and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/16674130.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con
Category: M/M
Fandom: 魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 | Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Relationship: Lán Zhàn | Lán Wàngjī/Wèi Ying | Wèi Wúxiàn
Additional Tags: Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Rape Recovery, Unplanned Pregnancy, Grief/Mourning, consent is never optional: the story, Omega!Wei Wuxian, Alpha!Lan Wangji, Slow Burn
Stats: Published: 2018-11-19 Updated: 2019-10-08 Chapters: 26/? Words: 238669

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

by izanyas

Summary

Cangse Sanren was the first of her kind to become a cultivator. Talented, passionate, free-spirited, she bested everything that ever came her way until the very end.

Jiang Fengmian refuses to see her son deprived of that same freedom.
and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Prologue

Cangse Sanren was not beautiful.

That was what people who never knew her recalled the easiest. She was tall and lean from cultivation, her face too handsome to be called pretty, her hands hard and callused. Not soft as they ought to be.

Boisterous, Lan Qiren had called her in seething outrage. Irreverent. Disrespectful. Cangse Sanren refused affiliation with any sect, came and went wherever she pleased, offending masters left and right. Lan Qiren declared with all the wisdom of a man only a handful of years older that she may never find a spouse; that no cultivator with a shred of dignity would wed her.

Those masters were once boys and girls, after all. Children suckling lies at the teat of their mothers, about beauty and frailty, about rarity and desirability.

They live secluded, they would learn. Surrounded by a sickly smell, like flowers, like fruit. One must never harm them.

Fragile. Unsuitable for combat or cultivation. Made to be owned like jewelry, like carved jade jailing light, like lacquered boxes exposed on dusty shelves.

When Cangse Sanren came down from that mountain wielding powers unknown to all, she turned a page in history.

Jiang Fengmian remembered her in sweetness and in pain, and to him, she was the most beautiful any human could hope to be.

She was older than him. A sister perhaps, to make up for the family he had lost, though Jiang Fengmian never held the illusion that his feelings for her were close to brotherly. She was something of a dream he could never let go of even after being wed to beautiful and deadly Yu Ziyuan, even after watching Cangse Sanren fall in love with Wei Changze and become round with his child.

He remembered seeing her in that bed with little Wei Ying in her arms after hours of labor; he remembered the scent of the child, milky and sweet, remembered how Cangse Sanren had held Wei Changze's hand and said, laughing, "He's just like me."

Such simple pride. Such honest pleasure. Jiang Fengmian looked at the sleeping babe and fell, if possible, a little more in love.

Yu Ziyuan gave him an heir not a week after that. A-Cheng was born strong and loud, smelling of storm, of upturned earth—smelling of his mother. Jiang Fengmian sat by his wife's bed as she fed the
wailing child, a finger touching A-Cheng's plump hand which would one day wear Zidian. Yu Ziyuan said nothing at all to him, to her son, except for a few words:

"You will never touch me again."

A-Li loved the babe. She spent all the time that her parents did not by his bedside, singing to him, rocking him in her arms, whispering love to Jiang Cheng's wrinkled little ears as if afraid that he would grow deaf to it.

Jiang Fengmian thought of Cangse Sanren holding her little boy, of his sworn brother Wei Changze looking at his partner and son with pride, entirely heedless of what a world like theirs wanted, and felt jealousy and shame war through his very flesh.

He wished for a child smelling of milk and honey.

It would take him years to regret this wish. He kept his word to Yu Ziyuan; he never again laid a finger on her, suffered her bitterness in silence, let her rule over her half of the Lotus Pier so that she may cling to this much freedom.

Jiang Fengmian loved his children. Perhaps it wasn't as immediate and all-consuming as he had wished, perhaps he would never achieve the sort of aching sincerity found in the Wei family's nursery, but he loved them fiercely. A-Li's kindness made him proud. A-Cheng's temper made him laugh. He walked the both of them through their first steps of cultivation under his wife's oddly peaceful watch, and for a while, he thought that perhaps he could make family work.

Then the day of Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze's death dawned frostily over Yunmeng.

In his grief, Jiang Fengmian all but forgot about Wei Ying. For days on end he kept secluded to his quarters. He didn't go to the funeral. He didn't pray or kneel. He took no part in the chasing of the corpses that had torn apart his friends.

He sat on his wooden bed and weeped unseen tears until the day seven-year-old A-Cheng pushed open the door to see him.

Jiang Fengmian looked at his son without understanding a word of what the boy was saying. A-Cheng's temper simmered rather than boiled, but now he seemed upset, the scent of him heavy and damp in the face of his childish emotions, and Jiang Fengmian remembered.

It took him two years to find Wei Ying. He hadn't seen the boy in so long then that when he first laid eyes on him, he thought his mind must be gone. The child was filthy, a skinny little thing fighting dogs for food in some abandoned town in Yiling, his scent almost erased by the stench of unwashed bodies. So wild did he seem that Jiang Fengmian almost walked past without recognizing him; he chased the dogs away, offered the poor boy food, and was ready to leave when Wei Ying lifted bright grey eyes to him and said Thank you.

He smiled like Cangse Sanren smiled.

"Wei Ying," Jiang Fengmian called. "Come here."

It took a while. Perhaps the boy had been too young, had forgotten the sound of his own name. But eventually he did come.

Jiang Fengmian didn't suffer Yu Ziyuan's anger passively that night. He stood his grounds despite her vitriol—What foolishness is this? What of A-Cheng? Where shall you raise an omega child in this household, what of gossip, what of me?
They would've done the same if you and I had died, Jiang Fengmian told her. A-Cheng will learn to accept Wei Ying as a brother. I do not intend to raise him any differently than my own children. You are stronger than anything servants could say.

Yu Ziyuan broke a vase standing by her dresser.

And for the years that followed, his every prediction came true. A-Cheng threw tantrums and screamed and cried, but Wei Ying was mischievous and bright, and soon enough rancor was replaced by laughter. Jiang Fengmian succinctly announced the coming of a new member of the Jiang sect to his disciples and taught Wei Ying everything he knew, paying no mind at all to the gossip, to the sideways glances and murmurs.

No doubt this would have been easier had Wei Ying been beta or alpha, but he was not, and others would learn to deal with it, just as they had learned to deal with Cangse Sanren. Jiang Fengmian would not deprive her son of power when she herself had been so talented; when she had strived so hard and for so long to prove herself.

Wei Ying had inherited it all from her. He took to cultivation like a starved animal to freshwater, progressing faster and better than any other disciple his age. Jiang Fengmian named him senior disciple, despite the bare five days separating him and A-Cheng in age. Yu Ziyuan seethed and simmered in her unending bitterness.

Those days at the Lotus Pier were filled with laughter despite the tension. Wei Ying soon learned to laugh and smile wide and unhindered, to move and touch and run like the worst of them. Like his mother, he grew handsome rather than pretty, tall and lean and scrappy; a very far cry from the stories of silks and sweetness taught to all young alpha. He wore clothes fit for running around in. He tied his hair up with a simple red string. Everywhere he went the scent of honey followed him, marred only by sweat, by dust, by the smell of cooked meat.

Then they all grew. From children to teenagers, to almost-adults. Jin Zixuan came to visit more often now that A-Li came close to being of marrying age. Jiang Fengmian saw the boy's eyes trail off of her to look at the newly-named Wei Wuxian instead; he thought of his own eyes leaving Yu Ziyuan's pretty face to follow the sound of Cangse Sanren's laughter, and he said nothing at all.

In his heart of hearts, he deplored that A-Cheng never seemed to develop the same affection. It would've been a comfort to secure A-Xian's future so close to home. It would be soothing, a balm, a quiet happiness, to know Cangse Sanren's son to be family.

He knew better than to try and force it upon them.

Those days went by like trickling water. High voices and unruly brawling and the sound of A-Li's quiet disapproval. Yu Ziyuan grew colder and colder, keeping to herself and her trusted pair of handmaidens. A-Cheng's admiration for A-Xian tinted itself with jealousy. Jiang Fengmian stopped knowing how to placate his son's moods—he stopped trying.

Wei Wuxian bloomed, filled to the heart with water and sunlight, the shape of his smile permanently etched inside Jiang Fengmian's heart, next to the memory of his mother.

When Wei Wuxian woke up gasping from the bleak depths of the afterlife, he didn't move at all.
Someone was beating him, he felt. Kicks and shoves more annoying than truly painful, which only served to clear his sluggish head, to make him wonder—where am I? Why am I here? *Whose body am I in?*

He lay on the dirt floor of the shack without hearing a word spouted at him. His head seemed fogged, memories and feelings alike blended into each other, entirely incomprehensible. He knew he was dead; he remembered breaking apart the seal, breaking himself apart; he felt deep within his heart that years had passed between then and now, and he felt as though he had experienced those years, although already his knowledge of the afterlife slipped through his fingers like smoke.

It was as if trying to remember a dream. The harder he tried, the less he knew.

Only hours later did he bother moving. The very act of breathing felt like so much effort. He took in the bloody array he was laid in, watched a stranger's face stare back at him in the small mirror poised against a shabby table, felt his left arm sting from unhealed cuts.

*Mo Xuanyu,* he thought blearily. That was the name that the young man who had kicked him around had called him.

Something weighed deeply in his chest. Something he hadn't felt in years, a badly-scarred wound whose pain he must have grown used to. Now in its absence, it felt more tender than ever. Wei Wuxian clenched the fabric over his chest and tried to remember how to breathe.

He had forgotten how heavy a heart was.

Chapter End Notes

A/B/O isn't my thing, and I'm only choosing to use it now because it is convenient for what I aim to do with this story. This is going to stay as low-effort as I can make it and will deal with themes of abuse, rape, pregnancy, and child loss (or at least what appears to be child loss).

The rape itself will not be shown but will be referenced throughout the story. My goal is recovery, not voyeurism.
Chapter 1

Lan Wangji did not enjoy watching the foreign disciples who arrived every year, though his presence was always required.

He stood next to his brother and uncle as the various delegations arrived. Only a few remained of those he had sat next to that very year, among them Nie Huaisang, who seemed to want to burrow deep into the soil. Wangji watched him rather than the faces of the many youths stepping through the gates of the Cloud Recesses; he knew not what to make of their admiration or lack thereof.

All of him ached to go back into seclusion. He stood with good grace the hand that Xichen put on his shoulder to quiet him, breathing in the cool and familiar scent of him.

"Preposterous," Lan Qiren said from beside them, his eyes fixed onto the loudest of the groups assembled in front of them.

They wore the purple of Yunmengjiang, silver bells hanging from their waists, knocking against scabbards and bows. None of those weapons were carved or decorated as finely as the Lan or Jin sects', but they seemed hardy enough.

"Uncle," Lan Xichen said quietly. "We have talked about this."

Lan Qiren seemed not to hear him. "Who does Jiang Fengmian think he is?" he declared anyway. His voice was soft enough not to carry over even to the closest Gusulan juniors, yet Wangji felt in it more disapproval than would be usual. "It is one thing for him to teach an omega, but to have him come here—"

Speaking ill of others behind their backs is prohibited, Lan Wangji thought idly.

"I have heard admirable things of young master Wei," Xichen interrupted, no doubt following the same train of thoughts. Lan Qiren seemed to regain some form of composure. "His cultivation level seems to be quite high for one so young."

"His cultivation level will not matter once he starts turning the heads of every one of our juniors."

"He is immature still."

"But for how long? And who will handle him once he comes to maturity, Xichen?"

This topic of conversation was too well-known to him by now for Wangji to listen very attentively. His eyes met those of the only disciple of Yunmeng not swaddled in purple robes. The boy was of a height with the one next to him—and this one must be Jiang Wanyin, for his robes were of a fabric finer and thicker than anyone else’s—and he only blinked once in Wangji’s direction before turning away.

One of his arms was around Jiang Wanyin’s shoulders. He said something, then laughed, his voice
carrying loudly over the quiet of the Recesses.

Next to Wangji, Lan Qiren tensed and breathed between his teeth.

"It's emperor's smile! I'll give you a jar, so keep this between us, alright?"

The cloth keeping the wine stoppered was not enough to hide its smell. It wafted thickly over the nightly air, sweet and heady, and Wei Wuxian was grinning again, seemingly unbothered that Wangji had caught him out after curfew.

Out after curfew and carrying liquor.

"Drinking is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses," Lan Wangji said thinly.

"What isn’t forbidden in the Cloud Recesses?" Wei Wuxian replied.

He looked nothing like Lan Wangji had expected.

It took until a few moments later, when Wei Wuxian followed his ridiculous reasoning to its end and decided that drinking atop the outer wall did not constitute rule-breaking, for Wangji to realize it fully. He watched in prickling irritation as Wei Wuxian threw back his head and drank from the sweet-smelling wine, and only then did he realize that it wasn't just the wine he was smelling.

Honey and apples and a smoked and woody scent. Wind brushed past Wei Wuxian's bare throat and carried those over to him softly.

All at once, years upon years of lessons whispered in Lan Wangji's ears:

They live in houses that smell of flowers, away from the commonfolk, because they are too valuable.

You must never hurt them. You must never touch them.

"What are you waiting for?"

Wangji looked at the boy in front of him and felt, for the first time in his life, entirely paralyzed.

Wei Wuxian was done drinking. Spittle shone on his mouth, wet with rice wine and with laughter, yet the curve of his lips seemed darker now. Condescending.

"I broke curfew," he said nonchalantly. "Are you going to fight me or are you too chicken for it, young master Lan? Your sword looks nice, it would be a shame to learn that it is only for show."

Lan Wangji's grip tightened around Bichen's pommel. "Come down from the wall and wait for morning outside," he said.

Even this much cost him; even this much seemed like violation, like anthesis to what he had been taught, to the sight of the Lan sect omega house far up the mountain whence the scent of blossoms came.

Wei Wuxian attacked first.
Later it would be the one thing Lan Wangji remembered: Wei Wuxian attacked first. He kneeled for a whole night on the cold floor of the jingshi, unable to find sleep even if he were to allow it to himself. Thinking again and again of the Yunmeng disciple's silhouette cutting against moonlight as they rushed at each other; recalling the clash of Bichen's blade against the clay jar, the spill of oversweet rice spicing up the night air sickly, thickly; Wei Wuxian's laughter as he tore the string from his own hair to block the sword coming at him.

He had been unarmed. Lan Wangji had swung his sword at an unarmed—

He knelt, silent and heaving, on the cold stone. His knees ached. The knot of anxiety at his throat ached more.

Those were the things Lan Wangji learned about Wei Wuxian in the weeks that followed.

He was unruly. He broke at least one Lan sect rule a day, shamelessly taking advantage of the Lan elders' unwillingness to punish him, making other disciples turn dark eyes to him wherever he went. He seemed not to care at all that such a cloud of outrage floated over his every step; he laughed, and lazed around, and physically nudged Jiang Wanyin whenever some bright idea caught him. Jiang Wanyin accepted the treatment evenly.

He was brilliant. Despite his immoral claims in class, despite Lan Qiren's ceaseless mockery of his character, despite how little time he spent actually studying, he was better than most of their yearmates. He moved with the same grace and power that accomplished cultivators did. He carried the rough sword at his waist like someone who knew how to use it.

He must be of a level with Lan Wangji.

He was carefree and shameless and the very opposite of what he should be. He was neither small nor waifish, and his skin was not soft but rough with sunlight, and his hands carried bruises and calluses from handling weapons. He stained himself with ink when he drew talismans. He sketched men and women in various states of hilarity in the margins of his work, showing them to Nie Huaisang and Jiang Wanyin and all who would look and listen.

"Lan Wangji," Wei Wuxian called on the fifth day of his coming to the library pavilion for punishment. "I really admire you so much. I don't know how you can stand kneeling here and learning every day. I feel like my mind is liquefying. Hey, Lan Wangji, second brother Lan, Wangji-xiong—"

Lan Zhan.

He called Lan Wangji's birth name with not a shadow of self-consciousness. The beta chaperone sent to watch over them shuddered every time she heard him do it, her eyes averted as if to look at Wei Wuxian were too shameful to consider.

The beta should have been enough to watch over Wei Wuxian's punishment, but Lan Qiren insisted on Wangji being there because he had figured out, somehow, that Wangji was less hesitant to call Wei Wuxian back in order. Less hesitant to speak to him and lecture him.

Wei Ying, Wangji once called him in a moment of too-great frustration.
The beta watching them had inhaled in shock. Lan Wangji had felt his ears burn at his own slip-up. Wei Wuxian had looked at him in wonder and then smiled, bright and easy and so genuine, the sound of his laughter filtering through the open windows and, it seemed, chasing mist and clouds away.

Those were the things Lan Wangji learned about Wei Wuxian and wished he had not—

He liked to chew on wild grass stalks while leaning by the pond or under the shadow of a tree, Jiang Wanyin ever-present by his side.

He walked through the thick of dislike hanging over him with his head held high. He answered bark for bark every comment addressed to him. He gave back every stare.

Lan Qiren called him every insult he could bring out of himself as if it were his life mission. Shameful and disrespectful and his mother's son, and Wangji sat in his uncle's study next to a placating Xichen and thought, I would have liked to meet Wei Wuxian's mother.

There was something about Wei Wuxian that Wangji could not help but look for. A shadow, a spark, a gut feeling. Something laid underneath his skin, hidden behind his brash persona, something as cloying as the honeyscent that clung to the pavilion's walls after each of his visits.

The heaven-sent aura of destiny.

"You look like you want the Jiang senior disciple to come with us," Xichen told him.

Lan Wangji could not refute it as much as he wanted to.

Caiyi Town shone with mist and sunlight most days of the year, its waters clear and quiet, its townsfolk welcoming. Lan Wangji stood over a wooden bridge and followed with his eyes the dark spot that Wei Wuxian's robes made against so much clarity.

"What do you think of him?" Xichen asked with the same voice he used to ask, Wangji, what are you doing here?

(What are you doing all alone in a house filled with ghosts?)

Wangji had spent so many hours in the dark of the empty cottage. His back braced against the wall and his small fingers wrapped around a piece of stolen clothing that still bore the seasalt scent of his mother.)

"I have no opinion of Wei Wuxian," Wangji lied.

He was breaking more and more rules. He was spending more and more nights kneeling upon the stone floor and chasing the sound of laughter from his ears.

"He is quite good, I hear." Lan Xichen looked down at Wei Wuxian's smiling face—he seemed in the middle of bargaining with a couple of salesmen, Jiang Wanyin by his side, Nie Huaisang laughing at them all from afar. "I watched he and young master Jiang spar yesterday evening. He is a fine swordsman, Wangji, and I think you would enjoy sparring with him too."

Lan Qiren would never allow it. Though he probably wished to see Wei Wuxian's pride split itself
on a Lan blade, he would not allow any disciple of his sect to fight an omega.

No matter that the omega was armed this time.

It mattered not anyway: Wei Wuxian got to fight that very same day in front of many eyes. He leaped from boat to boat with the agility of a monkey, paddling with ease, fighting with delight. He caught ghouls with his bare hands when he was not swinging the rough sword at his waist. Its glare was bright red. It burned into Wei Wuxian's grey eyes every time he looked at it.

*What is its name*, Wangji asked him before he could help it, and he could not truly be surprised when Wei Wuxian answered, *Suibian*.

Wei Wuxian flew higher and quicker than any of them—alpha or beta, old or young. He saved Su She's life before Lan Wangji noticed that his life needed saving. He carried an unconscious man upon his sword, or at least tried to, until Wangji arrived to help.

Lan Wangji acted on impulse. He didn't know where to touch Wei Wuxian that would not be considered inappropriate; didn't know how to hold him without suffocating on the heightened scent of him, liquor-sweet on every gust of wind. He grabbed Wei Wuxian's collar without touching his neck.

"I'm almost out of air," Wei Wuxian rasped at him in false irritation, a grin still tugging at his lips.

Wet hair stuck to the sides of his face gently. The wetness over his brow was half-lakewater and half-sweat from exertion. Sunlight turned every drop on his skin to gold.

Lan Wangji felt his heart quicken in his chest and replied, "I do not like physical contact."

---

Wei Wuxian did not take well to being told what to do. Lan Wangji had known this for close to two months now. And though he did not often see Wei Wuxian break rules once the boy's month of punishment at the pavilion was over, he knew that it was only because Wei Wuxian had become better at not getting caught.

When he thought of it—and he often did, much too often—Wangji felt close to understanding why Wei Wuxian did what he did. Why he broke so many rules; why he acted so carefree when his life could not necessitate more care.

Lan Wangji had been taught that hurting an omega was the worst thing one could ever do. He had grown away from them, in the company of his beta brother and alpha uncle, never once talking to the couple inhabitants of the brown house at the peak of the mountain. He had read the words written on scrolls that made omega feel less human than godly.

*You must never hurt them.*

Yet Lan Qiren did, day after day, in his words and looks and demeanor. The same voice that had told Wangji that he was powerful enough to hope for the best betrothal, and for one or two of the rare and precious omega at least, spoke of Wei Wuxian like filth.

Wei Wuxian could dance all he wanted on the training field behind the pond. He could parry Jiang Cheng's unhesitant sword and Nie Huaisang's more careful one, fly over the both of them like fallen
leaves on the wind… he would never win approval.

Lan Wangji wondered why the books made omega seem so otherworldly, when every time he looked at Wei Wuxian made something in him ache that was so very human.

He put his sword to Wei Wuxian's throat when he caught him out after curfew that night. His hand shook when he did it, his grip so light there and so tight over the handle of his umbrella, he feared one or the other would break.

He wanted to take it back. He wanted to hand the umbrella over instead, to let Wei Wuxian in despite the jars of wine he carried underarm, the spark of mischief over his face saying that he knew what he was doing. Lan Wangji felt some sort of nausea at resisting him like this; he felt queasy, brittle, watching raindrops glide along Bichen's blade and fall to Wei Wuxian's bare throat.

It was worth it for the smile that Wei Wuxian gave him.

He could not care about his own rule-breaking when they both fell over the wall. Wei Wuxian's jars of Emperor's smile had long since broke into pieces, their content spilling out, indiscernible from the transparent rain. Mud stained Wangji's robes and grass stuck to his wet hands, but all he felt and all he saw was Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian's arms around his body. Wei Wuxian's grin splitting his face in two. Wei Wuxian's scent in his nose rendered cooler by the downpour, like the first breath of air after swimming out of a lake.

The wooden switch hit Lan Wangji's back time and time again the following morning. He kneeled in the ancestral hall of the Gusulan sect, taking his punishment in complete silence, and the only bruise he felt was the one left by Wei Wuxian's fist clenched into his side. Clutching and shoving and pulling down, down, down.

"You should've punished me too."

Wangji had not come to the cold spring for healing. He seldom did. The bruises over his back were uncomfortable but ultimately meaningless, and not even the water of the spring would help mend them in quicker than a few days.

He had not come for cultivation either.

"You cannot be here," he breathed, not daring to turn around.

He heard Wei Wuxian move along the edges of the spring. Dead leaves broke under his footsteps and felt to Lan Wangji's acute hearing like glass. When Wei Wuxian appeared in the corner of his vision, having walked around half of the spring, he turned his back to him.

"Don't be like that, Lan Zhan."

"You can't—"

"No one's here, are they?"

A sound, sharp and sudden, like something breaking the surface of the pond. Lan Wangji jumped
around at once with a cry swelling in his mouth.

Wei Wuxian looked up at him with a smile. His hand, which had just dropped a stone into the spring, closed gently.

"Those bruises look bad," he commented.

Lan Wangji felt Wei Wuxian's eyes roam along the blue-and-purple spilling over his shoulders like a brand. His breathing caught inside his chest as if someone had stoppered his throat.

"I asked your brother. He said the spring helped?"

Wei Wuxian seemed to be waiting for an answer; Lan Wangji could only nod stiffly.

"You should've punished me too," Wei Wuxian said again, oddly pensive. Lan Wangji had hoped that his looking away would relieve him; instead, he found himself aching anew with the face that Wei Wuxian pulled. "I'm the one who pushed you over."

_I cannot beat an omega_, was the appropriate response.

_I cannot beat you_, Lan Wangji almost said.

Wei Wuxian crouched by the edge of the spring. He dusted away some leaves before sitting, legs crossed, his elbow on his knee and in chin in his palm. He was still watching Wangji as if waiting for something; his face gleamed softly, lit from under by moonlight, the water's surface acting like a mirror.

Lan Wangji repeated, "You can't be here."

He expected Wei Wuxian to protest, to chirp some awful argument or another on why this was completely fine and appropriate, but the other boy stayed silent.

Wei Wuxian could not be here. No matter how much leeway Jiang Fengmian gave him, no matter how he had been raised that the man's own son had no hesitation to follow him so closely, to touch him and be touched by him, he could not be here. He couldn't sit here alone at night in the company of a half-naked alpha. He _couldn't_.

If Jiang Wanyin knew—if Lan Qiren learned—

"You have to leave," Lan Wangji said, looking down into the clear water, his heart pounding bruises onto his ribcage. "Wei Wuxian, you can't be here."

"I know I can't be," Wei Wuxian replied.

Lan Wangji inhaled shakily.

Silence spread over them, broken only by the wet sounds of the spring, until Wei Wuxian chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Lan Zhan," he said. Wangji saw from the corner of his eyes his legs unfold and his body slowly come upright once more. "I was out of line. I just wanted..."

Wangji had never seen him struggle with words before. Despite himself, despite the inappropriate and potentially life-destroying situation they were in, he met Wei Wuxian's eyes.

_What do you want?_ he thought.
In that moment he felt ready to acquiesce to anything.

Wei Wuxian quirked a smile his way and said, "Nothing. I'll go."

He did not leave, however. He stayed as if frozen by the edge of the spring, water licking at his boots, dirt and grass staining his grey pants. Lan Wangji saw his throat move as if he were trying not to sob, though his eyes were entirely dry.

If Jiang Wanyin or Lan Qiren or anyone else happened to walk by and see them like this, the consequences would be grave. Lan Wangji may escape with no more than some shame and a profound taste of self-hatred, but Wei Wuxian's life would be forfeit in all ways but the literal. Not even Jiang Fengmian would suffer the rumor of an impure omega in his household.

No one would.

Lan Wangji knew this, and Wei Wuxian must know this, yet neither of them made to leave. Indeed Wei Wuxian's eyes only bore deeper into the spring, his knee flexing slightly, readying itself to jump.

Don't, Lan Wangji thought, and he didn't know which way he meant it.

All the air around them smelled of honey. It seemed the scent had turned to taste; Wangji had to swallow twice to make it go away.

Wei Wuxian's knee stopped jerking. Tension loosened itself out of him. He huffed a silent laugh, as if mocking himself, and said, "Good night, Lan Zhan."

"Good night," Lan Wangji replied, shaken all out of breath. "Wei Ying."

Lan Wangji did not see Wei Wuxian attack Jin Zixuan the following morning, though he heard of the brawl almost as soon as it happened. He was in his uncle's study when a fellow junior came running, shock and morbid excitement making him forget his manners.

The omega hit young master Jin in the face—

Lan Qiren was too lost to his own fury to bother disciplining the boy on his words or behavior. His face turned so red with anger that Wangji thought for a second he would see steam erupt out of his ears, and he rose almost shakily, walking out of the room in something like a run.

No running in the Cloud Recesses, he had told Wangji and Xichen as they grew, alone and unwatched and oft left to their devices. Wangji remembered the grip of his brother's hand on his shoulder one time, the cool beta-scent of him turning even cooler. It had been the first time Lan Qiren had talked to them in days. Xichen had bowed, and smiled, and said nothing.

All activities at the Recesses seemed to halt for a few hours. Everywhere Wangji went he heard of Wei Wuxian, as disciples from all sects discussed the event, some smiling, some grimacing. He didn't see Jiang Wanyin. Huddled in a corner of a wide classroom, Nie Huaisang bore a worried expression.

"... can't hit him."

"Of course I didn't hit him back, Father. I'm not mad."
The voices came from one of the guest rooms. Wangji stopped in his tracks near the window of it, the rabbit he had been walking toward watching him curiously.

Jin Guangshan sighed audibly, a noise like wood touching wood filtering through the open blinds. He must have put down his sword. "A-Xuan," he said in a weary voice. "I'll ask you again, and I want you to be honest with me—do you want to marry Jiang Yanli?"

Wangji knew Jiang Yanli, though he had seldom met her. He knew the names of all the clan leaders and their families, all taught to him in detail by his uncle and great-uncle as he grew.

*You're the heir, Wangji. You need to know all of them.*

"A-Xuan," Jin Guangshan said impatiently.

"She's a beta," Jin Zixuan answered. Wangji heard him groan after this as if he had not meant to say it at all.

There was a moment of silence. "I know you are unsatisfied with her status," Jin Guangshan went on, placating now. "And her low cultivation level. I know you wanted something better, but she is a kind, bright girl. Marrying her would be immensely beneficial to Lanlingjin, and I am certain that you will grow to love her in time."

"I don't think I can," Jin Zixuan muttered.

Speaking this way to his uncle would have earned Wangji a few days of fasting. Jin Guangshan only sighed.

"What do you want me to do, then? This betrothal was arranged by your mother since before you were born. Jiang Fengmian has offered you a way out, but know that you will take it with no other prospect in sight."

"Can't you…" Jin Zixuan seemed to hesitate. Softly, he said, "I was thinking… maybe an omega instead."

Another silence.

"There is no unbetrothed omega of marriageable age in any of the main clans," Jin Guangshan declared. "And if there were, I dare say we would not learn so much as their name before they were sworn to one of sect leader Wen's heirs."

"But—"

"I will not have you long for some fairytale. The birth of an omega is too rare to wait after."

"Father!" Jin Zuxuan cut in, his young voice now more expressive than Lan Wangji had ever heard it. There came the shuffle of soft cloth as one or both rose to their feet. "Father, I was thinking, Wei Wuxian—"

"Do not finish that sentence if you want to call yourself my son."

Silence froze the air inside of the dormroom. It seemed to crystallize around Wangji's oddly heavy heart, prickling his eyesight with white spots. Belatedly, he remembered to breathe out, as quietly as possible.

When Jin Guangshan spoke again, his voice was kinder. "A-Xuan," he said, "I understand. Do not
look away from me, I understand. You have spent the past few months in Wei Wuxian's company, much longer than when you met him in the past... This is why we all told Jiang Fengmian that this was a terrible idea," the Jin sect leader said ruefully. "I wouldn't be surprised if half of the disciples harbored some thought of wedding the boy, no matter how improper he is. Any omega will seem entrancing to one who has only glimpsed them before."

Jin Zixuan seemed to be at a loss of words. Lan Wangji bit the inside of his cheek till he tasted blood, shame and fury rolling through him in waves.

"Jiang Fengmian is a sentimental fool—he raised the boy all wrong because he was so blindly in love with his mother," Jin Guangshan said curtly. "Cangse Sanren was a blight upon omegakind, and she married a gutless beta who never put an end to her madness. Her son is turning out just like her. He has no shame, no manners, and he will bring nothing but embarrassment to whoever ends up wedding him. He hit you with his bare hands!" Lan Wangji almost heard the man shudder. "You will not think again of having anything to do with him. Am I understood?"

Silence.

"Am I understood?" Jin Guangshan said again, louder.

"Yes, Father," Jin Zixuan murmured.

Whatever fighting spirit had moved him before was gone.

"Come, now. If you do not want Jiang Yanli, I hear Wen Ruohan's alpha niece is a rare beauty..."

Lan Wangji walked away from the window in silence.

The rabbit he had glimpsed earlier, one of the two gifted to him by a dirt-marred and grinning Wei Wuxian, was gone. Wangji walked from the guest rooms to the cold spring and then to the library pavilion, crushing dewed grass under his feet, deaf to wind and birds alike. He felt no cold upon his skin; no exertion from the walk.

His feet took him to the wide gates of the Cloud Recesses without the need for thought. He had already heard news of Jiang Fengmian's arrival—he had flown in with Jin Guangshan earlier, the both of them cold to each other despite their usual cordiality. Jiang Fengmian must have run to where Wei Wuxian was kept as soon as he arrived.

He was there now, and so was Wei Wuxian.

There was no trace of the scuffle on him, of course. Jin Zixuan would never raise a hand on him, not even after being attacked. Unlike you, said a voice in Wangji's head, who held him at sword point, who felt his arms around your middle, who let him watch you bathe.

Wei Wuxian was talking to his sect leader, his posture more reverent and polite than Wangji had ever seen. The boy who would sit with spread legs or lean against Jiang Wanyin's shoulder now bowed in perfect form, fist and palm meeting firmly as he curved all of his back horizontally.

Some disciples ogling the scene scoffed. Some said, Finally. Some mocked that Wei Wuxian was now playing the part of omega.

Lan Wangji watched Wei Wuxian rise again and thought that what he had just seen was not make-believe, but deep respect.

Ice tickled his nose when Xichen emerged from a door not far and gestured at him to approach.
"Uncle has been looking for you," he told Wangji, ushering him inside.

"Wei Ying is leaving us," Lan Qiren declared without preamble as soon as Wangji was within sight. Distractedly, he gestured to both brothers to sit. "As it should be! What folly could possibly have taken Jiang Fengmian, to think that this boy would do well here…"

"Young master Jiang will remain for the rest of the year," Xichen said lowly. He served tea into three cups with one steady hand. "He is not happy. I hear young master Wei was the one who convinced him to finish studying here instead of going back to Yunmeng as well."

"There is no need to trouble yourself with respect, Xichen," Lan Qiren spat. "Jiang Cheng has obviously caught some of his father's madness. Oh, I will work on righting that wrong…"

Lan Qiren spoke for a while. If not for the lead that seemed to weigh down Lan Wangji's stomach, he could almost believe that this was a day just like any other. That he would patrol around that night looking for a sneaking shadow, for the sound of clay hitting clay as Wei Wuxian carried in his favored wine. For a hint of honeyscent on the wind.

Dusk had come when Wangji exited the study. The crowd gathered around the gate was long gone, and so were Jiang Fengmian and Jin Guangshan, no doubt on the way back to their respective holds.

So was Wei Wuxian.

"I dare say we shall find some quiet again at last," Lan Qiren huffed, descending the stairs in direction of the mess hall. "With any luck, we'll never hear of Wei Wuxian again."

Lan Xichen's hand rested at Wangji's elbow in a strange measure of comfort. Wangji looked at the grey sky and thought of equally grey eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A few things I forgot to say in the prologue: firstly, the rape I mentioned will not be between LWJ and WWX, in case anyone was worried. They're endgame and lovely to each other. Second, the title is taken from the song Vor í Vaglaskógi by Kaleo, whose translated lyrics are very fitting for this story. Here is the part I took it from:

"The dew comes forth
Our valley is swept with peace
Our dreams come true, who sleep in the wood of skies
On the berry hearth, the last touch of sunlight dies
And the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow"

Lastly, I am aiming to post one chapter per week (once every Monday), but I had a shit couple of days and needed some validation, so I didn't feel like waiting for this one since I already had it written up. Thank you to those who commented. If the 80+ of you who subscribed want to chime in with a nice word as well, I would appreciate it greatly.
Chapter 2

Wei Wuxian came to maturity on a heavy summer day, submerged knee-deep into water, Jiang Yanli's eyes following him as he lazed around his shidi.

He would not have noticed so soon if he were on his own. At the peak of lotus season the heat was always too damp, too heavy, clinging suffocatingly to skin and cloth every way he moved. Shipments came from all around in direction of Yunmeng, the men and women aboard calling their greetings in loud voices. The shallow waters where lotuses flowered were lukewarm, almost more uncomfortable than one's own sweat. Wei Wuxian took no notice that he was feeling hot, because he always felt hot these days.

"I don't believe you," said his sixth shidi to him, grinning from ear to ear. He was always the one least hesitant to approach him and talk—a heavy boy with gentle manners and no heart for cultivation, which his parents unfortunately failed to understand. "I don't believe you carried someone else on your sword."

"Are you doubting your senior?" Wei Wuxian answered with a grin. "I told you, I grabbed him, just like that."

"You can't carry two people on a sword!"

"Sure you can. Lan Zhan carried the both of us too."

Yunmeng was too familiar for Wei Wuxian to take much care what he said and who he said it to. Though he felt the weight of his shijie's worried eyes on him, though the boy next to him took his hands out of the water and gasped, Wei Wuxian only felt a distant sort of awkwardness.

"Anyway," he said in the silence, "just wait till Jiang Cheng comes back, he'll tell you I'm not lying."

"When is he coming back?" his shidi asked, impropriety forgotten for now.

"I don't…"

Wei Wuxian paused to wince. His back had been sore all day long, but it often happened whenever he ran too hard and for too long. Air came from his lungs as if from a furnace, but there was the hot sun over his back to contend with, the thick humidity floating over the riverbed where heat converged and stagnated.

"Are you all right?" another of his shidi asked.

Wei Wuxian smiled a waved a hand. "I'm fine, I'm fine. It's hot today."

His juniors agreed in concert, moaning here and there as they trampled the water. Too hot for training, they complained, why is Madam Yu so harsh?

Wei Wuxian walked more slowly. The thick haze he had struggled with all day had become thicker
still. Suddenly the water and heat seemed agonizing instead of simply troublesome. He loosened the line of his collar and wished to be alone, to walk deeper into the river, where the water was cool and the current stronger, to divest himself of all clothing.

He wiped sweat from his brow. His steps became sluggish. The very act of closing his fists felt disagreeable, for his hands and fingers were warm and stiff and painful. Breathing in was like inhaling smoke.

"A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli said when she saw him approach the pier where she sat. She put down the embroidery she was working on—a Yunmengjiang cloak threaded with enchantments for Yu Ziyuan's coming birthday—and rose to her feet. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," Wei Wuxian said. "Can't I sit down for a while, shijie?"

"Yes, of course."

He sat down. He tried to talk to her of unimportant things, to take her mind off of her broken engagement as he had tried to do since coming back from Gusu weeks ago. Not one word he said to her could distract him from how cloying air had become.

"Da shixiong!" his sixth shidi called, approaching quickly, his grinning face marred with mud from one scuffle or another. "Should we go hunting now?"

Wei Wuxian took in a shaky breath and jumped to his feet. "Sure," he said.

The next thing he knew, Jiang Yanli was pulling him out of the water, repeating his name over and over again in anguish.

Wei Wuxian understood none of the trip back to the main house. He only knew that his shidi’s faces bore looks of either horror or shame, that something in his lungs burned like firewood, that Jiang Yanli was holding him upright and tugging him forward step by step. The world turned around him in an unending dance. Nausea crept up his dry throat. Soreness spread through each of his muscles and made him want to cry out.

Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian were seated inside the dining hall with their advisors, pouring over scrolls and speaking in low voices. Wei Wuxian heard Jiang Yanli tell the other disciples to stay behind before pushing him in, and as soon as he was inside, all eyes were on him.

Jiang Fengmian seemed to have frozen on the spot.

Yu Ziyuan recovered from her shock faster than he did. She rose stiffly, her purple robes flowing around her like a halo, and her eyes gleamed with disgust as she took in the sight of him.

"You pitiful thing," she spat without any pity at all.

Jiang Fengmian rose as well. "Leave," he told his advisors, who obeyed in a hurry. "A-Xian."

"Uncle," Wei Wuxian managed.

"I will accompany you to your room—"

"His room?" Yu Ziyuan said the word as if it had insulted her, her thin nose scrunched as if she were protecting herself from the worst of smells. "He's not staying here."

"My lady..."
"You did this," she seethed. Jiang Fengmian closed his mouth, somber. "You knew this day would come, you knew the moment you took in this worthless child that this would happen. He's not staying in this house while his fever runs its course."

It was only then that Wei Wuxian understood what was happening to him.

Yu Ziyuan walked around the table, calling for one of her handmaidens. The beta one. "You take him to the omega house now," she told her, "and don't let him come out till the week is over."

"He will need food," Jiang Fengmian said tensely.

"He knows inedia."

"You cannot possibly let him—"

Wei Wuxian slipped from Jiang Yanli's hold. He heard her cry out in worry, her thin hands trying to hold his much heavier weight.

"Stop touching him," Yu Ziyuan snapped, "do you want your reputation to be ruined, A-Li? Jinzhu, take him away from here. If anyone approaches the omega house while he is fevered," she added more loudly, "I will personally see to their fate."

Jiang Fengmian left after her when she exited the room. Through the fog and pain muddling his mind, Wei Wuxian thought he heard the sound of their yelling.

Yu Jinzhu did not touch Wei Wuxian as she accompanied him to the other side of the Lotus Pier. She did not say a word to him. Wuxian dragged himself behind her step by excruciating step, unable not to notice the looks and whispers following him like shadows. Some people had covered their noses with their sleeves, while others fanned the air in front of them to chase away the smell of him.

"This is obscene," he heard one say.

The omega house of the Lotus Pier was a forlorn little shack at the edge of the river, long deserted by its last inhabitants, its foundations rotted by humidity. There had not been an omega in the Jiang sect since the old man who once lived there died unmarried a few years ago. Wei Wuxian had only ever seen it from afar, had never even talked to the man, but Yu Ziyuan had often threatened to have him locked up there. It was her favored method of insult, really: telling Wei Wuxian that she would lock him up and wait for the day he either got married or died.

It seemed she had at last kept her promise.

Wei Wuxian's first heat was spent alone with the dust and spiders. For days he rode out the fever and aches, thirst gnawing at his throat and hunger digging out his stomach. There was no way for him to properly practice inedia, no way to ignore both the crushing warmth and the sheer emptiness—the hollowness of him, as if he were being carved from the inside, as if he were but a bag of skin blown full of air.

He quenched the thirst from the river when he found the strength to walk out. The heavy oakwood door was not locked. He avoided the burn of sunlight as much as he could. He saw neither head nor tail of Yu Jinzhu during that time, though he knew she must be close.

He wasn't exactly surprised by the turn of events. Yu Ziyuan had never made her intentions for his future heats a secret. It was not enough to stop the fear cutting into him with each hour he lost to the haze.
There was no coming-of-age ceremony waiting for him once the fever abated. No celebration held in Yunmeng for the maturity of an omega, as Wei Wuxian knew there would be had one been born to the sect. He lay over the soil on the dawn of the fifth day, his mind clear for the first time in what seemed like weeks. Dry-mouthed, empty-handed, with for all company the sound of air tearing itself out of his wrung-out body.

Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan stayed angrier at each other than ever before in the days that followed. Their voices echoed through the hallways as summer unfolded over Yunmeng, wet and heavy, as the lotuses bloomed and the days stretched infinitely.

"He needs to be married now that he is mature—"

"Enough. I will not hear of it unless A-Xian himself brings it up."

"It is not his place! It is not any omega's place to bring it up!"

Wei Wuxian ate in silence, feeling their words wash through him oddly. He felt there and not-there. Present and far away. There was a version of him sitting in the dining hall and bringing food to his open mouth, and another floating somewhere far above, drinking in the sunlight, walking upon clouds.

It seemed to him that the air up above would be fresher. Cleaner. That there may smell the way that the Cloud Recesses did: that the cold and quiet would spice itself with sandalwood in some secluded corners. Above the wall separating inside and out. At the edge of a forbidden spring.

"Here," Jiang Yanli said to him, helping him to another glass of wine.

"Thank you, shijie," said the Wei Wuxian who sat at the table.

"A-Li," Yu Ziyuan barked at her daughter. Jiang Yanli jumped in fright. "Do not serve him, you foolish girl. You shouldn't talk to him anymore, people will start gossiping like they do about your father."

"Yu Ziyuan," Jiang Fengmian said, the way he only did when anger truly gripped him.

"Jiang Fengmian," Yu Ziyuan replied in kind.

And on and on they went. Yu Ziyuan kept to her study most of the day, writing delicately-worded letters to some minor sect or another, looking for someone to take Wei Wuxian as a spouse. Every refusal she received made her mood fouler. Every agreement had her ranting to her husband, spilling vitriol like bile, trying to convince him. Alpha she may be, but her husband was one, too. Neither held dominion over the other. Both had to be in agreement for such a thing to be decided.

Wei Wuxian lay on the pier one evening with his shijie, the both of them quiet, the both of them looking at the stars. Water licked at their bare feet in little waves, carried out by the sparse late-summer wind.

"Do you want to get married, A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked him in a secretive voice.

Did Wei Wuxian want to be married?
He could not remember when his status had started truly troubling him. It had not mattered in the shards of memories he still held of his parents; it had not mattered when he had been a small and filthy thing roaming the streets of Yiling. He knew Yu Ziyuan’s hatred of him by heart, could predict her every word to him as if he were reading her thoughts, but never before had it been so directly aimed at his being omega. Wei Wuxian had been raised a disciple of Yunmeng. He had torn through any awkwardness with his shidi, with Jiang Cheng, thanks to the bull-headedness of his own character.

They said Jiang Fengmian had loved his mother. Wei Wuxian had never dared to ask him about it. He dared not even say her name, or the name of his father, where either of the Jiang sect leaders could hear. No matter how much he wished to know.

In the small memories he had of her—broken voices and laughter, the world from high up on her shoulders, from the crook of her arm holding him against her breast—Cangse Sanren had been happy. She had smelled of ripe apples, of wind. She had sung to him and laughed with him and held the hand of Wei Changze with no shame whatsoever.

"If I could find a cultivation partner," Wei Wuxian told his shijie, "then I don't think I would mind marriage so much."

It was a fool’s dream, of course. Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze had been cultivation partners only because their sham of a union was less scandalous than if Wei Changze had been alpha.

No omega could be cultivator, and therefore, no omega could ever have a partner.

Jiang Yanli took his hand in hers and squeezed it gently. Wei Wuxian tried to etch the feeling of her skin and affection into his very heart, wondering how much longer he would be allowed such innocent gestures.

At that time of his life, Wei Wuxian decided on two things.

The first was that he would never let Jiang Fengmian’s gift to him go to waste. He was a cultivator, the senior disciple of Yunmengjiang, the one his shidi called da shixiong, and he had earned this title. No matter how differently some looked at him now that he was mature and no longer just the weird omega child running wild through the Pier. He was a cultivator of the Jiang sect. The golden core he had nursed to life was only here because Jiang Fengmian had stood up to his partner to allow him freedom. He would never let go of it.

The second was that he had never much cared for interdiction before. As long as he helped serve Yunmengjiang, as long as his actions didn’t lead to irreparable harm, he would keep breaking rules everywhere he went. He would keep being himself.

He wouldn't let anyone push him down into the dirt or lock him away from life.

Jiang Cheng came back to the Lotus Pier as winter melted into spring.

He returned with a straighter back than he had left with. His demeanor seemed to have changed as well. Sitting on the ornamented boat carrying him over to the main house, clad in his clan colors and wearing Sandu at his waist, he looked every bit the young heir to his parents' household.
Wei Wuxian tricked him from the water, splashing his clothes and laughing in his face. Jiang Cheng insulted him back with as much vigor as before, grabbing his hand to be pulled upright and accepting the brief sideways embrace that Wei Wuxian forced upon him. From behind them, the woman rowing the boat breathed in, scandalized. Jiang Cheng shoved Wei Wuxian away with his fist and pretended to be mad, ignoring her completely.

He did show some awareness. For a moment after the hug, he looked at Wei Wuxian in faint surprise, breathing slowly, taking in whatever must have changed with Wei Wuxian's maturity. He said nothing, however. The worry in his eyes made way for embarrassment, but nothing more.

Wei Wuxian felt a knot of tension in him loosen.

The Wen sect had settled somewhere the sun shone hard and dry over the earth. In summer the soil cracked in long and jagged lines, and each footfall rang loudly through the mountains, raising dust clouds wherever people went.

The Nightless City was supposed to be a fair sight in these scorched lands. Wei Wuxian erred along the mountain paths, finding only empty houses on his way, and doubted that he would ever reach it. Jiang Cheng had gone ahead earlier while Wuxian lingered; now Wei Wuxian wondered if he should not have followed more closely.

What a shame it would be for him to miss the competition, after all the begging he had done. After Yu Ziyuan had accepted to let him go.

The sound of a bowstring cutting the air led him to a plateau some way ahead. There he found a lone junior of Qishanwen, a young man whose light brown hair painted him as part of the Wen clan more surely than the sun motif on his robes did. Wei Wuxian watched him shoot for a moment, admiring his posture and precision, before making his presence known.

"Archer boy," he called, waving a hand in the other's direction. "You're very good!"

He must have broken the disciple's focus; the boy yelped, his hand releasing the string by mistake, and only Wei Wuxian's sharp reflexes allowed him to catch the arrow before it went off course and hit him in the chest.

And then something never-before-seen happened.

The boy seemed to regain his bearings. He turned to Wei Wuxian, shaking through all of his thin body, his mouth open in apology. But it closed the second he breathed in to speak, and his red face paled all at once.

He made a sound like a frightened animal and hid behind a boulder.

Wei Wuxian had met many a surprised person through his life. Some had looked at him in pity, some in anger or disgust. Some, in the year since his first fever, had watched him with an added layer of darkness that he wished he didn't know the reason for. He had never met anyone scared of him before, however.

"Wen lad?" he called again, walking toward the boulder.
The boy was obviously still there. His scent came from around rock and filled Wei Wuxian's nose with smoke—a strangely heady smell for one who looked so un-alpha.

"You can't be here," was the answer he got. The weirdest thing was that the boy's voice was not accusatory; if anything, he sounded apologetic.

"Sure I can," Wei Wuxian replied, more curious than ever. "Say, can you tell me which way is the Nightless City? I'm lost."

For a moment he thought that the boy would flee and leave his question unanswered. But footsteps rang against the hard ground, and the boy circled around the boulder with half of his body pressed to it.

"Why do you want to go there?" he asked Wei Wuxian nervously.

Wei Wuxian showed the bow strung over his shoulder. "For the competition, of course."

The Wen boy stared at him in disbelief.

It occurred to Wei Wuxian that though he couldn't help but refer to this disciple as boy, he must not be much younger than him. The thinness of his face already proved his adulthood.

"But you're—"

Wei Wuxian waited for the expected end of the sentence. The Wen junior never finished it, and instead stuck closer to the rock at his back.

He decided to stop tormenting him, then. "I'm Wei Ying of the Yunmengjiang sect," he said, bowing for once as lowly as his status demanded. "Courtesy name Wei Wuxian. Who am I speaking to?"

"Wen—Wen Ning, of Qishanwen," the boy replied almost inaudibly. He bowed as well—shoulder-level only. A beta, then. "Wen Qionglin."

"You're a very good archer, Wen Ning."

Wen Ning blushed to the roots of his light hair.

Wei Wuxian chuckled. He threw the arrow back to its owner, who fumbled around before catching it. "Will you be participating in the competition too?" he asked. "I look forward to fighting against such talent."

"I… I will not," Wen Ning answered quietly.

"Why not? Are the other Wen clan archers so good that even your skills pale next to theirs?"

Wen Ning only shook his head, his words seemingly caught in his mouth. Wei Wuxian spent another minute coaxing him into speech, curious about this boy whose gentle nature made him look as frail as a leaf in the wind. He had not called him by his birth name on purpose; it was only that Wen Ning seemed so young and eager for company, Wei Wuxian felt older in comparison.

"The Nightless City is this way," Wen Ning said, pointing in the direction Wei Wuxian had come from. "Not very far. Just follow the path straight ahead."

Wuxian bowed again. He grinned when he straightened up. "Thank you."

"I, I should accompany you…" The rest of Wen Ning's sentence trailed into nothingness.
"I'll be fine," Wei Wuxian replied. "It's not far, you said?"

Wen Ning stood still for a moment longer, his brow furrowed in what looked like embarrassment and worry alike. In a surer voice, he said, "I will accompany you. If you will accept me."

It was all so proper. All things Wei Wuxian cared very little about. But Wen Ning’s blushes and stammering seemed to stem from his own shyness rather than any sort of rule-abiding, and as they walked and talked side by side, he never stopped looking Wei Wuxian in the eye.

"Where have you been?" Jiang Cheng growled at him after Wei Wuxian reached him in the wide plaza where all the Wen drums were gathered. Wen Ning had bowed to him again before joining the ranks of other Wen juniors, his smile genuine despite its timidity. "Father will arrive any minute now, if he thought I'd left you alone…"

"You worry too much, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said. "Did you think I'd fallen down the gorge?"

"You would, if you were too busy looking at the clouds rather than your own feet."

Wei Wuxian laughed and dropped his elbow atop Jiang Cheng's shoulder. It always infuriated Jiang Cheng when he did it; his shidi had yet to catch up to the last inch of height that Wei Wuxian had over him.

All around them stood hundreds of disciples from more than fifty clans in total. Wei Wuxian glimpsed faces he had met during his time in Gusu: Ouyang Zhi not far talking to another Yunmeng boy, Nie Huaisang waving at him from behind a thin fan. Jin Zixuan stood only a few steps away. He met Wei Wuxian's eyes briefly before turning on his heels, his face suddenly bright red.

It was impossible in the midst of all these dark uniforms to miss the spotless white of Gusulan. A handful of their disciples stood on the other side of the biggest war drum, among them Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji.

They shone, otherworldly it seemed, against the backdrop of rocks and mountains. Wei Wuxian had often wondered during his time in Gusu how one achieved the poise that these two did; if it was their natural inheritance, or if Lan Qiren's acerb tongue had sharpened it out of them.

He dropped the arm he had put over Jiang Cheng's shoulder. "Lan Zhan!" he called. "Second brother Lan!"

Lan Wangji's head turned aside almost as soon as his mouth had opened, and Wei Wuxian had not advanced three steps before the smell of sandalwood reached him.

"Young master Wei," Lan Xichen greeted him with a smile. He was about to bow when he seemed to notice what everyone else had noticed about Wei Wuxian for a year now; but instead of shame or disgust, his face bore only a smile. "Congratulations," he offered, bending down at last. "I'm sure your skills have improved since we saw each other. I look forward to the competition."

No one had congratulated Wei Wuxian on reaching maturity yet. "Thank you," he replied a little awkwardly. Then to Lan Wangji: "Lan Zhan, it's good to meet you again."

Lan Wangji said nothing. He looked Wei Wuxian in the eyes for a second before bending the neck stiffly in his direction and walking away.

"I'm sure he's looking forward to it as well," Lan Xichen said in apology.

"I know he hates me," Wei Wuxian replied with a laugh. "Hey, Lan Zhan, your forehead ribbon is
crooked."

His humor seemed unstoppable; he watched in glee as Lan Wangji actually stopped in his tracks to check, then laughed again at the vicious glare that the Lan sect heir gave him over his spotless-white shoulder.

Lan Wangji was too proper not to rile up every once in a while.

It was with a cheer in his heart that Wei Wuxian took his place among the other disciples. From down the steps of the Wen gate, he saw Jiang Fengmian sit between Lan Qiren and Nie Mingjue. Jin Guangshan had taken place close to the dais where Wen Ruohan would supposedly make his appearance.

It wasn't Wen Ruohan who appeared next, though, but a much younger man. He sat upon the dais with his legs spread wide and asked for drinks in a voice so disagreeable that it carried downwind and to Wei Wuxian's ears. The rich ornaments he had put his brown hair in were not enough to draw elegance out of him.

"Wen Chao," Wei Wuxian heard one of the Ouyang disciples murmur to Jiang Cheng. "Wen Ruohan's second son."

"Who does he think he is, sitting above father?" Jiang Cheng seethed.

"The Wen clan really thinks itself at the top of the cultivation world."

"I heard Wen Chao was the one who annexed the Zhu sect a few months ago. He took everything, even their omega…"

Wen Ruohan entered the stage a step above his son, backlit by the sun in an obvious show of power. All whispers ceased. Wei Wuxian watched in incredulity as every Wen disciple fell to their knees at once and praised his name like one praised an emperor's. At the very back of their neat row, he saw Wen Ning mimic them, his face twisted with unease.

The shields barring entry from the competition field loosened. One after another, the disciples entered through the rock maze to look for the haunted targets.

One of Wei Wuxian's shidi told him, "Maybe you shouldn't participate after all."

"Why not?" Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng retorted in the same voice.

The boy seemed to hesitate. "It's just, it's just… won't the Wens cause trouble for us if they notice?"

"The Wens know not to cause trouble today," Jiang Cheng said. "Not with all five main sect leaders present. This is Qishan, but Father wouldn't let that stop him."

"I'd participate even without Uncle Jiang here," Wei Wuxian added, lightly elbowing Jiang Cheng. "You all have no chance of winning without me, after all."

"You wish!"

The sound of the Wen disciples' voices reached them then. Everyone turned to look at them and find out the source of the commotion: it seemed they were arguing over who would and would not enter the competition. Wei Wuxian stilled as he heard Wen Ning's name leave one junior's mouth.

"I've never seen you shoot an arrow before," he was telling the shrunk-up form of Wen Ning,
sneering the whole time. His scent tagged him as alpha. "Wen Ning, do you think this is a game?"

"I, I'm—"

"He's a great archer," said Wei Wuxian.

Behind him, he heard Jiang Cheng sigh. Wei Wuxian grinned and walked the distance separating him from the Wen group until he reached Wen Ning's side.

"I saw him earlier in the mountains," he told the group of shocked youth, not a single one of whom seemed to know what to make of his sudden arrival. "He hit bull's eye every time. You'd be foolish not to let him participate."

"Young master Wei," Wen Ning said shyly. "There is no need to—"

"What's going on here? Why are none of you idiots on the field yet?"

The ten-odd disciples of Qishan parted around Wen Chao, letting him walk up to where the boy Wei Wuxian had talked to stood. Wen Chao was holding a cup in his hand. He took a sip of it as his eyes roamed over the assembly. When they reached Wei Wuxian, he spit the wine out, staining the dry earth every way.

He coughed so loudly that one of the youngest disciples approached to pat him on the back; Wen Chao chased him off with one violent shove.

"You, omega" he said, causing most around him to blush and look away, causing Wei Wuxian's irritation to boil over into anger. "You—who are you?"

"Wei Wuxian of Yunmengjiang," Wei Wuxian replied.

He didn't bow. He didn't raise his hands in salute. He did not call Wen Chao's name or title.

Wen Chao barely seemed to notice. "I've heard about you," he murmured. There was a sneer on his face too—perhaps sneering was a common Wen trait—but he did not look away from Wei Wuxian, staring him up and down and up again, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "You're Jiang Fengmian's omega. Why are you here?"

"To compete, of course."

"To compete?"

"Wen Chao," came Jiang Cheng's voice.

He had walked toward them until his elbow almost touched Wei Wuxian's. His face now frowned in a way that terribly resembled his mother, his anger hot and evident.

"Wei Wuxian is the senior disciple of Yunmeng and a skilled archer," he said. "If you have a problem with his participating, you're welcome to take it up with our sect leader."

Wen Chao looked briefly toward where the different leaders sat, his own father above them. All but Wen Ruohan seemed interested in the scene going on below, though there was no way they could hear through that distance what words were being exchanged.

It seemed Wen Chao had no interest in bringing up the matter with Jiang Fengmian. "Then why is Wei Wuxian here with my lot?" he asked.
Wei Wuxian said, "I heard them talk about leaving this young master out of the competition, and I thought I would tell them that they have better chances of winning with him."

The whole affair was solved within a few minutes. Wen Chao didn't believe that Wen Ning could hold a bow and arrow together; he openly mocked Wei Wuxian's words, the ugly expression on his face never abating.

Wei Wuxian would have cared more about himself if he had not seen Wen Ning's own face shatter at each hurtful word thrown his way. He couldn't get out of his mind how eager the boy had been for praise—for praise coming from Wei Wuxian. How he had marched him to the Nightless City without ever looking away from him, drinking in his conversation as if parched for bonding, calling him young master and bowing in obvious respect.

Wei Wuxian offered to have Wen Ning shoot a target in front of everyone. His idea, once repeated by Jiang Cheng, found approval in Wen Chao, if only for the potential to laugh. Wei Wuxian tried his best to encourage Wen Ning from where he stood, but it was no use; the boy shook and faltered, and his arrow missed the target by a wide leap.

Wen Chao looked at Wei Wuxian like he was dirt when he approached to comfort the young beta, but at least Wen Ning's shamed face regained some confidence.

"You always have to shove your nose into things that don't concern you," Jiang Cheng told Wei Wuxian once they finally entered the maze.

They split up from the rest of their shidi and from the Ouyang disciples, most of the juniors going their own way in search of feral ghosts. They were the very last to enter the competition. No signal had been sent yet to mark anyone's points.

"He really is a good archer," Wei Wuxian said.

"I don't doubt it. You don't praise people off-handedly. But it's still none of your business."

"I don't like bullies."

Jiang Cheng didn't reply. "Beware of Wen Chao," he simply said, drawing his bow and marching left where the road between the rocks opened. "He's the worst of his kind. You just had to go and make him notice you, didn't you."

As Wei Wuxian shot down his first target—the first of the whole competition—he thought idly, Wen Chao will forget me soon enough.

Yunmengjiang's lotus bloomed over the mountains, bathing everything in its light.

Wei Wuxian ran his way through every narrow opening he found, climbing rocks and crawling down holes, shooting every ghost he encountered without missing any. Soon the disdain with which Wen Chao had addressed him vanished from his mind, cleanly swept away by focus and effort. His face and hands became dirty. Dust stained the hem of his clothing. The arrows he used and then picked up started blunting at the head.

There was some comfort to be found in this loneliness, Wei Wuxian discovered. There was a thrill to being unchaperoned while night-hunting, no matter that this night-hunt was not the real thing, no matter that people watched over the competition from high up the mountains to make sure no one cheated. Here he was alone with no one to judge him. In front of the ghosts he shot out of existence, he was no one's inferior.
He was understandably annoyed when he emerged from a thin rocky alley and found Jin Zixuan at the other end.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

Jin Zixuan humphed. His quiver was empty by a third, and most of his other arrows were in the same state of use as Wei Wuxian's. He had not been idle.

"Where is Jiang Wanyin?" Jin Zixuan asked him after a moment of silence.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "No idea. He went his own way."

This seemed to shock the Jin heir immensely. His face, which had shone with exertion and sweat a moment before, paled noticeably. "He left you alone?"

"What," Wei Wuxian said sweetly. "Don't you know I'm capable of throwing a punch?"

"No, I—"

Jin Zixuan's reaction to mentioning how their time together in Gusu had ended was not what Wei Wuxian had expected. He had only ever seen Jin Zixuan as a pompous little master with too much pride for his own good; when he visited Jiang Yanli before their engagement was rescinded, he barely talked to her. He barely looked at her. Wei Wuxian could remember each and every time those judging eyes had followed him around, full of somber feelings, when they should have been looking at his shijie instead.

Yet now Jin Zixuan was in the same state as he. Dirty and a little tired, sweat shining on his face, words struggling out of his mouth. The golden robes of Lanlingjin had absorbed much of the dust around. His cheeks turned red under Wei Wuxian's staring.

One could almost believe them equal.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan finally said. Even so much seemed an inconceivable effort; he blushed further. "I have been meaning to... to speak to you."


Now Jin Zixuan looked even more lost, as if he had not expected Wei Wuxian to hear him out at all. The hand not wrapped around his bow lifted and then lowered hesitantly.

Wei Wuxian half-hoped for Jin Zixuan to insult him, so that he may have the excuse to insult back; instead Jin Zixuan said, "I offer you my congratulations for coming into maturity."

And then he bowed in all the proper ways an alpha should, his head held as low as it could go without moving his shoulders, his free hand splayed over his chest.

The most humble and deferential of all alpha greetings.

"I heard no news of a ceremony, or I would have come," Jin Zixuan said, mistaking Wei Wuxian's silence for something it wasn't. His head was still turned to the ground. "It has been so long since any of the main clans had one—"

"There was no ceremony," Wei Wuxian cut in.

Jin Zixuan's head lifted. "Why?" he asked in surprise.
Because it had been so sudden. Because Wei Wuxian had grown so used to things always being the same, to his status being nothing more than a flicker of distaste in the eyes of strangers, that he had forgotten. Because the harsh lesson he had learned during the three months he spent in the Cloud Recesses—that it did matter, that he was different—had seemed like a dream after coming back home.

Yu Ziyuan had not wanted one. When Wei Wuxian had come out of the forlorn shack at the edges of the Pier, hollowed out by the fever and loneliness, and Jiang Fengmian had walked to his room to ask about preparations with shame distorting his very scent, Wei Wuxian had said, "No need."

He was not a child born to wealth. He was not part of the Jiang clan. Having a ceremony would have only worsened all the things tearing Jiang Fengmian's marriage apart.

A shadow appeared in the distance. Wei Wuxian walked around Jin Zixuan and drew back his bowstring, focusing on his aim to forget about everything else.

Before his arrow loosened, another was already piercing the target's ghostly forehead.

Laughter echoed loudly against the rocky walls of the clearing, boisterous, arrogant. Wei Wuxian looked up and saw Wen Chao hand his bow over to one of the two lackeys accompanying him.

"You know," he told Wei Wuxian as he jumped off of the boulder he stood on, "some Yunmeng juniors I saw on the way told me you're a skilled archer, Wei Wuxian."

Jin Zixuan's voice was cold when he greeted, "Wen Chao."

Wen Chao ignored him. "But you didn't even shoot fast enough for a target right in front of you," he continued. "I told them, I said, 'there's only one thing that omega are skilled are, and it's not archery.' I was right, wasn't I?"

"Those are some words coming from someone who can't carry his own weapons," Wei Wuxian replied, annoyed. "Or find his own targets."

"Only the poor take care of their own things," Wen Chao said arrogantly. "Why should I live as a peasant? Ah, but you wouldn't know about that, would you. Still, I was surprised by your behavior!"

Here he turned to the other Wen cultivators who had followed him, and who immediately nodded their approval. It was as though their minds had gone and been replaced by lifeless devotion, Wei Wuxian thought with disgust. "An omega playing cultivator, here in Nightless City! Jiang Fengmian must have the thickest skin in the world to still call himself alpha. If you'd been of Qishanwen, this spirit would have been taken out of you in no time."

"If I'd been of Qishanwen," Wei Wuxian mocked, "the sun would have dried out my wits like it seems to have dried yours."

There was a silence. Then Wen Chao let out a forced laugh, shrill and open-mouthed, bouncing again and again on the smooth rocks around.

"Oh, you have wits, I'll give you that," he said when he was done. "The quiet that followed his outburst sent chills up Wei Wuxian's spine. "I guess I can see why Jiang Fengmian likes you so much. But now it all makes sense, after seeing you with that man—" he gestured rudely to Jin Zixuan "—you're not here to night-hunt at all, are you! The valley is a great place to lose a chaperone in, you smart thing."

Jin Zixuan's thin control finally snapped. "How dare you!" he said, one hand over his golden sword. "I wasn't—"
"Save your breath, brother Jin," Wei Wuxian interrupted.

He was tired of it all. He didn't feel like hearing Jin Zizuan defend his pristine virtue while throwing Wei Wuxian's to the dogs.

"Young master Wen here doesn't look like he can make sense of anything more complex that his choice of clothing for the day," he said. "I think you shouldn't trouble him with your affairs."

"Watch your tongue, omega," Wen Chao snapped, angered at last.

Wei Wuxian shook his head and laughed. "You said you didn't believe I had any skills to show?" he asked. Wen Chao's eyes narrowed as Wei Wuxian walked around him. "Fine, then. I'll win this competition, and then you may talk to me, Wen Chao."

"This isn't any way to speak to your superiors—"

But his voice was drowned already as Wei Wuxian slipped between rocks. Muffled down to nothing as the very tone of it, harsh on the ears, erased his words' meaning.

Wen Chao followed him, as expected, but Wei Wuxian did not let that affect him. He was quite confident in his advantage over the other participants—he had lost count of how many targets he had shot, but he knew there were many—and he could afford to lose some time.

He looked for feral ghosts in the shadows of the valley. Wen Chao nicked them from him each and every time, shooting them when Wei Wuxian's focus was turned to pinning them in place. The judges watching the competition stayed conspicuously silent to his cheating.

"Lower your head when I talk to you, Wei Wuxian!" Wen Chao yelled from behind or above him, the two lackeys carrying his affairs panting by his side.

He made an odd picture with his cream-colored robes rumpled with effort, and each time he stumbled and had to reach for dirt to push himself upright, Wei Wuxian laughed just loudly enough to be heard.

"My father will have you sold for nothing," Wen Chao fumed.

"Yunmengjiang loses face with every second you spend here!" Wen Chao bellowed.

"Enjoy this farce while you can, omega—"

Wen Chao slipped in the middle of that one, causing the fall of the junior he grabbed to steady himself, raising a dust cloud around where his behind hit the ground. Wei Wuxian shot his target as they stood and dusted themselves. He was grinning overtly.

Wen Chao's face had dirt on it now. His anger was such that he did not stop to let his lackey wipe it off for him and simply walked to Wei Wuxian, his steps heavy on the cracked-open ground.

"You filthy little—"

"What's going on here?"

That was Jiang Cheng's voice. He emerged from another path between rocks, followed by a shidi whose defeated expression said he must have been eliminated. Jiang Cheng had said the words to Wen Chao, but now he could see who exactly Wen Chao was talking to, and his expression grew darker the second he met Wei Wuxian's eyes.
His hand grabbed the pommel of his sword firmly. "Wen Chao," he said. "Get away from him."

Wei Wuxian wanted to tell Jiang Cheng to let him handle it. He was fine. Wen Chao was nothing more than a fool with an overblown ego; if anything, dancing around him like this was proving more entertaining than the competition alone. But Wen Chao and Jiang Cheng were of a status, and Wen Chao struggled so obviously not to offend another alpha that a vein popped over his red forehead, which was just as amusing to watch.

Wen Chao turned to Wei Wuxian again and spat, "One day, you'll be put back in your place."

Wei Wuxian lifted his bow, took aim, and shot.

His arrow split the air so close to Wen Chao's shocked face that his cheek bore a faint red line. Its head burrowed into the haunted target that had risen behind him. The ghost fell to the ground before Wen Chao even found time to recover thought and turn around.

"My apologies," Wei Wuxian said. He gave a brief salute and added, mocking, "You didn't seem to have seen it, master Wen."

"You bitch," Wen Chao heaved. "You fucking bitch."

Many things happened at once.

Wen Chao grabbed his sword from the youth by his side so harshly that the girl fell over, her forehead hitting the ground and immediately spilling blood.

Jin Zixuan arrived, panting, to the place where they were gathered. Wei Wuxian's name died off of his lips as he took in the blade now swinging through the air.

Sandu came out of its sheath at the same time as Suibian, and Jiang Cheng like Wei Wuxian knew that neither would be quick enough.

Then a great whistling shocked the air around them. The sound of metal striking metal rang through the hazy silence as an arrowhead touched the gleaming edge of Wen Chao's sword, deviating its trajectory so that it embedded into dirt.

Lan Wangji dropped to the ground with as much grace as ever, the white of his robes barely bearing traces of dust. He put his bow back over his shoulder and stood motionless between Wei Wuxian and Wen Chao, his handsome face sharpened by the black-and-white light of the elimination signal.

Its shape was that of Gusulan's cloud.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian let out, breathless with shock.

Lan Wangji took a moment to answer. "Dueling is forbidden," he said.

Then he dusted his robes, fixed his forehead ribbon, and left for the Nightless City.

Wei Wuxian laughed like he had never laughed before.

His face still ached from smiling as he joined the other disciples at dusk for the results of the competition. The ethereal coming of Gusulan's Jade had broken Wen Chao out of his rage, and it seemed that the amount of witnesses to his would-be assault was enough to put him out of trying again. How terribly shameful would it have been for a sect leader's child to attack an omega in public? He had left another way and not bothered Wei Wuxian for the rest of the day.
He stood now with the other dust-stained Wen participants, looking a lot less put-together than even the youngest of them. His face paled and then reddened as the results were announced and the first Wen name to make rank—a name not his—was in sixth position.

When he glared at Wei Wuxian from afar, Wei Wuxian smirked back.

"Da shixiong, congratulations," his shidi said, looking at him in admiration.

For a golden while of talking and laughing, Wei Wuxian forgot that all of his juniors had grown distant from him since he first fell fevered.

Wei Wuxian walked up the stairs of Qishanwen's imposing gate with the other winners. He received and gave back Lan Xichen's congratulations on the way, nodded to a silent Lan Wangji, ignored Jin Zixuan as the other ignored him. Jiang Cheng followed him up silently.

"A-Xian, A-Cheng," Jiang Fengmian said, rising from his seat once they were in front of him. "Congratulations. You made the Jiang sect proud today."

"Thank you, Uncle Jiang," Wei Wuxian said, bowing.

Jiang Cheng hesitated before nodding. His face was uncertain as he replied, "I didn't make top four, father."

"You came in fifth," Jiang Fengmian smiled. "With such competition against you, that is more than admirable."

Jiang Cheng's face lit up. Wei Wuxian's heart swelled with warmth.

Wen Ruohan had already left his throne-like seat, and the dais where his son had sat arrogantly earlier was empty too. Wei Wuxian let Jiang Cheng speak with his father of the mistakes his had made during the day and how he promised to fix them, and allowed his gaze to linger.

The Lan brothers seemed to be receiving a much colder welcome from Lan Qiren, which was not surprising considering the man's temper, but did not look to bother Lan Wangji or Lan Xichen in any way. The both of them bowed, one at the neck, the other at the shoulders. Jin Guangshan was crooning something at his son, probably some promise or another of wealthy recompense when they came back to their golden tower. Jin Zixuan met Wei Wuxian's eyes for a fleeting second before turning away.

There was no sign now of the courtesy he had shown in the valley.

Nie Mingjue was the only one of the sect leaders not to have a winner to celebrate. He didn't seem to mind so much, as he was walking toward Jiang Fengmian now with a brash smile on his face.

"So that's your infamous omega, then," he said, nodding quickly to Jiang Fengmian. His eyes then bore into Wei Wuxian's with much curiosity. "I thought Huaisang was taking me for a fool, speaking of him all this time."

Jiang Cheng tensed by Wei Wuxian's side, but Wei Wuxian felt no worry. There was not a hint of disgust, not a shadow of double-entendre, in Nie Mingjue's voice. "It's an honor to meet you, sect leader Nie," he said.

Nie Mingjue grinned brashly. He spoke to Jiang Fengmian again. "All this time I've been lecturing my brother for making up tales, but now I'll have to tell him I saw Wei Wuxian best Lan Xichen in archery!"
"Is Huaisang-xiong not here?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Nie Mingjue laughed. "Gave up around noon, the useless boy," he replied. "He'll be well on his way back to Qinghe now, I believe."

He went on for a bit longer about this useless brother of his. Wei Wuxian escaped the conversation and watched the plaza below empty itself until only the war drums stood in their elongated shadows.

Sunset was crawling over the land, bleeding to red every rocky crevice, every sparse greenery. In the absence of Wen Chao and his pack of empty-headed followers, Wei Wuxian could understand why such a place might be called beautiful.

"You sure showed them, sect leader Jiang," Nie Mingjue was saying now in no more than a whisper. Jiang Fengmian's posture didn't change, though his earthly scent shifted, acid and watery. "An omega winning in Qishan… Wen Ruohan will have to bed every one of his spouses before he feels alpha again."

"Wei Wuxian won out of his own merit," Jiang Fengmian replied curtly. "And with no aim but competition."

Their words turned softer still. Secretive.

Jiang Cheng stepped beside Wei Wuxian to watch the setting sun with him. Already the mountain flanks were turning grey, the sky bleeding into black. Wei Wuxian thought of nothing but his name upon the competition scroll and how to celebrate once he arrived back home.

The Gusulan delegation walked past them, beginning its descent down the stairs, their white robes pinked by the light.

Wei Wuxian breathed in and called, "Lan Zhan!"

They all stopped in their tracks. Lan Qiren glared death upon him as he approached, but Wei Wuxian paid him no mind; he hurried to Lan Wangji's side, passing by Lan Xichen, who by some stroke of luck pulled his uncle down the stairs and gave them privacy.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said evenly.

Even with darkness spreading overhead, he looked beautiful. As if he couldn't be touched by anything. It was the kind of beauty that only immortals achieved; the kind of otherness that Wei Wuxian had heard of in relation to Baoshan Sanren, to Lan An, to Wen Mao.

Wei Wuxian bowed like he only ever did in front of one person and said, "Thank you for your help earlier."

He poured as much honesty as he could in his words, for he knew how little Lan Wangji thought of him. But Wei Wuxian had never hated Lan Wangji despite their many arguments and clashing personalities. He had never thought of the Jade of Lan in as ill a manner as he did Jin Zixuan or any conceited alpha he had met in Gusu.

Wei Wuxian knew he had pushed Lan Wangji to the limits of his patience before in the worst way; but he wished to make him understand that at least this time, his gratitude was sincere. Not a joke, not a game.

"Don't."
At first he thought he had misheard. Wei Wuxian straightened out his posture and looked at the boy—almost a man—in front of him in askance. "What did you say?"

Lan Wangji was not facing him. His profile cut against the red sky and made him look statuesque, like an altar in a cave; lit only by burning incense, given life to by worship.

"Don't bow," he said, glancing at Wei Wuxian from the corner of his pale eyes.

He perhaps meant it as *You're welcome*. He probably meant it as *Do not talk to me*.

Lan Wangji turned away to follow his brother and uncle down the stone steps of Qishanwen. Sandalwood heated the air he left behind like smoke; when Wei Wuxian inhaled, he felt a little like he had during that night by the cold spring. Excited and flustered and warmed from head to toes.

Chapter End Notes

The rumor come out: is izanyas write A/B/O?

Outside of me de-anoning because I Frankly Cannot Be Bothered, and anyway I suck at keeping secrets so all my friends know, I had... the worst day. The most awful day. You'll find a recap of it on Twitter if you're curious, but all in all, thank you SNCF.

I hope you enjoyed reading. Keep those lovely comments coming.
Summer dusked into fall that year with the heaviest rains seen in Yunmeng in living memory.

Wei Wuxian's last fever of the season was spent trying to keep the omega house relatively dry. Although the shack didn't possess much in terms of furniture—no one had lived here in years, after all—he found vases and bowls to put under where its holed roof leaked. It was almost a game, he found, in his immense boredom. Listening for raindrops and catching them in their fall. His life was never as slow as in those isolated days.

It was enough to make him wish that someone could spend them with him one day.

In the last days of his heat, when the fever was only some remnant of warmth in his neck and forehead, Wei Wuxian had more than enough clarity for thought. He sat in the dryest corner of the rundown house and ate lotus seeds from a bag his shijie had given him. His mind ran the country over in the pitter-patter of the rain; crisp and cold in Gusu, dry and hot in Qishan. He smiled at nothing in particular, waiting for his time to be done so he could come back out.

Yunmeng gorged itself with water. Lotuses drowned one after the other, finishing their bloom submerged. Paths became covered in mud. Near the mountains in Yiling, landslides killed innocent travelers and buried their bodies.

ToWei Wuxian's surprise, Yu Ziyuan came to fetch him herself at the end of the last day.

He scrambled to his feet at the sight of her, stumbling somewhat under his own weight. "Madam Yu," he told her, bowing low. Belatedly, he remembered to put both hands forward and finish the salute. "I hope you are well."

"Come with me," she said without returning his greeting.

She had come alone. Usually Wei Wuxian would receive a knock on the door when the sixth day brightened, and Yu Jinzhu's sharp voice would call out to him and tell him to get out. Then he would walk down the dirt path, bathe a moment in his room, and join Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli for breakfast. Neither of them ever asked him where he had gone. Life simply picked up where it had left off, the days of soreness and heat forgotten in the minds of all.

But Yu Ziyuan had come this time. Not on the sixth morning but on the fifth night. Wei Wuxian did not fear any loss of control, but the fever lingered, warm around his neck and through his chest. He must smell awfully to her—she had always hated his scent—yet she said nothing. She didn't take him to his room. She didn't bring him to the main hall.
She took him to the mansion's kitchen, where a bowl full of lotus root soup waited, and gestured for him to sit.

Wei Wuxian was so surprised that he almost forgot to obey.

"Thank you, clan leader," he said once he had taken place. He took the bowl in one hand without touching its content, his stomach too knotted now to allow for hunger. "Did you want to speak with me?"

"I do, actually," Madam Yu said curtly.

She did not sit down. She would never want him to think the both of them equal like this.

She took a long piece of paper out of her wide sleeves and put it down in front of him. Then she put another next to it, similar if not for the seal at its end. "These came in the past few days from the Jin and Wen sects respectively," she said. "About you."

Wei Wuxian needn't ask what they were.

"They are marriage offers," Yu Ziyuan explained anyway.

"I imagine you have replied already," Wei Wuxian pushed past the ache in his throat.

For once, Yu Ziyuan didn't punish his insolence. "We do not deal with Wens," she said harshly. "Not even with Wen Ruohan's favorite son. He has more than enough omega spouses to satisfy him already."

I would not have married Wen Chao even if he were single, Wei Wuxian thought through his relief. Never.

"The Jin sect, however…"

He unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth and asked, "Who is it?"

The memory came to him, unbidden, of a rocky alley on a hot summer day; of a boy in golden robes bowing to him with his hand pressed over his heart.

"Jin Zixun," Madam Yu answer briskly. "You've never met him. He's a cousin of Zixuan's. He isn't a very good cultivator, nor is he near the top of the Jin line of succession, but he is still an alpha of the Jin clan. This is a more than admirable prospect, Wei Ying."

Something was very wrong.

It had nothing to do with Jin Zixun's supposed love for him, spread over the letter for Wei Wuxian's clan leaders to read. Poor line after poor line of poetry about Wei Wuxian's virtues blackened the paper in-between a lengthy introduction and even lengthier offer for monetary compensation. Jin Zixun probably hadn't even written them himself. This was nothing more than a business transaction, as all omega unions were.

No, what surprised Wei Wuxian was that Yu Ziyuan was talking to him about it instead of Jiang Fengmian. That she looked, for all intents and purposes, as if she were asking his opinion.

Something is very wrong, Wei Wuxian thought again.

"Have you replied yet?" he asked her tentatively.
Yu Ziyuan stared him down for a silent moment before replying, "Not yet."

"Does Uncle—"

"My husband will not hear of any marriage prospect that does not come out of your mouth. He would refuse if I came to him with any letter, no matter whose hand wrote it."

Wei Wuxian swallowed. In his hand, the bowl of soup burned, untouched.

"Will you refuse, Wei Ying?" Madam Yu asked him.

So this was what it was all about.

Wei Wuxian thought in a small corner of his mind that it was a good thing he had never hoped to win Yu Ziyuan's approval. If he had ever believed that he could one day grow to meet her standards, to make her look past who his parents had been and appreciate his character instead… Perhaps that was what she was counting on in this endeavor. Wei Wuxian had never pegged her as someone prone to manipulation—she was too strict and blunt, too direct in her manners, a woman of the strongest temperament—but perhaps she had thought this would work better on him than mere orders.

Yu Ziyuan didn't sit down, for that would bring her to his level, but she put her sword over the table. She took Zidian off of her finger and slipped it into one of her long sleeves. "Wei Ying," she said, "you owe this clan reparation."

Wei Wuxian replied, "I know."

"You stole Jiang Cheng's birthright from him by being named senior disciple. You thanklessly humiliated him in Qishan." She breathed in, taking some time to ease the fury growing in her dark eyes. "You destroyed A-Li's future prospects and irreparably damaged Lanlingjin and Yunmengjiang's long-standing alliance with your actions."

"What!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed, ready to rise from his seat. "I did not—"

"Sit down!" Yu Ziyuan bellowed. "You did, you know you did, or how else do you explain Jin Guangshan's lack of invitation to Golden Carp Tower's banquet?"

It was the first Wei Wuxian heard of any such thing. He knew he had been the cause for Jiang Yanli's broken engagement—he knew that guilt like the back of his own hand, could experience it anew every time he caught his shijie looking into distance with sadness in her eyes—but no one had said anything of Jiang and Jin's alliance coming undone.

Yet neither Jin Guangshan nor his wife had set foot in Lotus Pier since before the competition. Wei Wuxian couldn't even remember seeing the Jin sect leader talking to Jiang Fengmian during it.

Wei Wuxian sat back down. "Now do you understand, boy?" Yu Ziyuan asked darkly. "It is not just face we are losing by letting you roam around. My husband took you in and raised you as a son—"

"Uncle Jiang wouldn't..."
But did Wei Wuxian truly know? Had Jiang Fengmian ever been truthful to him, he who neither confirmed nor denied all the gossip, all the rumors calling him lovesick, calling his wife abandoned, calling him Wei Wuxian's true father?

Perhaps Jiang Fengmian did wish for Wei Wuxian to marry and unburden him at last. Perhaps he only did not wish to tell him so out of kindness.

Wei Wuxian's heart beat off-tempo in his chest. The last dregs of his fever heated in his temples and awoke all soreness in him, making him wince, causing Yu Ziyuan's nose to twist in disdain.

"I don't want to marry," he said in a rough voice.

"You will eventually have to do things you do not wish to do," Yu Ziyuan replied. "As do we all."

Her comparison seemed unfair to him. What could she, an alpha born to a wealthy Yunmeng clan, know of his situation? She had never had to face disapproval at her own upbringing. She was a powerful cultivator, a beautiful alpha. Even if Jiang Fengmian had never loved her, he had always treated her with the utmost respect and courtesy. They were cultivation partners.

Wei Wuxian realized even as he thought it that he was wrong. Even if she had never faced abuse of that kind, she was unhappy. And even if he had known disapproval, Wei Wuxian had still lived in immense privilege.

The lonely house by the river was not his home, after all, for most days of the year.

"You will meet him," Yu Ziyuan said after the silence stretched beyond bearability. "You will meet Jin Zixun and you will hold his attention and you will marry him." Wei Wuxian felt her every word like whiplash; as if Zidian were tearing into his back as it sometimes did his shidi's. "You will repay your clan leaders' kindness by doing your duty, Wei Ying."

Her tone was final. She stared at him for another second, and in that span of time Wei Wuxian saw something incredible, something akin to pity, simmer in her vivid eyes. Yu Ziyuan seemed a second away from saying something to him. For the first time since he had come to Yunmeng held in Jiang Fengmian's tired arms, Wei Wuxian saw her not as a figure to fear.

She said nothing of what she thought, in the end. She picked her sword from the table and told him, "You don't have a choice."

Wei Wuxian was left alone in the kitchen. Five days' worth of fatigue and hunger weighed upon his sore back and made his hold over the soup bowl weak. He didn't touch any of it.

He said nothing to Jiang Fengmian.

Every day he felt Yu Ziyuan's eyes on him. She seemed to have adopted another strategy: she did not say one word to him anymore, good or bad, as if waiting for something to happen. Perhaps she wanted her husband to announce during dinner one day that Wei Wuxian was to be wed. Perhaps she was waiting for Wei Wuxian to come to her and say, "I accept."

He couldn't.
He tried, at first. He attempted to ignore how uneasy the thought of marrying someone made him; how petrified the knowledge that marriage could only mean being locked up had him. He tried to think of his fevers differently. He tried to imagine someone keeping him company during them, touching him during them.

Wei Wuxian woke up at night with his tongue dry and his hands fisted in the sheets of his bed. Images ran behind his eyelids of invisible hands on him when he was in that very state. Of someone doing with him as they wished. Of exchanging five days of company, five times a year, for a lifetime of loneliness.

He couldn't. He didn't think he would ever be able to. In those dark nights, as Yunmeng thickened with rain and the lotuses slowly withered and died, Wei Wuxian came to understand what he was lacking.

It wasn't that he had spent his life avoiding other omega on purpose. He knew enough not to blame himself for this. He had been young when Jiang Fengmian had brought him home and decided for him how his upbringing should be; and while traveling with his mother and father, Wei Wuxian hadn't known any better. In their company, he had never been made to feel different from anyone else.

But he had grown up outside. He had run through the wilderness around Yunmeng, not fully realizing perhaps what the disapproval he was faced with meant. He had been sheltered in a way that no one else of his status could aspire to be.

Going to Gusu two years prior had been like stepping into ice-cold water. Lan Qiren's disgust tasted differently that Madam Yu's did, for at least she had reason beyond his status to hate him. Lan Qiren knew nothing of him and of his character. He simply hated Wei Wuxian for being omega. Wei Wuxian had overcome that unfairness by being as obnoxious and terrible to the man as he knew how to be; he had coped, in Lan Wangji's quiet presence, by harassing the boy until his composure cracked.

It was easier to forget like this. With the Jade of Lan looking at him like this, anger quickening his breaths, skin creasing at his forehead—with such a powerful cultivator, the best of anyone their age, calling his birth name and fighting by his side—Wei Wuxian didn't feel so powerless. Even if he still couldn't explain to himself why he had gone to the spring that night. He still couldn't understand why he had looked at Lan Wangji like this, why he had acted as he did, why he had wanted so badly to say, *Please never change.*

But Wei Wuxian had never spoken to another omega in his life.

Try as he might, he couldn't even remember meeting another omega who was not his mother. What little he had known of his status as he grew up came from the few scrolls that Jiang Fengmian had felt the need to have him read; from the stilted conversations held between the both of them about fevers that someone needed to give Wei Wuxian eventually. But he had never met someone of his kind, never talked to them, never shared experiences.

He asked Jiang Cheng one morning, "Is there any omega in Yunmeng?"

Jiang Cheng was training his archery. His aim faltered for a second, though he thankfully managed not to lose his arrow. "What kind of question is that?" Jiang Cheng replied, frowning and taking aim once more.

"Well, it's only that there isn't any in the sect."
"There's you," Jiang Cheng pointed out. He blushed as he said it, as he was never so at ease with referring to Wei Wuxian in any such way.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "You know what I mean."

Jiang Cheng shot. His arrow embedded itself right above Wei Wuxian's, only slightly off-center.

"That's much better," Wei Wuxian said. He patted Jiang Cheng's shoulder and handed him another arrow. "The trick isn't in aiming with your eyes, more in aiming with your body."

"It's not that easy," Jiang Cheng complained.

"You're the one who wanted to learn! I never said it would be easy."

Jiang Cheng grumbled some insult or another under his breath. Wei Wuxian laughed brightly. They had left their cloaks by the side of the training field after coming out—the day was clement, sunlit and bright-blue—and Wei Wuxian could smell Jiang Cheng's lightning-sharp scent as cleanly as if he had the other buried in his arms.

On sunlit days, Jiang Cheng smelled like his mother.

"About omega in Yumeng," Wei Wuxian prompted as Jiang Cheng took position once more.

"Of course there's omega in Yumeng," Jiang Cheng replied at last. He sounded hesitant, brusque almost. "Just because there isn't any in the sect besides you doesn't mean there's none in the region."

"But where do they live?"

Another shot. Another arrow just an inch to the right, hitting bull's eye but missing its true mark. Jiang Cheng groaned. "How should I know?" he said, annoyed. "Probably in their family homes. I don't go spying all over for omega."


"Nothing! I do nothing!"

Laughter sweetened all of that day. Wei Wuxian stopped asking questions once he understood that Jiang Cheng truly did not know. Instead he focused on teaching his shidi through the warm afternoon hours, until the sun had almost set overwater, until at last Jiang Cheng's arrow split Wei Wuxian's.

He laughed at Jiang Cheng's cry of victory. He put a hand over his shoulders, ruffled his hair, breathed in his familiar scent.

That night Wei Wuxian thought of walking down to Yumeng and wandering around. He thought of knocking on people's doors, of saying, *May I speak to your omega?*

He amused himself by thinking of how people would react. He built make-believe arguments in his head, smooth-talking his way into what he imagined a family inn to be like, down to a comfortable room somewhere where someone similar to him lived. Someone older and married, out of their omega house. Someone who could tell him what exactly it was he was missing.

He thought of finally getting answers as to why each fever left him so lonely and scared. He thought of asking advice about whether or not he should marry.

But Yu Ziyuan had warned him that the choice was not his, and she seemed determined despite her
distance to keep her word.

A delegation came from Lanling as autumn edged into winter. Wei Wuxian saw the golden glare of their swords before he ever saw their faces. They were stark against the blue-white of the Pier's frozen waters, where he was sitting and watching fish get caught in the spreading ice.

Yu Jinzhu appeared by his side and said, "Wei Ying. Come with me."

Wei Wuxian had expected nothing more than to be summoned to the main hall for a scolding or another when he followed the woman back. Instead he was taken to his room and ordered to bathe and change.

"But why?" he asked, confused.

Yu Jinzhu only looked at him impassively.

There was a set of clothing resting on his bed. Purple silk slid between his fingers like water when he touched it; a bell different than the one he carried was tied to the belt that would no doubt go around his waist, but it wasn't any sort of belt he knew. It was wider. The fabric thin and translucent.

This was omega wear.

Wei Wuxian bathed as succinctly as he could. With growing horror, he noticed that powders and perfume had been put next to his bed. He rummaged his closets for trace of his usual clothes, but found not even one forearm brace. The silk robes on his sheets seemed to mock him from afar in all their pristine glory.

Yu Jinzhu knocked on the door and barked at him to hurry and dress. Wei Wuxian considered the dirt-stained training wear he had on minutes ago, trying to evaluate the risk of showing himself in them despite Yu Ziyuan's obvious order.

It was with wary hands that he took hold of the purple robes. And that was another offset of habit, was it not? The color, and the meaning it held. For some reason, Yu Ziyuan wanted Wei Wuxian to be undeniably part of her clan; she who had fought her husband for almost nine years now, trying to make him see that Wei Wuxian was no child of his, not worthy of his name, was the one now calling him hers.

Wei Wuxian dressed slowly. He didn't touch the cosmetics, though their flowery smell wafted thickly through his room and made him want to sneeze. He struggled with the silk belt as he never did with leather; in the end he strapped a leather one around it anyway and strung Suibian from it, comforting himself with its weight.

He didn't touch his hair or face. He wore the same boots he had worn outside earlier. He was certain he looked ridiculous, clad in such fine clothes. He was certain that whoever looked at him now would only see what he was and was not. A boy of eighteen, too tall and rough and with too-big hands. Callused hands.

Suntanned and messy and not at all omega-like.

Yu Jinzhu did express disgust with her face, but she made no comment to him. Wei Wuxian felt a whole new sort of humiliated at being walked around like this, and could only rejoice in Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli's absence. He never wanted them to see him like this.

"Let me look at him," Yu Ziyuan said when they entered the hall.
Servants were already pouring tea. Servants in the Lotus Pier almost never poured tea outside of official visits or banquets with many guests—they had better things to do. Madam Yu walked around a bowing Jinzhu and took in Wei Wuxian's appearance from head to toe.

"Fix your hair," she told him with a sneer. "And get rid of this ridiculous sword."

"Madam Yu," Wei Wuxian said, trying not to let alarm move his voice. "What is going on?"

"Jin Zixun will be here any minute, and I want you to at least look like you won't disgrace this clan in front of him, Wei Ying."

Anything Wei Wuxian could have said to her stopped dead on his tongue.

He didn't hear any of what she said after—about his footwear, his posture, his hair again—for he was too busy reigning in the panic now flowering through him.

"Where's Uncle Jiang?" he asked.

Yu Ziyuan had been in the middle of delivering orders. She looked at him in anger, her lips thin and white, and Wei Wuxian had no doubt that she would have grabbed him by the hair to fix it herself, were she not raised with manners. "Away," she replied. "You don't need him here for this."

"You can't—"

"I can't?"

He knew then that he had crossed a line.

A hush fell over the room. Servants scurried away quietly, their heads bowed, and even Yu Jinzhu's presence faded. Yu Ziyuan observed Wei Wuxian with such cold eyes that his blood seemed to turn to ice.

"Are you presuming to tell me what I can and cannot do?" Yu Ziyuan asked him. Every breath that Wuxian took carried in the smell of her; it seemed that air itself were as sharp a bite as Zidian. "Are you presuming to order me around, boy?"

"I don't want to marry," Wei Wuxian said. He was grown enough now to recognize that his voice bared all of his panic, but he couldn't pretend. "You can't force me."

"I can and I will."

"You—"

"What makes you so special?" Yu Ziyuan shouted.

She may as well have grabbed him by the throat—he couldn't swallow without aching.

"This is what every omega does, Wei Wuxian," she said, her eyes flashing with hatred. "They are married. They produce heirs. They don't have a choice. What makes you so special that you should be treated any differently? What makes you so special that you should be given such privilege?"

What makes you so special that my husband must love you so much?

Yu Ziyuan was talking to someone, Wei Wuxian felt distantly, but it was not him anymore.

"You have trampled over every tradition that the Jiang sect upholds," she continued, "you have taken
and taken and brought nothing but shame to us since the day you stepped foot in this home. You don't even realize, you ungrateful rascal, everything we've sacrificed for you.

"You are unsightly in every way. You are a thief and a liar, ugly, insolent, a blight on everyone who shares your status. You were never worth the kindness you were shown, you were never worth the price we pay in letting you roam free and expose yourself to scandal. You will marry. And then you will leave."

Wei Wuxian’s ears rang in the silence that followed.

Yu Ziyuan didn’t seem otherwise upset. Her face burst with anger and disgust, her tongue sharp on every word she threw his way, but she was standing tall. She didn’t waver or tremble or even breathe more quickly. With gold in her hair, with Zidian shining at her hand and her sword hanging from her hip and her face prettier and more deadly than any Wei Wuxian had witnessed, she looked every way the part she was supposed to play.

He could hear her say again what she had said to him without words, over and over through the years—*You are inferior. I am superior.*

He had never truly felt it till this day.

"Fix your hair," she said again, turning away from the sight of him. "I feel scorned just looking at you."

Yu Jinzhu held a white ribbon his way. Wei Wuxian took it from her hand without touching her and tied his hair with it in silence, nausea clogging his throat, apprehension shaking through him. The color of it reminded him of Lan Wangji; with a weak heart he wondered what anyone should say, if he decided to wear it over his forehead instead.

Jin Zixun was several years older than him. Only the barest hints of resemblance marked him as Jin Zixuan’s kin, in the shape of the eyes and nose, in the way he postured. Perhaps this was a Jin clan trait, just as sneering was to Wens. He entered the dining hall in a full set of golden clothes, his lackluster hair loose over his nape, his eyes roaming over the walls and floors with satisfaction. No one followed after him like they should for such negotiations.

He nodded to Madam Yu. He looked at Wei Wuxian sitting next to her with cold interest. He bowed to him with his hand over his chest as his cousin had once done, offered his name and congratulations in an even tone of voice, and went to sit where he should, at the other end of the hall. The seat on the dais next to him seemed conspicuously empty.

"I was happy to receive your answer, clan leader Yu," he said as drinks were served. "I have long been looking for an omega to marry."

"So I heard," Madam Yu replied pleasantly.

"Is sect leader Jiang not here today?"

She did not even hesitate. "He offers his apologies," she lied. "Urgent business took him away."

Jin Zixun seemed not otherwise distressed. "As long as he approves of me," he said, drinking from
his cup. The sound it made as it touched upon wood made Wei Wuxian's hair rise. "You have to understand my surprise—I heard that every offer he has received for Wei Wuxian was rejected."

Wei Wuxian listened to the curt explanation she gave—*protectiveness, better offers, time for consideration*—and wondered in vicious humor how she felt at having to defend Jiang Fengmian and him from shame.

She was never one for such underhanded ways. Never. Not for lies or deceit or manipulation. He realized with a heavy heart that he had always found faith in her for this before.

"I didn't want to marry any of them," Wei Wuxian cut off.

The conversation came to a halt. Wei Wuxian felt Yu Ziyuan's eyes burn into the side of his face and looked at her with a thin smile.

"Ah, yes," Jin Zixun said. Shock made his voice climb a little higher; he cleared his throat before continuing. "I did hear Zixuan say that he had been raised... somewhat oddly. Out in the open, I believe were his words."

"A fancy of my husband's," Yu Ziyuan replied before Wei Wuxian could. "The boy has talent for cultivation."

"It's nothing that can't be fixed with time. Any young omega can be put back on track with a little effort. I believe Zixuan and my uncle have discussed the topic many times—the young master was very, very shocked when he came back from studying Gusu, I remember."

As it turned out, Wei Wuxian's opinion of Jin Zixuan could sink lower.

*I'll punch him again the next time I see him*, he thought, distracting himself from how terribly uncomfortable he felt. *What right does he have to speak behind my back? I'll bruise that face he's so proud of.*

All the Lan Qirens in the world would not stop him this time, he swore solemnly.

Silk clung to his skin with every minute move he made. His wasn't soft enough, too dry with manual labor, too tanned. Wei Wuxian thought Lan Wangji would look better in those robes than he ever could.

Lunch carried on in the same tense atmosphere: Madam Yu spoke only when spoken to, Jin Zixun ate and bragged with all the subtlety of a sword through the chest, and Wei Wuxian kept rigidly silent. He needed to figure out a way of canceling the whole affair without bringing scandal.

He started wishing that Jiang Cheng and his shijie were here when Madam Yu shifted the topic from sect relations to payment.

His hand shook when he drank from his cup—tea, not liquor, not now that he was in plain sight of an alpha wishing to marry him and with the whole household playing part in this farce. Wei Wuxian had known, distantly, that omega were rare and pricey. He had not fully understood it until numbers left Yu Ziyuan's mouth that made his whole head spin. Negotiations began without further ado, each side of the room bargaining in turn.

"Too much, clan leader, far too much," Jin Zixuan said again and again, "have you seen the look of him? I met the Zhu clan omega before Wen Chao whisked him away—he was a beauty, I promise you, and his father never asked for such compensation!"
And again and again for more than two hours. When it wasn't Wei Wuxian's posture, it was his hair, his complexion. His hands were too rough. His eyes were not bright enough. When not those, then his manners—He slouches, see? Yueyangchang has a beautiful omega, immature still, you could strap a pole to his back and not see a difference—

Such negotiations were usually held in closed quarters. Such negotiations were held in presence of the sect leader. Such negotiations were akin to unboxing a gift, to unveiling a painting, the omega brought out so that their suitor could look and estimate and their clan leader dispute until all reached an agreement.

(He was ten and practicing with weights at the back of the training field, servants murmuring from afar at the sight of him sweat-drenched in sunlight, his arms strengthening each time he moved. He could see Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli on the ground the some distance away, the both of them out of breath, and Jiang Fengmian stood in front of him, smiling with pride, hiding from his sight the whispers and curses. "Very good, A-Xian," he said. "Very good…"

He was twelve and the best archer out of all the disciples. He was shooting an arrow into the trunk of a tree in front of Jiang Cheng, and then another which split the first in two—Jiang Cheng cried with shock and ordered, "Teach me that, Wei Wuxian, you have to teach me that." And Wei Wuxian laughed and replied, "I will."

He was thirteen in the fire of the forge, with a list of names all as unsuitable as the other in hand. Paper crinkled in his fist as he watched Jiang Fengmian work the iron for him. Sweat dripped from his temples and the underside of his lips. He smelled earth smoked by the sun in that firing heat, watching his sword be born to him, and long gone were the thoughts of Jiang Cheng's jealousy when he had learned that Wei Wuxian would have a sword before him—this was his sword, glowing red now as Jiang Fengmian struck again and again. *His* sword. It was panic he felt when the blade was put to cool and Jiang Fengmian asked for the name and he replied, "Whatever!"

Jiang Fengmian laughed. Jiang Fengmian had never laughed thusly that Wei Wuxian could remember. Sweat was dripping from him too; in the silence and dark of the forge he did something he never did—he put a hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder and squeezed and said, "That's a good name.")

"Clan leader Yu," Jin Zixun said, "I admit I am getting impatient. I would pay this much for an omega of good upbringing, even one from the most minor sect, but please remember what it is you are offering."

"I am offering an omega of the Jiang sect," Yu Ziyuan replied, hot with rage.

"You are offering the son of a servant." Jin Zixun seemed disinterested now; his leftover food had cooled over the table, untouched for a long time, and Yu Ziyuan signaled to have it taken away. "I have heard of Wei Changze's talent, but he was still only beta… Still only Jiang Fengmian's shidi."

Wei Wuxian hadn't touched his food at all. He paid no attention to the girl who took it away and made sure to avoid his eyes—for the first time the conversation caught his interest and made him stick out of the thick stupor that the whole day had him in. He so rarely heard of his father.

"You know, they say he didn't marry that omega," Jin Zuxun said. "He took her as a cultivation partner! She walked around with his child without marrying him!"

Yu Ziyuan's thin nostrils flared ever-so-slightly. For a second her eyes met Wei Wuxian's.

"Wei Ying will be no one's cultivation partner," she declared.
"I should hope not." Jin Zixun drank from the liquor before him—his cheeks had reddened and his voice roughened, diminishing his faint resemblance with Jin Zixuan. Now he looked like nothing more than an arrogant and slightly drunk man who thought too highly of himself. "Ah, I am a hard man to deal with, clan leader. Truly, I find Wei Wuxian to my satisfaction, and I am sure his faulty upbringing can be fixed. Now if only the price—"

The doors of the hall opened loudly.

The scent that reached Wei Wuxian's nose was such that he had never smelled before. Earth and grass turned over by storm, wetted through by rainfall, like the aftertaste of a landslide. So strong was it that for an instant he wondered if his fever was upon him, if he was sitting in the shack and trying to keep dry as the whole world around rained and rained.

Jiang Fengmian walked into the dining hall with fury in his steps and let all who saw him feel it in their bones. He didn't greet Jin Zixun. He didn't call the handmaids' names as he often did in greeting. He walked straight to his wife without bothering to dry at all, and water dripped from his long hair and the sword he had not yet sheathed. It glimmered on the floor behind him.

He stopped once he was level with Yu Ziyuan. "My lady," he greeted coldly. And then to Wei Wuxian: "A-Xian. It's good to see you."

"Uncle Jiang," Wei Wuxian said blankly.

The smile he got in return was very brief. Jiang Fengmian asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

Silence froze over the room.

There was more movement near the entrance. Wei Wuxian turned his head and saw, through his surprise and shame, Jiang Yanli's timid figure enter after her father. Following her was Jin Zixuan, and his eyes were fixed onto his cousin in fury.

"Zixuan," Jin Zixun called amiably. "What are you doing here?"

"I should be the one asking this," Jin Zixuan replied through his teeth.

"What do you—"

"Silence," Jiang Fengmian called.

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened.

The Jiang sect leader kept looking at his wife for a moment longer. He seemed entirely unbothered by the rudeness of his attitude. Yu Ziyuan held his glare with all the dignity she possessed, showing not a hint of shame or regret. She said nothing to him.

Finally, he turned away. "I must ask you to leave," he told Jin Zixun. "You may stay the night to wait out the storm, but in the morning, you will be gone."

"Wait just a moment, sect leader Jiang," Jin Zixun replied, raising from his seat at last. His gait was uneven as he rounded the table. "I was invited here—"

"I heard of no such invitation," Jiang Fengmian said frostily.

Jin Zixun's face reddened with outrage. "I was told to come for negotiation of your omega's future," he expelled. "Is this how the Jiang clan treats its guests? I came here with the intent to buy, and I will
not leave without good reason!"

"That's right," Yu Ziyuan said. "What reason could you possibly give this man for refusing him after inviting him, Jiang Fengmian?"

Jiang Fengmian's face turned dark with anger. The sword he held in one wet hand still shone faintly from the travel; he must've flown back, Wei Wuxian realized, as soon as he heard of what was happening in his absence. A knot of tension in his heart loosened all at once.

This marriage offer was not Jiang Fengmian's plan for him after all.

"Good reason?" Jiang Fengmian repeated slowly. "You want a good reason?"

No one quite dared interrupt him, not even the fuming Jin Zixun. Near the entrance, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan stood their ground.

"A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian met the eyes of the one he had never dared to call father. They were as kind as ever.

"Do you wish to marry this man?" Jiang Fengmian asked him.

It was the same tone he had asked, years ago, "What do you want to call it?" The same voice he had used for encouraging his training, for congratulating him, for naming him senior disciple. The voice that Wei Wuxian had heard laugh out loud in a rare spark of honesty as he answered, panicked, "Whatever!"

"No, Uncle," Wei Wuxian with as much sincerity as he had then. "Frankly, I'd rather die."

Jiang Fengmian smiled. "There," he told Jin Zixun with a dismissive wave of the hand. "You have your good reason."

Wei Wuxian slipped away in the outrage that followed. Jin Zixun all but yelled his embarrassment out until Jin Zixuan himself stepped in to silence him. Jiang Fengmian sheathed his sword and left the hall as quickly as he had entered it, Yu Ziyuan hot on his heels, the both of them headed to yet another night of arguing. Wei Wuxian kept all of those things out of his mind and walked among scurrying servants, joining his shijie as quickly as he could. She took his hands in hers when he held them forward.

"I'm sorry to be so late," she told him secretly.

Wei Wuxian stared at her, mouth open and eyes wide. "Were you the one who went to fetch him?" he asked.

"Of course. Father was called away yesterday evening—you were already asleep, I think, but a group from Lanlingjin came to ask for help about an incident in Yiling. Father and A-Cheng went with them..."

That must be when Yu Ziyuan seized the occasion. She must have heard that Jin Zixun was in the region, or maybe Jin Zixun had been part of the group itself, and she knew that her husband would be gone for the day, that she could negotiate Wei Wuxian's marriage before he came back home. Wei Wuxian could have gone away for good with Jiang Fengmian none the wiser.

Wei Wuxian squeezed Jiang Yanli's hands. "Thank you," he said. "Shijie, thank you."
She laughed sweetly. "A-Xian," she sighed, taking one hand back to push away from his forehead some stray strands of hair. She tugged on the thin collar of the robes—it was crooked, he knew, to hide much of his throat. "You have no idea how to dress properly."

"I look ridiculous, don't I?" he chuckled.

"I always think you look very beautiful," she scolded. "But yes, these clothes don't suit you at all."

They smiled like this for a moment, their hands still linked. Jiang Yanli was wet from flying in the rain; Wei Wuxian took her further inside, near to the hearth in the wall where a fire was burning, so she could warm herself. She took his fussing in good humor. Wei Wuxian felt a peculiar satisfaction when he ordered a servant—one of those who had watched him be bargained over like a piece of meat—to get her something to eat. The boy hurried away.

Both Jin clan cultivators were still here. Wei Wuxian had stopped paying attention to them, but now he saw Jin Zixuan murmur unintelligible things to his cousin, his perpetual frown even deeper than usual. Jin Zixun bowed to him and walked away. He didn't pay Wei Wuxian any attention anymore. His face was red with more than just wine indulgence.

Some weight lifted from Wei Wuxian's chest after his departure. This, he thought, was a man he never wanted to see again.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan greeted awkwardly, noticing his stare. He took a few steps toward them. "Please apologize on my behalf to Madam Yu and sect leader Jiang for intruding like this. I will be leaving with my cousin in the morning."

Next to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli shrunk in on herself. Her cheeks were red.

"Are all your cousins so rude?" Wei Wuxian asked.

To his surprise, Jin Zixuan answered, "This one more than the others."

He seemed to realize what he had just said just as he said it: his cheeks turned red, and he looked away, shifting from foot to foot.

Wei Wuxian wanted to laugh again. A strange euphoria had taken him from the moment he had rejected Jin Zixun so openly, and he felt freed of all boundaries. He wanted to approach Jin Zixuan and either punch him, as he had promised himself earlier, or put a hand on his shoulder as he often did Jiang Cheng's. Jiang Yanli held him back with her presence alone; the mix of shyness and misery on her face reminded him of exactly what his past actions had led to.

She and Jin Zixuan had once meant to marry. And she may try as often as she could to convince Wei Wuxian—to convince herself—that she held no feelings for the Jin heir, the truth was obvious to Wei Wuxian.

"Thank you for warning me," Jin Zixuan told Jiang Yanli, nodding toward her politely. With the way he had spoken of her years ago, it made Wei Wuxian want to shake him.

But Jiang Yanli straightened up. She bowed at the shoulders with her fist against her palm and replied, "Of course."

Wei Wuxian entertained the thought of leaving them alone for a moment. It wouldn't be so improper in the great hall, not when any servant could come back with Jiang Yanli’s food and chaperone them. But before he could, Jin Zixuan turned to him.
He still felt terribly awkward with the way he was dressed. He hadn't stopped longing for his training wear and Suibian's weight by his hip in hours, after all. But Jin Zixuan only looked at him with an oddly red face, his eyes avoiding the sight of the silk robes, his mouth opening and then closing again.

Finally, he said, "Excuse me."

He bowed as he had taken to around Wei Wuxian—as his cousin had earlier: his face looking at the ground and his hand splayed over his chest. He stayed down a second longer than what seemed necessary.

"He's just becoming weirder and weirder," Wei Wuxian commented once he was gone. "Shijie, look at how weird this guy is. You're well rid of him."

Jiang Yanli didn't seem to hear him. When Wei Wuxian looked at her, she was staring at the spot that Jin Zixuan had occupied with shock writ all over her. "A-Xian..." she said.

"What? What is it?"

Sadness flickered over her face. Wei Wuxian only saw it briefly enough to wonder what he had done this time—in what way he had hurt her—but she seemed to chase it before he could ask. "Nothing," she said, smiling brightly at him. She gripped his hand more tightly than before. "Let's get you something else to wear, shall we?"

She dragged him out of the room, one step ahead of him, her face firmly turned away.

This day in Yunmeng felt like one unending night. No sun had shone from dawn to dusk, hidden by thick clouds and heavy rain. The halls near Yu Ziyuan's pavilion echoed with the sound of her voice, of Jiang Fengmian's, of a decade of hurt digging deeper between them than it ever had before. Servant walked around the house with fear lightening their steps. Disciples stayed inside looking out, bemoaning the weather, resting their weary limbs. Jin Zixuan and Jin Zixun didn't come out of their guest quarters before leaving the next morning.

This autumn at the Lotus Pier would forever feel washed out in Wei Wuxian's memory. As pale and fleeting as smoke. Two or three years later he would think upon it as if caught in a haze; he would remember the smell of rain gorging every dirt path, the sight of dying lotuses drowned underwater, the word, "No," leaving his mouth with all the confidence of those who believed in safety.

Jiang Yanli's wet hands in his. Jiang Fengmian's fury filling his nose with storm. The leaking omega house where he spent five days catching raindrops before they fell.

His last autumn in Yunmeng. His last autumn whole and hale.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Don't spend too much time on the Jin Zixuan Has A Dumb Crush thing it's supposed to be just a detail
My brain: I'm Boo Boo the fool and I love tragic subplots
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow
Chapter 4

The day the summons came started, as always, with an argument.

All who lived in Yunmeng had taken to wearing furs and capes atop their clothes. Perhaps it was the water all around that caused the Lotus Pier to feel so very chilly; fires burned in every room, tended to by servants with gloved hands, and the cold seemed to seep through every wall and floor and chase Wei Wuxian through the late hours of night. For breakfast that day he warmed himself in the kitchens with Jiang Cheng, eating out of the reserves cooked there, exchanging fencing tips.

"You never make any sense," Jiang Cheng told Wei Wuxian in-between mouthfuls of burning soup. "I can fly on Sandu just fine, and I've never had to practice like this."

"I'm telling you," laughed Wei Wuxian, "it's not about meditation. The more time you actually spend fighting and the easier it gets."

"You're ridiculous."

"Yet I'm the faster one."

For once the cooks around didn't seem to mind Wei Wuxian's presence. Something had changed since the scandalous end to what would have been Wei Wuxian's union to Jin Zixun.

The servants had never been mean to him, exactly; they just hadn't been kind. Outside of Jiang Fengmian and his children and Wei Wuxian's other shidi—who had seemed to realize who he was and what fraternizing with him entailed only when he came into maturity—no one in Yunmeng saw very well to his presence and behavior. Yet ever since the last storm of the season and Jiang Fengmian's vocal opposition to seeing Wei Wuxian wed, something had changed.

Wei Wuxian did not meet so many wary eyes on his way anymore. He didn't have to stop in the middle of hallways of outdoor paths for others to slither past the way he once did. People's steps may turn hesitant, but they simply walked ahead. He felt less like to be around others was a physical inconvenience.

The cooks had greeted him that day. When he had opened one of the wide pots full of steaming soup to breathe in the warm and spicy smell, one had even offered him a bowl.

Wei Wuxian was about speak again when a young voice asked, "What is it like?"

He and Jiang Cheng turned their heads at once.

He was a boy of roughly their age. The smells around the kitchen made it impossible to guess at his status, but he was shorter and thicker than the both of them, with wide hands and a pleasantly broad face. He smiled awkwardly at being so scrutinized and asked again, "Flying, I mean."

Behind him, the old alpha cook—the one who had worked here for as long as Wei Wuxian could remember and who used to curse him for stealing treats behind her back—said nothing. She must be
his mother, he thought distractedly. There was a familiarity to the boy’s face and hers. A dimple in
the exact same spot when they smiled wide enough.

Wei Wuxian asked, "Do you want to learn?"

The boy stilled for a second at being addressed by him. Then Wei Wuxian's words seemed to catch
up to him, and he flailed and shook his head. "No, no, of course not—I was just curious."

"You're too old to begin training anyway," Jiang Cheng said indifferently.

"Indeed, young master Jiang."

Wei Wuxian elbowed Jiang Cheng in the ribs until his shidi hissed. "Don't be such a killjoy, Jiang
Cheng," he said. "Why would it be too late? They say Lan An started cultivating at twenty years of
age."

"I know you like to think highly of yourself, but even you are no Lan An."

Wei Wuxian laughed loudly.

The cook boy watched their bickering with apprehension in his eyes. He seemed not to know what
to do with himself now that he had their attention; Wei Wuxian saw him glimpse quickly toward
where his presumed mother kept working.

"Flying is the best thing in the world," Wei Wuxian told him. "To think our ancestors had no idea
that it was possible! Cultivation wouldn't be nearly as much fun without flying."

"You're shameless," Jiang Cheng said, pinching his nose. "Flying isn't all there is to cultivation," he
told the boy in a more serious voice. "And some can never rise to that level no matter how long they
try."

Wei Wuxian accused him of growing old before his time. Jiang Cheng called him a child. In-
between their good-natured spats, they found time to talk to the boy a little longer, until what was left
in their bowls had cooled, grease congealing at the surface of the broth. The boy's alpha mother took
those away without a word, but Wei Wuxian thought he saw a smile on her face, too. A shadow in
her dimpled cheek.

Although the cold was harsher this year than it had been in a long time, Wei Wuxian still dragged
Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli with him to the training field. There was a sharpness to the air in such
frosty weather that felt to him as if each inhale cleansed his body vein by vein.

They trained and shouted and laughed without much discipline. Wei Wuxian was determined to
show Jiang Cheng the truth of his words, and challenged Yanli to a spar in front of his judgmental
eyes. He made her fly over the field once they were all done and sweaty. His shidi had joined them
in the late morning hours, as the sky overhead turned blue and bright, as the lone clouds drifting by
started to look like ice.

Jiang Yanli's sword was a thing of beauty. Wide and cold and gorgeous, it reflected the piercing light
as if made of crystal. She flew on it close to the ground with Wei Wuxian doing his best to race her
on foot. Jiang Cheng made for the poorest referee, of course; he had never had the strength to deny
his sister victory for as long as they had all played together.

It was a good day. A warm day in every sense but the literal. Wei Wuxian picked at the seeds that
Jiang Yanli had brought as they debated the approaching fencing tournament in Qinghe, encouraging
her to join even as Jiang Cheng tried to dissuade her.
"Why wouldn't she come?" Wei Wuxian scoffed. "Shijie, you should've been there in Qishan. The Nightless City is very beautiful."

"Mother would have been too lonely," Jiang Yanli replied with a smile.

"You should've stayed in Qishan if you loved it so much," Jiang Cheng added, kicking Wei Wuxian's leg. "Sister, he hasn't stopped talking about this Wen Ning person one second."

"He's a great guy."

"You barely know him."

Jiang Yanli smiled a little sadly and said, "I would not want to embarrass young master Jin."

This stopped Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng's argument on the spot and made them redirect their energy toward consoling her. Yanli laughed less brightly now than she had months ago; but she smiled, anyway, and teased Wei Wuxian with as much vigor as her brother.

Wei Wuxian forgot anything he was supposed to be while in their company. Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng did as well. They mocked him relentlessly over his oft-repeated comments about Wen Ning—whether he would be there, whether Wei Wuxian would get to compete with him one day. They said he must have a crush. Wei Wuxian denied it in fake outrage.

"A-Li, A-Cheng."

The three of them climbed to their feet at the sound of Yu Ziyuan's voice. She stood wrapped in furs and with her hair free of decoration, Yu Jinzhu by her side as always, Zidian glowing at her finger like a gemstone.

She glanced at Wei Wuxian but did not say a word to him.

"Come get warm inside," she ordered. "It's too cold for lazing around. Your father needs to speak with you both." She paused for a second before amending, "You three."

In the long winter months, Qishan seemed to turn to ice.

It was still as dry, still as unwelcoming as it had been last they visited. Parts of the mountains were thick with trees and rivers, but everywhere around the Nightless City was devoid of life, as if the Wen clan's presence had sucked the soil dry. Dust still rose after their steps as it had in the summer; but when Wei Wuxian touched the rocky sides of the paths they traveled, all he felt under his fingers was cold.

Such a harsh land to live in.

To say that Yu Ziyuan had taken badly to Wen Ruohan's sudden summons would be a vast understatement.

*Every heir and senior disciple*, the lengthy missive that had come through the hands of servants said. *"Not even cultivators," Madam Yu had seethed, "servants!"* They had come on horseback. Some had come by foot. But Wei Wuxian had been a lot less worried about the rudeness of Wen Ruohan's envoy than he was about the face that Jiang Fengmian made upon reading the man's words.
Every heir and senior disciple must come to Qishan to undergo training.

Wen Ruohan had asked every sect leader to deliver hostages willingly. He was no longer just playing at ruling over them all; he was putting plans in action that Wei Wuxian could only guess at.

He slept very little that night. He could remember a time, he thought, when such news would have left him unconcerned. When he would have volunteered to go even without being summoned, when he would have remained carefree and full of laughter. A time before Gusu; a time before fevers, before Jin Zixun’s attitude reminding him of what he was supposed to be.

Wei Wuxian could not remain carefree now. He felt in his bones something like the echo of rain, like dampness in the air making old wounds surge back to life. Plots were brewing undercloud that he felt would soon change his life.

Wei Wuxian walked past Jiang Fengmian’s study when he gave up on sleep and went out for a walk. Light filtered in from glowing candles; from inside the quiet room, Yu Ziyuan’s voice came, softer than he had ever heard it.

Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Jiang Yanli had made for Qishan the following day. Madam Yu had burdened her children with as much food as they could bear to transport. She had hugged Jiang Yanli to her chest; had placed a kiss on Jiang Cheng’s red forehead.

Then she had looked at Wei Wuxian for a long moment before handing him a small pouch and whispering to him, "Drink this tea each day."

He hadn't had the time or privacy to check what the pouch contained yet.

The Nightless City came into view under a dark grey sky. They had walked past a promontory earlier, the same one where Wei Wuxian had met Wen Ning and seen his talent at archery play out, but the boy had not been present this time.

"Don't get lost again," Jiang Cheng said to him.

"I won't, I won't."

It was said in the same voice they bantered with, but Jiang Yanli did not smile at them in faint reproach, and Wei Wuxian did not laugh.

There weren’t as many people present now in front of the City’s imposing gates as there had been during the competition. Wei Wuxian recognized the lone Ouyang heir as Jiang Cheng walked toward him, and Nie Huaisang some distance ahead, who was not fanning himself for once. He only gave Wei Wuxian a passing glance.

In the far distance, Gusulan’s delegation stood. Lan Wangji was looking at the ground with an expression Wei Wuxian had never seen on his face.

He didn't have time to run to him and pester him with greetings and questions, for at this moment someone climbed up the wooden dais that had been placed at the bottom of the stairs.

Wen Chao fell onto a wide couch almost bursting with pillows. His clothes were more extravagant than Wei Wuxian could remember—thick and fur-lined, with Qishanwen’s red sun sewn everywhere that the eye could see, so that no one could mistake either his name or wealth. A woman with very delicate features sat next to him almost instantly; he wrapped an arm around her in such a scandalous way that Wei Wuxian felt he would hear Lan Qiren's voice ring loudly at the display.
But Wen Chao didn't mind, and neither did the servants standing around him. "You're all here to undergo training," he declared loudly. The woman simpered next to him; her very beautiful features suddenly seemed much uglier. Wen Chao cooed at her for a second before continuing, "The sects have become lazy. Complacent. All of you bring shame to the names you bear, and my father has decided, in his great wisdom, to put you back on the right path."

The murmurs around Wei Wuxian turned to shouts of disapproval. He thought he heard someone yell, "And he put you up to the task, Wen Chao?" Next to him, Jiang Yanli crossed her arms over her chest and slouched.

"It'll be okay, shijie," he told her softly.

She gave him a weak smile.

"Of course he told me to do it," Wen Chao yelled back arrogantly. "You—" he pointed to one of the manservants next to him "—make sure this one gets no food tonight."

More outrage arose from the crowd of disciples, but Wei Wuxian almost laughed. If being deprived of dinner was the harshest punishment one could be subjected to here, perhaps Wen Ruohan's cruelty was not so legendary after all.

Wen Chao spoke for a while longer. He insulted their families, their sects, their manners. He made way at some point for a very old woman, who proceeded to read for a long time the scroll she held in her wrinkled hands, and which detailed the great deeds of past Wen sect leaders.

Wei Wuxian yawned. Although there had been no trace of sun the whole day, he could feel that it was setting. He had flown all morning and then walked the rest of the way to the City; he wondered when they would be let off to sleep.

Wen Chao was not done, however. Once the old woman was done boring all of them to death, he rose from his seat and declared, "Now hand over your swords."

Jiang Cheng had come back to Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli's side after he was done greeting the Ouyang heir. Like Wei Wuxian, he had done a very poor job of hiding how bored he was through the endless speeches, but now he looked alert once more.

"What?" he exclaimed.

It saved Wei Wuxian the trouble of asking it. His hand grabbed Suibian's pommel without thought.

Jiang Cheng was not the only one to wake up and protest. All around them, young cultivators of all sects took a step forward, some even drawing their swords, and their shouts got more indiscernible the louder they became. Through the movement Wei Wuxian saw the hem of a golden cape; Jin Zixuan had not drawn his sword, but his hand was firmly upon it as well.

"You're not worthy of those swords!" Wen Chao bellowed. His foot hit the stage loudly enough to be heard through the noise. He didn't seem notice how child-like this made him look. "Now hand them over. You'll get them back before you leave, if I'm satisfied with your training."

A braver disciple than most stepped forward and replied, "A sword is a cultivator's soul and strength. You have no right to ask for this, you Wen dog!"

There was a man standing behind Wen Chao who had not moved or talked all evening. A tall man, dark and unbecoming, with serious and clever eyes watching over the assembly. Wen Chao did not howl or curse at the insult thrown at him; instead he made a decisive gesture of the hand, and the still
man moved at last.

Such was his speed that he became almost impossible to follow with eyes alone. Wei Wuxian saw him step off the dais and then saw him emerge behind the young cultivator, his right hand glowing red with power, his expression somber.

For a moment, no one understood what had happened. The disciple who had spoken wavered under the blow delivered to his chest, but his clothes weren't torn, and there was no trace of blood.

Then he choked, dark red spilling out of his mouth, and fell to the ground at once.

Wei Wuxian faintly heard a name be cried out—the boy's name, no doubt—but he was too busy staring at him to take notice of anything else. His feet took him forward, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli by his sides, as they rushed toward his fallen form.

The somber man's hand had stopped glowing. He was now walking back toward his master, who looked over the scene with satisfaction.

"Is he dead?" Wei Wuxian asked, wishing now more than anything to be able to just touch and make sure for himself, no matter how many people could see.

Jiang Cheng took a moment to answer. "I don't think so," he replied, "but something feels off."

To hell with propriety, then. The boy's fellow sect members obviously looked too scared to check on their comrade themselves. Wei Wuxian fell to his knees in the dust and put two fingers against the boy's neck. If some around him found the energy to be shocked, he had more important things to do than care.

The boy was alive. His pulse beat against Wei Wuxian's fingers in the same rhythm a bird's would, but his skin felt deathly cold.

It wasn't until Wei Wuxian pushed some of his spiritual energy into him to try and soothe whatever ached him that he understood.

He jerked back his hand in horror.

"Jiang Cheng," he said. He had to swallow before speaking again. "His golden core is…"

Jiang Cheng needed no more than that to understand. "Wen Zhuliu," he hissed between his teeth.

"Do all of you understand now?" came Wen Chao's strident voice.

Wei Wuxian turned his head to look at him once more. He had never thought of Wen Chao as someone worth worrying about, not even with the man following him around a maze and throwing insults at him, but now, with Wen Zhuliu by his side, he seemed much more impressive.

"If you disobey, my Core-Melting Hand will deal out punishment," Wen Chao said. His eyes met Wei Wuxian's for the first time; the grin on his lips seemed to stretch infinitely. There was no doubt who he was addressing his next words to. "So unless you want to end up like this scum, you know what to do."

Wei Wuxian made to stand up; a hand grabbed his shoulder and firmly kept him kneeling.

"Don't," Jiang Cheng whispered. "Wei Wuxian, obey for once. Do you want to risk your life?"

*There are things more important than my life,* Wei Wuxian wanted to say. But he met Jiang Yanli's
eyes a few feet away, and the fright he saw in them kept him grounded more firmly than any hand.

He rose quietly. All around the other disciples stood with lowered heads, their fear overwriting their shame as they handed out their weapons. They piled up in the hands of the Wen clan's servants: swords and bows and Nie Huaisang's gleaming saber.

"Wei Wuxian."

Wei Wuxian looked sideways. "Wen Chao," he greeted back coolly.

He had meant to insult, but Wen Chao seemed to find reason for joy in his attitude. His grin grew again. "So they did send you," he said, looking Wei Wuxian up and down as he had the first time. The only difference was that instead of incredulity, satisfaction shone over his face. "Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan have lost reason at last."

"You requested all senior disciples," Wei Wuxian replied with clenched teeth.

He couldn't get the sight of that boy on the ground out of his mind.

Wei Wuxian knew of Wen Zhuliu's Core-Melting technique as he knew of the Lan clan's Killer String, of Qinghenie's saber style. It was famous to those who had any interest in cultivation. And although he had heard that the Core-Melting Hand had joined the Wen clan, he had never expected to meet him, let alone to have him be used as a threat against all who were present.

Wen Chao extended a hand forward. "Your sword, omega," he ordered. "I came here to pick it up personally."

"Am I supposed to be impressed?" Wei Wuxian replied.

He felt more than saw Jiang Cheng's worried gaze on him. Wei Wuxian's hand had gone back to Suibian's handle, whose fine engravings had smoothed over years of use already.

He didn't want to give up his sword to Wen Chao. He didn't want to give it up to anyone. This was his sword, the sword that Jiang Fengmian had forged for him, the sword that bore the name Wei Wuxian had given it, however ridiculous the name.

More than anything else he possessed—clothes, freedom, the Jiang clan's acceptance—this sword was his.

But what choice did he have, in the end? Already he could feel how much Jiang Yanli wanted to tell him to comply. Already he could see Wen Zhuliu's brow furrow at watching his master take so long to gather just one weapon. Wei Wuxian let his hand slide from Suibian's pommel and to the middle of its scabbard; he untied the leather band keeping it tied to his waist and gave it over.

Wen Chao's greedy eyes seemed to shine like two miniature suns as he grabbed it. He took a moment to examine it, going so far as to unsheathe a fraction of the blade to let light shine off of it. Wei Wuxian's hands turned to fists.

"Very well!" Wen Chao announced then. He threw Suibian onto the pile of other swords in his servant's hands—Jiang Cheng had to grab Wei Wuxian's shoulder again to keep him from jumping forward—and said: "All of you will now be accompanied to your encampments. Alpha on one side and beta on the other. Guards will be posted around your tents to ensure you do not try to do anything foolish."

Just like that, Wei Wuxian forgot all about the swords.
He said nothing as the other disciples started splitting into two groups. The Jiang siblings didn't move, no doubt as surprised as he was. The original letter had said nothing about encampments. All of them had expected to be given guest rooms—the Nightless City was big enough to host hundreds, after all.

Wen Chao's amusement was almost palpable. "Is there something you want to say, Jiang Wanyin?" he asked unpleasantly. His eyes didn't leave Wei Wuxian's. "Do you perhaps find your accommodations unsatisfactory?"

Wei Wuxian near felt Jiang Cheng's anger through the air; his scent seemed to crackle in his nostrils, to burn down his throat and lungs. Jiang Cheng hissed, "You—"

"Young master Wen," Jiang Yanli interrupted.

All eyes turned to her.

Yanli had always been a shy person, not at all prone to confrontation, although brave in her own right; she bowed now, the arc of her shoulders almost painting-perfect, as she addressed Wen Chao. "May I ask where Wei Wuxian will reside during his stay here?" she asked. "I'm sure you can understand our clan's worry."

Wen Chao snorted rudely. "You and your brother go where you belong," he said, saving a hand dismissively. "Wei Wuxian will of course reside in the City's omega house."

"I will not," Wei Wuxian retorted hotly.

"Won't you?"

Wen Chao's eyes shifted to the right—toward Wen Zhuliu's imposing figure. Even the off-white of his robes seemed to bleed black in the coming darkness.


Wei Wuxian's fists clenched even tighter. His nails bit into his palms almost strongly enough to draw blood.

She didn't know, he tried to reason himself despite the anger and betrayal now aching in his throat. Jiang Yanli had no idea, and neither did Jiang Cheng, of how much he hated the Lotus Pier's omega house. Neither of them knew the pain that his days of heat brought. Neither of them could understand the sheer terror that the sight of the house dragged up in him—the constant, haunting knowledge that had Jiang Fengmian not made the choices he did, Wei Wuxian would have grown up knowing nothing but the inside of that sad and lonely place.

Neither of them could understand how much he feared being locked up after learning how to fly.

He saw in Jiang Yanli's face that her plea was only out of worry. He saw in Jiang Cheng only anger, and that this anger was not directed at him but at the despicable man standing before them all. The pretty woman who had clung to him during the speeches had joined them, her whole body plastered against Wen Chao's side, her beta-scent filling Wei Wuxian's nose with mildew.

"You two go ahead," he said. He didn't know by which miracle he managed to smile, but the relief on Jiang Yanli's face was worth the lie. "Go on, then. I'll see you tomorrow."

It was Jiang Cheng's turn to speak. "You must let me accompany—"
"I don't need watching over," Wei Wuxian cut him off.

Jiang Cheng looked at him in anger and surprise both. Before he could say anything, Wen Chao laughed.

"As if I would let an outsider know where our omega are kept," he sneered. "Out of my sight now. You'll need your rest come morning, Jiang Wanyin."

It took a moment for him to comply. Wei Wuxian saw irritation and worry war over Jiang Cheng’s face in a very different way than they did whenever Wei Wuxian pulled pranks. In the end he took hold of his sister's shoulder and dragged her back toward where the two groups of disciples waited.

Jiang Yanli joined the beta group with timid steps. A Qinghenie man Wei Wuxian faintly remembered meeting over the years—a friend she had made during her understudies in Gusu and who sometimes visited her in Yunmeng—immediately approached her to talk.

Jiang Cheng was not welcomed so warmly among the alpha group, but that was probably due to how furious he looked. Su She stepped away from him as he took place among them and knocked into Lan Wangji; Wei Wuxian looked at the Lan heir and found, to his surprise, that the heir was looking back.

Lan Wangji stared at him fixedly for a second longer, his gaze as impenetrable as ever. Then he turned away before Wei Wuxian had the time to salute.

Wei Wuxian remembered the words that Lan Wangji had spoken to him the last time they met: "Don't bow."

His anger abated somewhat.

"You follow my Jiaojiao now, Wei Ying," Wen Chao crooned, dragging Wei Wuxian out of his stupor. "She'll show you the way."

"Even you have some manners, then," Wei Wuxian said, turning his back to the other disciples. "That is a surprise."

Wen Chao's grin vanished at last.

"I heard your clan leaders rejected my proposal," he said.

"They did," Wei Wuxian replied with a sneer of his own. The thought of marrying Wen Chao seemed even more unpleasant than that of marrying Jin Zixun.

"Yet they sent you here anyway, all by your lonesome? Who is the one without manners?"

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth. He wished more than anything to have Suibian within grasp, to feel the weight of its scabbard at his hip; to at least hold a bow and arrows like all those months ago. There was nothing he wouldn't give to shoot once more precariously close to Wen Chao's haughty face.

He straightened his back and replied, "Your father asked that all senior disciples come. I am the senior disciple of Yunmengjiang. That's all there is to it."

"We'll see," Wen Chao spat back.

He walked away in a cloud of white dust, firelight making his hair shine like bronze and turning the red suns on his clothes blood-like.
"Come, come, Wei Ying," the Jiaojiao woman said. Wei Wuxian noticed that another beta was with them—a boy a little younger than he, probably a servant. He bore with him a lukewarm and watery scent. "I need to bring you to your quarters."

Her way of speaking belied the jewels and silks wound all over her. She was probably a mistress and not Wen Chao's wife; as far as Wei Wuxian knew, Wen Chao and Wen Xu had only married omega.

He bowed in a parody of politeness and replied, "After you, my lady Jiaojiao."

Her smile turned into an ugly frown. For a second she looked like she wanted to hit him, but no doubt her need to look mannered held her back, for she yelled at the beta boy instead: "Hurry up now!"

The boy yelped and led them forward.

They climbed the steps to the wide gates in silence. Wei Wuxian remember too clearly in what circumstances he had ascended them last—with his bow around his shoulders and dust marring his tired face, and the knowledge of having bested all his competitors. He did not feel so victorious now.

Although it was his first time walking through the gates, he saw very little of the mansion behind. Jiaojiao and the beta boy led him through several garden paths around the house, then to a small pond, then further along toward the side of the mountain. He saw emerge from the darkness the flicker of a flame; the silhouette of a shack not unlike the one in Yunmeng; the two beta guards outside whose faces looked very tired.

"Open the door," Jiaojiao ordered.

The two guards jumped. At first they start at her without understanding, but then their eyes went to Wei Wuxian by her side, and their noses must have picked up the scent of him. They nodded in acknowledgment.

The door opened. The smoke from the lanterns, the smell of oil and burning wood, had masked it at first; but now Wei Wuxian smelled it.

Sweet, warm, almost heady. A flower of some kind, born through rocky desert soil and so much sweeter for it. Young liquor, too acidic but still soft on the tongue. Berries.

Omega.

He stepped forward with something heavy in his chest—a half-forgotten memory, apples, a laugh, a hand in his as he was put on the shoulders of a man who seemed so, so tall to him. But he had barely stepped into the house when the door closed loudly behind him and tore apart the dream, and when Wei Wuxian turned around, the sound of a key turning inside its lock could already be heard.

He still tried futilely to open the door. He still banged upon the wood and yelled, "What's the meaning of this!"

"Did you really think that master Wen would let you out with the others?" came Jiaojiao's answering shriek. Wei Wuxian moved to the tiny window by the side of the door to try and look through it, but it was in vain: someone had hammered wood all over it. "Did you really think you could be a cultivator, Wei Wuxian?"

"I am a cultivator!" he snapped back, hitting the wall for good measure. "Unlock the door! The letter said nothing—"
"The letter said my master would train every disciple in the way that your sects failed to," Jiaojiao laughed at him. "Including you, omega! You'll stay in here until my master deems you ready to be sent back."

"Jiaojiao!"

It was useless; he could hear her walk away already, laughing boisterously through the night. Whoever was posted outside to guard the house obviously had no intention of listening to him either. Wei Wuxian hit the wall another time. His knuckles ached fiercely at the blow, but he ignored it.

He let himself fall to the floor and rubbed furious hands through his hair.

He should have seen it coming. He who had become so wary of unexpected situations since Jin Zixun's coming to the Lotus Pier, who had taken to avoiding Yu Ziyuan as ostentatiously as she did him, who kept his sword by his side always… Now he was unarmed and alone and with seemingly no way out. He did not expect that there would be any other exit to the house, or any window he could jump out of.

His gaze lingered over the inside of the house thoughtlessly. It looked nothing like the abandoned shack of the Pier; candles lit up the place and diffused another layer of sweetness, making every breath almost nauseating. There were tables and chairs layered with thick cushions, elegant drapes framing the barred windows, trinkets of all sorts lying around. Weren't it so dark and locked, the place could almost be called homely. Wei Wuxian looked away from a cream-colored cape hanging from one of the chairs and met a pair of bright eyes.

There was a child hidden underneath the desk.

He blinked. The child blinked back.

"Hello," he said.

The child gasped, and then put both hands over her mouth. Despite the hopelessness of his own situation, Wei Wuxian chuckled at the sight. Another noise came from the only other door of the room; someone murmured, "A-Ying!" pressingly, making Wei Wuxian jump at the too-familiar name, and then the door opened and a young girl came rushing.

She gasped at the sight of him. She quickly looked around the room before locating the child and then bent down, her silk clothes flowing about her as if moved by wind. She pulled the little girl out from under the desk.

Wei Wuxian had no time to talk to her at all. With the child held in her arms and without another look behind, she rushed into the other room and closed the door.

Only the smell of wine lingered behind her.

Wei Wuxian found himself with no idea what to do. It wasn't hard to guess that she and the child must live here—he hadn't caught the child's specific scent through the heady fumes of the candles, but hers was distinctive enough to mark her as omega even if he had not seen how pretty she was. Though he had thought half-baked thoughts for months now of meeting another of his kind, he knew not how to proceed now.

He had never been one for inaction, however. Wei Wuxian pushed himself to his feet once more, dusting dirt off of his pants and boots, and made his way to the door on the opposite side of the room.
He knocked. There came the sound of something falling, then a muffled voice, too childish to belong to the girl he had just seen, before some said, "Shush!"

Silence hovered in the air. Wei Wuxian knocked again. "I'm sorry to intrude," he said with an odd itch in his chest. "It looks like I'll be living here for a while. I promise I'm not dangerous."

Well, he amended silently. Not very much.

There was no response. Wei Wuxian looked again around the small room; there was ink on the desk, and a brush, and a childish drawing of a bird next to another hand's careful calligraphy. "Who drew the bird?" he asked. "It looks very life-like. You're a very good artist."

An excited cry came from the other side of the door.

It seemed the girl wasn't able to restrain her protégée anymore. Someone shook the handle and then pulled it open widely. It was the child from before, looking at him with bright eyes, her hair in disarray.

"You're omega!" she said loudly.

Behind her the older girl stood, and half-hidden in her clothes was another child, not much older than the first. A boy. He was the one who smelled of fruit. The older girl was staring at him with fear shaking in her hands.

"I am," Wei Wuxian said a little hesitantly. He was replying to the child but looking at the girl—she must be only a few years younger than he was. Perhaps thirteen or fourteen. "My name is Wei Wuxian. I won't stay long, I promise."

It didn't seem to matter to the child how long he planned to stay; as soon as he confirmed his status, she threw herself at him.

Wei Wuxian found himself in the very unprecedented situation of having someone hug him. Even though the child's full height only brought her head to his hip, his heart gave an awkward leap.

"A-Ying!" the older girl called, making both Wei Wuxian and the child look at her.

"He smells like honey!" the child told her, her hands still linked tightly around his waist. "Linfengjie, he smells very good!"

"Did you draw the bird?" Wei Wuxian asked faintly.

He both wanted to put a stop to the embrace and to never let go. There was something caught in his chest, something warm and painful, that he had no way of deciphering; his hands stayed lax by his sides.

The child smiled at him with all of her very white teeth. "I did," she giggled. "Is it very life-like?"

"I've never seen a better bird."

"He's lying," the boy hiding behind the older girl said. As soon as Wei Wuxian looked at him, he hid even further. "A-Ying is very bad at drawing," came his muffled voice.

"A-Qian is just jealous that I saw that bird and not him," A-Ying declared proudly.

"Why are you here?" Linfeng asked, cutting through the children's bickering. She was talking to Wei Wuxian as if every word cost her; her hands shook still, he noticed, although by now she must have
smelled the truth of his status as well. "Are you a Wen omega?"

"Wen Linfeng, was it?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The girl jerked backward and bit her lips. As soon as she noticed, she stopped, shame flooding her face red.

He bowed to her as he had been taught to. "I'm a cultivator of the Jiang sect," he told her. "My shidi, shijie and I were summoned to the Nightless City to be trained by Wen Chao, but it seems I fell into a trap. I will leave as soon as I find a way out of the house, I promise."

Although Wen Linfeng's face shone with relief, then incredulity, she had no time to reply. "Don't go!" A-Ying cried at him. Her hold on him tightened almost to the point of pain.

"Please, please don't go, they never come back when they leave—"

"A-Ying," Wen Linfeng hissed, "mind your manners."

It was as though something had changed in the little girl entirely; she dropped her arms and stepped back, bowing in a perfect arc despite her tearful face.

It was enough to make Wei Wuxian's head dizzy.

"There's no way out of the house," Wen Linfeng said curtly. "Dinner has already been served, so no one will be back until morning either."

Behind her back, the two children exchanged a quick glance.

"I have to go," Wei Wuxian said. "I don't belong here."

Wen Linfeng frowned at him. "Why are you here if you are of the Jiang sect?" she asked. "Don't they have a house of their own?"

"They do. I've just never lived in it."

All three children looked at him with their mouths open.

"But where did you live?" the boy, A-Qian, asked.

And suddenly, despite how dearly he had wished for such a moment to come, Wei Wuxian did not want to say what he had prepared to say or ask what he wanted to know.

He was tired from the journey. Although A-Ying had said he smelled good, Wei Wuxian had no way of knowing his own scent except for the sweat and rain that had drenched him on his way to Qishan. He wanted nothing more than to make use of any basin or bucket full of water to clean himself—nothing more than to drop onto the thick pillows of the couch and sleep the whole night round.

They were only children. Wei Wuxian had always wondered how one could tell the maturity of an omega from scent alone, but now that he had Wen Linfeng in front of him, he knew just how young she was. Some part of him simply knew that she would not always smell as she did now. All of them were too young for the questions he wanted to ask and the words he wanted to say.

Perhaps Wen Linfeng sensed his fatigue. "I'm Wen Linfeng," she said, bowing more properly to him than he would manage in a lifetime of trying. "And this is Wen Yiqian and Wen Yueying."

Wen Yiqian bowed to him too. Wen Yueying, having already bowed, only grinned at him again.
Wen Linfeng showed him around the house after that. It was in fact bigger than the one in Yunmeng, though not by much. Aside from the room with the only door that led outside, there was a bedroom and a washing room. Wen Linfeng explained to him that water came in from a spring outside and that twice a day, servants from the Nightless City brought their meals.

It was every bit the nightmare that Wei Wuxian had envisioned since his first fever: a closed house, a fully hermetic place, suffocating him day after day while the world shone outside, forever out of his reach. Yet Wen Linfeng seemed not to notice anything strange in what she was saying. She seemed not to see the harm that was done to her.

She had only ever known this house.

Wei Wuxian watched her tuck in the two younger children side by side in the wide bed. There was room still for herself. He watched her pick up Wen Yueying's odd drawing after making sure it was dry; he saw her gather the toys that the other two must have played with and put them inside a finely-carved chest.

Perhaps, he thought, she had reason not to despise her life so much.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian understood why Wen Yueying had clung to him so tightly earlier despite having just met him.

"I thought the Wen clan had no omega of its own," he told Wen Linfeng as she served him tea.

"We do not come from the main clan," she explained to him. "A-Qian and A-Ying weren't called Wen before being brought here. We are children of distant parents by marriage… but sect leader Wen prefers to have us take his name and live here than too far from the City."

"Why?"

"So we can carry our duty," she said, surprised. "Once I am mature I will be wed. I will make my clan proud and produce many heirs for my alpha."

Wei Wuxian's chest ached. "Why?" he asked again.

Wen Linfeng's face colored with either shame or anger. It was impossible to tell. "You ask such strange questions, Wei Wuxian," she accused. "Who raised you to be so ignorant? I've never seen an omega like you."

Wei Wuxian had never seen an omega like her either.

Her name must not have been Wen when she was born, just like A-Qian, just like A-Ying. She must've had parents before Wen Ruohan decided to lock her up in a house upholstered with silk.

"I think I'll call you Fengfeng," he told her.

Wen Linfeng swallowed her next sip of tea the wrong way. "You most certainly will not!" she said to him in as high a voice as he had ever heard from her, coughing this way and that until she could breathe again. "Wei Wuxian—!

"I'm your senior, aren't I?"

"That is no reason—I barely know you!"

Flushed and lost in her words, her composure slipping every which way, she looked exactly how a
child of fourteen should. She did not yell at him, but she pouted. She turned her head aside to avoid the sight of him and crossed her arms over her chest.

She reminded him of Jiang Cheng at the same age, and the thought made him smile.

Wei Wuxian found sleep that night much more easily than he would have thought. He washed himself in the cramped room where a wide tub full of cold water was kept, making sure to scrub all the day's dust away. He lay on the too-soft couch of the first room, looking through cracks in the wooded windows for a hint of starlight.

He dreamed of nothing at all.

In the morning, he woke to the feeling of being closely watched.

His heart hurried, his fingers clenched. He slid one hand upward under the blanket spread over him in search of Suibian's handle; then he breathed, and the scent of sweet flowers filled his nose, and he remembered.

Wen Yueying's eyes were even brighter from up close. Wei Wuxian blinked slowly at her; she put a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles.

"Hello," he rasped.

She had to wait a moment and regain her calm before answering, "Hello."

With a groan, he rose to a sitting position.

No candles burned inside the house now. Though the planks blocking the windows were thick, there were enough interstices in-between them for daylight to peer in and bathe the room with its glow. In that penumbra, morning felt even earlier; Wei Wuxian did not think he had been up so soon in years.

"Where's A-Qian and Fengfeng?" he whispered to Wen Yueying.

She laughed again at his nickname for Wen Linfeng. "Asleep," she replied in kind. Then she put her index over her lips and tugged harshly on his hand so he would follow her.

There were not many ways to go inside such a small house, so he was not surprised when she led him to the bedroom. Wen Yiqian and Wen Linfeng were indeed still asleep on the bed, cuddled next to each other for warmth.

Wen Yueying pulled him along again; he followed her into the bathroom.

"There is a way out," she said then, kneeling near the tub. The water in it was murky now from Wei Wuxian's bath the night before, but he paid no attention to it at all.

"Really?"

"Yes, yes, come look."

He crouched next to her. Her small hands were roaming over the wall, patting here and there with more or less strength. Wei Wuxian wondered for a fleeting second if she had been serious of if this
was a game that she wanted to play with him.

He needn't have worried; soon the sound of wood shifting reached him, and light broke out of where a piece of wall had once stood. Wen Yueying immediately crawled through the hole, calling after herself, "Come along, quick!"

It was a tight fit. Children like her or Wen Yiqian would have no trouble slithering out of such an opening, and perhaps Wen Linfeng was thin enough for the feat to be easy, but Wei Wuxian was much taller and broader than any of them. It took more than a minute before his feet finally came out of the opening.

Fresh, cold air washed over his face. He didn't think he had ever appreciated it so much in his life.

Wen Yueying sat close to the wall, inhaling deeply too, her eyes closed to appreciate the caress of wind on her face. "Me and A-Qian come here to look at the birds," she told him. "But we can't stay long or the guards will smell us."

He nodded gravely to her. "I'll keep your secret," he promised. "Thank you for showing me."

"You'll come back, right?"

He had been in the middle of rising to his feet, but her question stopped him. Despite her smile, there was an air of desperation to her young face.

"Everyone who leaves never comes back," she said. "They always say they will come back and say hi, but they never do."

"Where do they go?" Wei Wuxian asked, though he knew the answer.

Wen Yueying brought her knees close to her chest. "They get married," she replied.

There was no mistaking the fear in her voice.

Wei Wuxian sat back onto the dirt. He hesitated; but remembering how gladly she had held him the night before—how delighted she had been at learning that he was omega—he let his arm circle her frail shoulders. She immediately cuddled closer to him. Once again, his heart stumbled.

"I'm not getting married," he told her. "Never."

"Don't you have to?" she asked, looking up at him.

"If someone tries to make me, I'll punch them."

She laughed into his shoulder.

It was still so early. The clear sky overhead was one of pre-dawn; luminous without the glare of sunlight, even in the middle of winter. Wei Wuxian knew he would have to hurry if he wanted to find Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli and join them in training, but was loath, suddenly, to leave his spot on the ground.

"I'll tell you a secret," he said.

The effect was immediate. "What secret?" Wen Yueying exclaimed.

She really was so like himself. Wei Wuxian placed a finger on his lips to remind her to whisper and said, "We have the same name."
She gasped.

"But I thought your name was Wei Wuxian!"

"That's my courtesy name," he told her, grinning. "My birth name is Wei Ying. My sect leader used to call me A-Ying, just like you."

Wei Wuxian had never cared one way or the other about his birth name—it was a name like any other to him, often said without much respect. Jiang Cheng had never called him by it despite Wei Wuxian's insistence on using his. Jiang Yanli and Jiang Fengmian had both called him A-Xian since his courtesy name was given to him. He could not think of one person who called him Wei Ying and did not mean to be discourteous.

But Wen Yueying said, "A-Ying," with wonder in her eyes, and suddenly Wei Wuxian did not care at all that Yu Ziyuan used to say his name as one spat out bile.

"That's my secret," he told her, though it wasn't truly. "I promise I'll be back."

A-Ying stared at him without a doubt in her eyes.

Wen Chao's face upon seeing Wei Wuxian arrive at the field where both encampments had met was a thing to remember.

"You," he breathed, staring with such wide eyes that they looked ready to pop out of their sockets. "You—"

"What are you going to do, master Wen?" Wei Wuxian asked, gently elbowing Jiang Cheng to inform him of his presence. Jiang Cheng immediately turned around, his face torn between smiling and frowning. "Grab me and drag me back yourself?"

Now all eyes were on them. Wen Chao's face turned purple with anger—to be accused of enough impropriety to physically harm an omega must be hard to live down in the presence of so many. "Don't drag us down!" he spat at last, turning on his heels and walking away almost grotesquely. The Jiaojiao woman from the previous night welcomed him with more simpers. He seemed to suffer her embrace more bitterly than before.

"How was your night?" Jiang Cheng asked as they walked, still unarmed, toward whichever monster or spirit Wen Chao would have them all fight for him. "I'm not going to survive weeks of this. My back is killing me."

"Be grateful you aren't meant to sleep near Nie Huaisang, A-Cheng," said Jiang Yanli. She had joined them after Wen Chao had walked away. "He complains so much about every little thing."

"We should have you compete with him, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said.

"If I had Sandu with me..."

"How was your night, A-Xian?" Jiang Yanli asked as they broke their fast near the edge of dry pine woods an hour later.
Wei Wuxian could hear all the guilt in her without her needing to apologize. He remembered how betrayed he had felt the night before as she insisted on him going to the omega house; those feelings seemed harder to muster up now that he had seen the house and met its inhabitants.

Warmth had followed him since leaving the omega house and despite the biting cold. Snow crunched under their feet as they struggled along forest paths, but Wei Wuxian didn't shiver. He still had at the corners of his lips the smiles he had given Wen Yueying.

"It was educating," he said.

Jiang Yanli, confused, asked no more questions.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to iskendaris for helping me find those cute names.

I'm at the end of my semester and virtually buried in school and internship work, so I apologize if I can't update twice a week until Christmas break comes around. I'll do my best but I have to like... sleep, occasionally. I hope you enjoyed, keep commenting because these days that's the one thing keeping me going.
In the book given to them all by Wen Chao's lackeys, Wei Wuxian found cause for amusement. He read it as they trod through the mountains in search of spirits and ghosts. Wen Chao followed them sitting on a palanquin, his mistress by his side feeding him delicacies by hand. For each feral corpse they slew, Wen Chao claimed credit. Each ghost laid to rest was reported as his doing. Wei Wuxian knew how much this angered the other disciples—he heard it in Jiang Cheng's furious whispers and saw it in Jin Zixuan's perpetually tense face—but although he found it irritating, the book proved a great distraction.

The great members of the Wen sect had much to say in the past. Philosophy and poetry and cultivation advice, each more asinine than the next, crawled over the thin paper. Clan must come above everything else. Immortality is within grasp of all but those who seek it. One who abuses their clan name to bully others deserves nothing but death.

This one in particular kept him laughing through the cold days of hunting.

He knew that Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli's food supplies had been taken when they were shown to their encampments. He knew that outside of campfires, they had little to keep warm at night. He couldn't do anything about the cold, but he could and did bring food over from what was left of the omega house's copious meals. Wen Yiqian was a picky eater, Wen Linfeng ate no meat, and although Wen Yueying had a voracious appetite, she was too small to finish all that she meant to.

Wei Wuxian wrapped rice and bread in cloth every morning when he left through the hole in the washing room. A-Ying was there with him each time, delighted by his rule-breaking, and he made sure to pat her head and promise to return by nightfall.

At least the disciples were allowed to write to their families. The servant in charge of carrying their letters only came by the campsites, so Wei Wuxian could not write, but he was certain that Jiang Cheng related to his mother all the wrongs done to them. Jiang Yanli must try to make light of her own plight. She had grown thinner and paler in the days since their arrival in Qishan; this, more than anything else, made Wei Wuxian want to strike Wen Chao's smug face.

The other disciples avoided him. Lan Wangji kept oddly quiet among the Gusulan group, silent in the face of their unjust treatment, surrounded at all time by half a dozen white-clad youth. Sometimes Wei Wuxian felt eyes on him as he walked through mud and snow. When he turned around to look, he would only glimpse Jin Zixuan's retreating back.

In a way, his situation was enviable compared to the others'. He had a house to keep him from the
cold nightly wind. He had a hearth and a washing room, a soft couch to rest his weary back on once
sleep came to claim him. The beta guards who looked over the house hated to see him arrive each
night and not know how he had left, but they couldn't approach the house to check. Wen Ruohan
would have their heads if he knew that they had come too close to the three omega he kept so
securely.

It wasn't until a week had passed that Wei Wuxian realized he had completely forgotten about Yu
Ziyuan's parting gift.

He found the pouch as he was washing his clothes in the basin. At first he had no recollection of it at
all; when he tugged on the string keeping it closed, a sharp smell hit him and made him cough
uncontrollably.

"Wei Wuxian?" Wen Linfeng called from the bedroom.

He had left the door open. She must have heard him. Although her opinion of him still seemed
catched between fear and fascination, she came inside to look. He waved one hand in her direction
and wiped his nose with the other.

"Nothing, nothing," he said. "It's just this tea that my clan leader gave me before I left."

"Tea?"

He was only in his underclothes now. Anyone else would have turned their heads around or called
his virtue into question, but not Wen Linfeng or the two children she looked after. Wei Wuxian had
never known that to be possible before. Wen Linfeng entered the room and paid no mind at all to the
damp stains over his torso from laundering; she simply took the pouch from him, and suddenly, her
face paled.

"Your clan leader gave you this?" she asked harshly.

Wei Wuxian looked confusedly at her. "Yes," he replied. "She told me to drink it every day. I forgot
about it."

"You shouldn't—"

But Wen Linfeng cut herself short before she could finish her words.

Now Wei Wuxian's curiosity was piqued. He stood on his feet, bending to avoid knocking his head
into the wooden ceiling of the tiny room, and stepped into the bedroom with her. "What's wrong
with it?" he inquired, trying to take the pouch back from her. "Shouldn't I drink it?"

_Is it poison?_ he didn't ask. Though he knew how much Madam Yu despised him, he wanted to
believe that she wouldn't willingly put his life in danger.

Wen Linfeng's hand would not let go of the tea no matter how he tried to tug at it. Her face revealed
only horror and shame as she said, "You shouldn't drink it."

Yet she sounded guilty.

"What is it?" Wei Wuxian pressed.

Wen Linfeng bit her lip. For once, the improper act did not bring her into a frenzy and cause her to
touch her mouth and make sure skin had not split. "I shouldn't let you drink it," she said. "It's, it's
wrong. It's wrong—"
Wei Wuxian realized that her breaths were coming in sharply and that she was swaying on her feet. He caught her before she could knock into the dresser and helped her sit on the bed. He didn't try to take the pouch back this time.

She took a long time to calm down. Two bright red spots shone on her cheeks, fever-like, and her eyes were very shiny. For a while he thought that she would start crying; in the end she breathed in shakily, wrapped her arms around herself, and shook her head to chase off whatever was plaguing her.

"Fengfeng," Wei Wuxian said once he was sure that she would not pass out. "Please tell me what it is."

After a brief silence, her lips parted. "I do not know exactly what is in it," she replied. "But I once saw someone else use it. I would recognize this smell anywhere."

Her hands tightened into her sides, the pouch still clutched between her elegant fingers.

"There were others living here before," she continued. "They left to carry out their duty once an alpha was chosen for them. I know about the way out of the house—" she shot Wei Wuxian a scathing glare "—because the last one to leave, he was the one who cut it out of the wall one day. It was after sect leader Wen took him to negotiations. He came back and cut a hole into the wall with a knife and left, and we didn't see him till morning came. He had covered himself in dirt and other horrible things to disguise himself."

"What happened to him?" Wei Wuxian asked gently.

Wen Linfeng shook her head again. "Nothing," she replied. "He was married a week later. But when he came back that night, he had that tea with him as well. He drank it every day, although it smelled and tasted terribly." She shuddered.

Wei Wuxian felt that he knew already what she was about to say.

"He called it moonless tea. He said—he said his mother had told him about it when he was very little —before sect leader Wen took him from her." Wen Linfeng took in another shuddering breath. "It stops fevers," she told him brusquely. "It's wrong."

She kept ranting after that, but Wei Wuxian did not hear her.

For the past two years, he had thought that there would be no remedy to the loneliness and hollowness of heat. He had done his best to shoulder through the fevered days and to forget them as soon as they were over, so that fear would not keep him dreading the next. He had believed that this was how his whole life would go: loneliness, and the fear of it, and the days in-between trying not to remember.

And all this time, there had been a way out? All this time Yu Ziyuan could have given it to him, she who never hated him more than when he felt the first inklings of his fever and came to inform her of it, she who insisted he be kept under lock and key during those shameful days?

"Give me that tea, Fengfeng," Wei Wuxian said blankly.

"I won't," she shook her head.

"Fenfeng," he repeated through gritted teeth. "This isn't yours to keep. Whatever you've been taught, this is—"
"No!" she screamed. "It's wrong, it's wrong, I won't let you!"

She tried to climb backward over the bed, to put distance between them, but Wei Wuxian grabbed her arm and held her back, saying, "You don't even know! You don't know what it's like, you're still immature, soon enough you're going to wish you had something to—"

"Linfeng-jie?"

Wei Wuxian stopped talking.

Wen Yiqian stood in the frame of the door leading to the main room. In his hand he held one of the dolls he liked to make out of wide strips of colored cloth, and it was raised to his face as if he were afraid of showing himself to them.

Wei Wuxian had come to realize that Wen Yiqian was a very timid boy. He used words only when he couldn't avoid them, and his playing with A-Ying mainly consisted in letting her lead him around and listening to her incessant babbling. That he felt the need to interrupt them verbally was telling enough.

But the true blow, the true shame Wei Wuxian experienced then, came from the sight of A-Ying standing behind the boy and looking at Wei Wuxian in fear.

He released his hold on Wen Linfeng's arm. Red marks spread on her skin in the shape of his fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling gutted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten angry."

No one answered him.

He swallowed back the guilt, the heat in his face that felt like his very skull was thick with smoke, and said, "Please, Fengfeng."

She gave a quiet sob and let the purple pouch fall onto the bed sheets. Wei Wuxian grabbed it without another word and left for the main room.

None of them addressed a word to him that night. He boiled water over the fire and prepared the moonless tea alone, drinking it scalding to minimize its awful taste. He couldn't feel any effect on his body at all no matter how long he tossed and turned over the couch that night. His mind ran around with thoughts of how to procure the tea for himself once he got back to Yunmeng—how had Yu Ziyuan gotten hold of it in the first place? Who knew to make it, since when, and why? Wei Wuxian had never heard of any way to prevent fevers before. He wondered if she had given it to him only because she wanted to spare the Wen sect more of his shameful presence; but then, it made no sense at all. Yu Ziyuan hated the Wens more than anyone he knew. If anything she would wish them to have to deal with Wei Wuxian's fevers in her stead.

The candles burned out slowly. Wei Wuxian had gotten used to their heavy smell and did not choke so much on them now. Perhaps the reason all omega were supposed to bear such sweet scents came from them, he thought in his drowsy insomnia.

Perhaps they were trapped in this as much as in anything else.

In the thick darkness of that locked house, and no matter that three children he had grown to care about slumbered only a room away, Wei Wuxian felt alone.
"Lan Zhan doesn't look good," he told Nie Huaisang almost a week later, as they searched for a haunted cave hidden in the forest around Qishan's Nightless City.

The thought had plagued him since he had come. The Lan Wangji he remembered from his short time in Gusu, the Lan Wangji who had saved him from Wen Chao's arrow during the archery competition, would never let anyone order him as the Wen princeling did.

Wen Chao still followed them around, seated on soft cushions and with Wang Lingjiao clinging to his side. She kept giggling at their fruitless efforts and dirty appearances, her fine shoes not even specked by mud while they were all knee-deep in it.

Nie Huaisang put a hand over his mouth; this must be the best he could do to appear demure in the absence of his precious fans, Wei Wuxian thought idly. "Haven't you heard?" he said. "The Cloud Recesses are no more."

Lan Wangji was seated on a rock now. One of his hands rested on his right thigh a little too firmly.

Wei Wuxian almost stumbled and exclaimed, "What?"

"They tried to keep the affair quiet, but my brother is a former classmate of Lan Xichen's," Nie Huaisang whispered to him. "Wen Xu led an attack on the Cloud Recesses and burned everything down. I heard Wen Ruohan explained the whole thing as 'an opportunity for Gusulan to start anew'."

"This is such—"

But there were no words filthy enough that Wei Wuxian could come up with to express his outrage. As much as he had hated his time in Gusu, as much as Lan Qiren's disapproving voice followed him around even now, commenting here and there in the back of his head over every inappropriate thing he did, he never wished to see the place destroyed. It had been so peaceful. So beautiful.

"Was Lan Zhan hurt?" he asked worriedly.

Nie Huaisang nodded. "He tried to stop them from burning down the library all by himself," he said. "Wen Xu broke his leg in punishment."

"When was it?"

"A month ago."

A broken leg—no matter how clean the break was—would not have time to mend fully in so little time. They had been in Qishan for two weeks now, and Wei Wuxian held no illusion that Lan Wangji had allowed himself to heal before coming, not with the Cloud Recesses in need of rebuilding. He had probably offered his help everywhere he could instead of resting.

"He shouldn't be walking at all, let alone hunting," he muttered. Then, more loudly: "Jiang Cheng!"

"What?" came Jiang Cheng's annoyed voice.

He had been struggling through the muddy path a few feet behind them, cursing now and then when he slipped. Wei Wuxian walked toward him and said, "Go offer Lan Zhan some help."

Jiang Cheng looked at him as if he had grown a second head. "What?" he repeated.

"His leg is hurt," Wei Wuxian explained. "Go help him walk."
"What does it matter to me if his leg is hurt?" Jiang Cheng asked, irritated.

"Wouldn't you want some help walking if your leg was hurt?"

"Go offer him your help if you're so worried, Wei Wuxian!"

Wei Wuxian considered it for a moment before replying, "All right, then."

Jiang Cheng choked on whatever reply he intended to give—he had obviously only told him off in jest, not expecting that Wei Wuxian would agree, but Wei Wuxian could see no reason not to.

Or rather, he knew every reason not to, but the situation they were all in was already such a mess that he didn't think a bit of impropriety would matter in the long run.

He made his way toward the sitting Lan Wangji slowly, so as to avoid slipping through the water-slick rocks and dead leaves. A strong stream ran through these parts of the forest and dampened everything around. The soil was moist with it, which explained why so many maple trees grew here when the rest of the Qishan cracked over in dryness. Such a place was too dangerous for someone with a leg on the mend to walk around.

He attracted a few looks as he went, as always whenever he ventured away from Jiang Cheng or Jiang Yanli, but the other disciples were more or less used to him now. They had all met the Jiang sect's unruly omega Wei Wuxian at one point or another; even this much novelty must grow old after a while.

Wei Wuxian pushed past the close ranks of Gusu's disciples until he reached Lan Wangji's side. "Lan Zhan," he said, turning his back to him and bending slightly forward. He looked at the other over his shoulder. "Climb on my back," he grinned, "you shouldn't be walking on an injured leg."

All the cultivators within hearing distance immediately reddened and scoffed, scandalized. A few feet down the muddy path, Jin Zixuan turned on his heels to stare, his face almost comically shocked.

Lan Wangji's ears turned bright red. "Wei Ying," he hissed.

"Someone needs to help you," Wei Wuxian called loudly. "You know it, so why won't you accept it?"

"Of course he won't accept it!" Jin Zixuan exclaimed, having run the short distance between them to yell directly at Wei Wuxian. "Even you can't be so blind, Wei Wuxian!"

"I don't remember asking for your opinion—"

"Enough," said Lan Wangji.

He rose from the rock with only a brief show of tension at the mouth and walked away. His sect juniors flocked after him like ducklings, shooting anxious glances toward Wei Wuxian as they went. Those were laced with disgust.

Good, Wei Wuxian thought, suddenly furious. I have no interest in your high opinion.

Although he expected Lan Wangji to be mad, he only hoped to have one of the man's shidi realize that he needed help and offer it at last. He didn't think that his actions would be considered so very disgraceful—he never truly meant to carry Lan Wangji.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan seethed. He hadn't left, and his face was red with anger. "You can't do
Wei Wuxian had little interest in arguing with another arrogant little heir. Wen Chao was bad enough in and himself. "I wasn't really going to touch him," he replied coldly.

This seemed to surprise Jin Zixuan. He stared at him for a second before an oddly pleased expression washed over his face. "Of course not," he said then. His voice had regained that touch of self-satisfaction which Wei Wuxian so disliked. "I see you learned your lesson from that time in Gusu. Once can be forgotten, but enough times and others will think of you as nothing more than a—"

He stopped himself, pale-faced, but the harm was already done.

Wei Wuxian's voice felt very distant from himself. "A what?" he asked.

"Nothing," Jin Zixuan replied immediately. "Nothing, I... My temper got the better of me."

"You should say what you think in full, Jin Zixuan," Wei Wuxian said coldly. "Otherwise others will think of you as nothing more than a gutless little coward."

There was more he wanted to say, more insult he wanted to give for what he thought Jin Zixuan had almost called him, but he recalled too freshly what had happened the last time he lost track of his emotions. Wen Linfeng's forearm still bore faint bruises. He kept his mouth shut.

Thankfully, Jin Zixuan did the same. He bowed to him stiffly, his hand briefly touching his chest, before walking away.

"Are you done making a spectacle out of yourself?" Jiang Cheng asked Wei Wuxian once he joined him and Nie Huaisang again.

"Shut up," Wei Wuxian replied without much heart.

Jiang Yanli was still with her beta friend. She seemed not to have noticed anything happening. Others around kept looking at Wei Wuxian furtively, their faces red or twisted with embarrassment, and Wei Wuxian felt a little like he had when Yu Jinzhu had walked him through the Lotus Pier to lock him up for his first fever.

_This is obscene._

There was no canopy over their heads. What little snow had fallen over Qishan was long melted into mud, and it shone under the cold winter sunlight through the bare branches of the trees. Wei Wuxian followed the footsteps they had all left behind until he reached the place where Wen Chao and Wang Lingjiao sat, eating fruit and pieces of dried meat. Wen Zhuliu stood guard, as somber as ever, the threat of his very presence making all swords futile. Wang Lingjiao cooed and rubbed against Wen Chao's side like a contented feline.

Wen Chao opened his mouth to accept the slice of apple she leveled with his face; the whole time, his eyes never left Wei Wuxian's.

They found no hidden cave that day. Wei Wuxian came back to the omega house covered in mud and freezing to the bone. The two beta women standing by the surrounding fence avoided looking at
him as they unlocked the door.

It was late. Wen Chao had not let them rest while they searched around the woods, and only the coming of night had him convinced to go back to camp. The sun was long gone, and Wei Wuxian had no hope to dine with company, but at least he knew there would be food. The Wen omega may not be talking to him anymore, but they would not let him starve.

Indeed he found rice and soup and fresh fruit over the dinner table, and he hurriedly put the first two over the fire to heat while he cleaned himself up. All three children were fast asleep on the bed; he made sure not to let the house crack under his steps as he crossed the bedroom on his way to the washroom and back.

He ate quickly. He tried not to think of Lan Wangji's rejection, of Jin Zixuan's words. When those fled from his mind he found Wen Chao's arrogant staring instead, creeping goosebumps up his back and making his stomach twist.

He had no appetite past a few bites of rice and a mouthful of the broth, but he pushed himself into finishing anyway. He put water to boil over the fire and placed some of the moonless tea inside a clean porcelain cup.

"You're still drinking it," came Wen Linfeng's voice.

Wei Wuxian stopped in the middle of pouring the water into the cup. He heard her approach and take a seat away from him and decided not to look at her. "Why wouldn't I?" he replied, finishing his task. The water turned brown almost immediately upon touching the dried and smelly herbs. "Why shouldn't I avoid a fever when I'm kept away from home? I don't see why this is such a problem, Fengfeng."

"It's unnatural," she muttered.

"Why?"

She must think it was his way of annoying her—Why? Why? Why? Every time they talked Wei Wuxian asked it to her, and every time she fumbled and looked lost and made his heart ache with sympathy.

She was so young.

"We enter fever to conceive," she told him shakily. He heard her gasp as he took his first sip of the disgusting tea, but she went on bravely. "We can't conceive outside of them. If you stop them, then how will you have children?"

He knew that a tutor came to the house once a day to teach her all those things. An older omega from the Wen clan, wedded to Wen Xu when he was still young, who taught each child to write and read and prepare themselves for what life would bring them. Wei Wuxian thought he would have long gone mad if he were in Wen Linfeng's stead. He thought he might have become trapped inside of his own head as well as between those four walls, just like she was.

"Do you want to have children one day?" he asked her, turning around to face her at last.

She was wrapped in a soft cape of the best quality, her feet socked to protect her from the cold, seated on a chair by the desk with her back ramrod-straight.

"*He slouches, see?*" Jin Zixun had said.
Now Wei Wuxian knew the kind of posture he should have if he meant to be owned.

"I do," Wen Linfeng replied with an air of defiance. "Of course I do."

"Then I hope you do have children one day," Wei Wuxian said, "and I wish you all the best. I hope that your fevers are kinder to you than they are to me. I truly do."

There was something tangibly, achingly fragile to her expression as she took in his words.

"But—" and he took another long sip of the tea to mark his words "—you and I are different people. I don't want to marry anyone. I don't want to have children. I'm a cultivator, and being incapacitated is a risk, so if I can avoid my fevers, then I will. I hope one day you can understand that."

"I don't understand," she replied instantly.

He was not surprised at all.

"How can you be so—so different?" She seemed utterly lost. She asked again, "What can be so good out there that you would expose yourself to shame and scandal and refuse the protection that your clan could offer you?"

"Do you feel protected?"

She stared at him in outrage. "Of course I do!" she exclaimed. "No one is allowed to hurt us! We are guaranteed love and family!"

Wei Wuxian thought of the old omega in Yunmeng who had lived in the house before him and never been wedded. He remembered how hushed his death had been, how his lack of a match was considered shameful to bring up, how he had only learned of it by spying on the cooks while waiting for an opportunity to lift food from the shelves.

He remembered asking Jiang Cheng about it, and Jiang Cheng saying, indifferent, "He was too ugly to marry."

Wei Wuxian had not thought of it for years after that. Now it was all he could think of whenever the fever came and he ached on the floor of the shack: an old man forever cut from the world, loneliness digging into him like a blade, his voice and character withering till wind could dust them off of him. Wei Wuxian would have preferred death to such a fate.

"You look scared to me," he told Wen Linfeng.

The girl broke into sobs.

He didn't know how he came to sit on the couch with her crying over his lap. All he knew was the strength of her arms holding him as closely as she could, the way she hiccuped when she said, You smell like outside, is it really what it smells like, the way he smiled and patted her unruly hair as he told her of his life.

I've swum so often in the waters around Yunmeng, I could find my way there even on a moonless night, he said, and she snorted and called him liar.

I can fly, he told her, and she looked at him with wide, wet eyes.

She told him of how afraid she was of being separated from A-Qian and A-Ying as she had been separated from the omega she had lived with before. She talked of her fear that the alpha she married
would be unkind or indifferent to her, that they would prefer their other spouses to her and take her children away. She told him, *I hope I don't give birth to an omega*, and Wei Wuxian felt a little like crying too.

She asked with a red face what fevers were truly like.

"It's a pain," he replied, poking her forehead until she batted his hand away. "You get sore all over and you feel sick. I get awful headaches and I'm always too hot."

Wen Linfeng's face grew even more distressed. Wei Wuxian had no words to comfort her with, so he simply ruffled her hair again.

She fell asleep in his lap not too long later. Wei Wuxian shifted without waking her until his back was settled more comfortably against the the couch, and resigned himself to spending the night like this. He dozed off till sleep claimed him as well.

Movement woke him some time later. A-Ying's sweet flowery scent filled his nose as the little girl cuddled by his side, and the smell of fresh fruit followed as Wen Yiqian settled at his feet. Wei Wuxian smiled, wrapped an arm around A-Ying, and waited for morning surrounded by warmth.

---

Wen Chao was not happy with them.

For four days now they had looked for the rumored haunted cave without finding it, stepping through freezing mud, wetting their hands on slick rocks and cold, mossy trees. They followed along the mountainside farther than ever before; the Nightless City was so far away now that returning there before nightfall was a fool's dream.

"We'll camp here if you don't find it!" Wen Chao bellowed at them from where he stood. He had given up on looking at them from afar and decided to join the search; or at least to join it so he could insult them from up close. It seemed he had grown tired of Wang Lingjiao's presence as well. The woman was alone on the comfortable seats that servants carried her around in, wrapped to the neck in furs, pouting visibly. Wen Zhuliu remained by her side.

The river had gone down the flank of the mountain and could not be heard now. The thick maple trees had turned to drier vegetation, pines and other coniferous plants which scratched their skin when they ventured too close.

Wei Wuxian gave Jiang Yanli some leftover goods he had saved from the previous night's dinner. "I bet you anything there is no haunted cave," he grumbled. "Wen Chao is just doing this for fun."

"I heard it is an old Qishanwen legend," she replied, shaking her head. "A monster that many Wen cultivators failed to slay. But no one has sought it out for centuries, so no one knows where it is, exactly."

"He expects us to fight a monster without any weapons? Does he want us to die?"

Jiang Yanli did not answer. Her face looked ever-so-thin, and paler too, with dark circles under her eyes. Wei Wuxian could see how stiff and sore she was in each of her movements.

None of them except him were in better shape, really.
Wen Chao's voice came from behind them, startling the both of them: "Do you think you have time to be lazing around?"

"Of course not," Jiang Yanli said immediately, bowing and stepping on Wei Wuxian's foot. He closed his mouth on the sharp retort he was prepared to give. "Forgive us, young master Wen, we were only thinking on where else to look."

Wen Chao sneered at her. "Then get going," he ordered. "You're at least halfway smart for a beta; go help those idiots over there, Jiang Yanli."

He pointed toward a group of exhausted Nie disciples, among them Nie Huaisang, who stood under a tall pine tree and seemed to be fighting off sleep. Jiang Yanli gave Wei Wuxian a brief smile before obeying.

Wei Wuxian turned his back to Wen Chao and left as well, kicking branches and dead leaves out of his way, keeping an eye out for so-called legendary monsters. It didn't take him long to realize that he was being followed; Wen Chao's charred-wood scent hadn't left his nostrils.

"Did you need something?" he asked dryly, looking over his shoulder.

Wen Chao, for once as dirty as they all were, only smirked in answer. "I'm just making sure you don't stray too far, Wei Wuxian," he replied.

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes and decided to ignore him.

Unfortunately, Wen Chao had no intention of letting him.

"I knew you were shameless," he said loudly, "but to make such advances on Lan Wangji as well as Jin Zixuan..."

"What are you talking about?" Wei Wuxian snapped.

"Have you forgotten already?" Wen Chao laughed, and the sound of his voice was as disagreeable to Wei Wuxian's ears as ever. "Who knows what would've happened if I hadn't caught you and Jin Zixuan during the competition? You should be thanking me to salvaging what little virtue you have left."

"I thank you for making it so easy to win back then," Wei Wuxian replied. "You and the rest of your clan's incompetent archers."

Wen Chao's smile vanished. It was Wei Wuxian's turn to smirk.

"Watch your words," Wen Chao said darkly.

He tried to advance as threateningly as he could, but his foot slipped into a muddy strip of earth, and he slid forward, struggling to catch himself on the rough bark of a tree. Wei Wuxian laughed.

"You dare laugh at me, Wei Ying," Wen Chao growled. "One day you'll—"

"I'll what?" Wei Wuxian chuckled, leaning against a tall rock and eyeing the wide mud stain at the hem of Wen Chao's rich garments. "Choke and die at the sight of you?"

Wen Chao spluttered and raged for a few aimless moments. Wei Wuxian watched him struggle upright once more and felt nothing but cruel amusement. If any alpha deserved to be rid of pride, it was Wen Chao.
But Wen Chao seemed to regain his bearings soon enough. He continued on his way till he stood before Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian frowned, pushing off of the rock to stand as tall as he could. Wen Chao stared at him with the same disgust he always did.

"You're an ugly one," he declared at last.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. He was too used to such insults to let them affect him anymore. Yet Wen Chao advanced further, and only Wei Wuxian's perpetual need to stay tall in the face of adversity kept him from taking a step back.

"Really ugly," Wen Chao said again. "But you don't smell bad at all."

He closed his eyes and inhaled noisily.

Wei Wuxian suddenly felt that Wen Chao was standing much too close. He found himself looking away from him, anywhere but at him, and through his chest something spread that felt close to seasickness. His lungs stilled breathlessly.

"So sweet," Wen Chao said almost softly. Wei Wuxian kept looking far to his own side; though he willed his legs to move—to walk, to run, to kick—they did not. Wen Chao chuckled, close enough now that the air from his mouth brushed the side of Wei Wuxian's face—"I wonder how sweet you smell during heat," he sighed.

The sickness rushed up Wei Wuxian's throat. He raised a leg at last and kicked Wen Chao away. His foot hit the middle of the man's stomach; Wen Chao fell backward at once and hit the trunk of a tree. Whichever insults spilled from his mouth then, Wei Wuxian heard none of—he simply walked away as fast as he could. Cold air was not enough to chase from his throat the imprint of nausea. He thought he could drink as much wine as there was in the world and not be rid of it. He walked and ran, almost falling to his death twice on the slippery ground, until enough distance stood behind him and Wen Chao that he felt he had fled a whole country over.

The first people he met were the Gusulan group. Wei Wuxian stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of them, unaware of just how hurried his breathing was, and almost jumped when Lan Wangji called, "Wei Ying?"

"Lan Zhan," he replied thoughtlessly.

His eyesight was a little hazy. He felt as he did in the late days of fever, when hunger gnawed at him and made the world turn round his head. Wei Wuxian forced some air through his stiff lungs and looked the Lan heir in the eye.

"I got lost," he said in as steady a voice as he could. "Did you find the cave at all?"

Lan Wangji shook his head. He was frowning at Wei Wuxian, though his look was not one of anger. Wei Wuxian wanted to say something else—to apologize perhaps for how their last interaction had gone—when his ears picked up the sound of someone running and panting, and his whole chest seized once more with the need to hurl. He turned on his heels and broke a branch out of the nearest tree, mindless of the cuts that the needle-like leaves dug in his palm, holding it in front of him as he would Suibian.

The person who emerged from the path was a girl from the Nie sect. She panted over her knees after she stopped before them, and then rasped out, "We found it! Quick, quick, Wen Zhuliu wants us all there."
In the commotion that followed, Wei Wuxian found time to calm himself down. He walked behind the Gusu disciples and took care to regulate his breathing. Soon the sharp taste of bile receded from his mouth. He still wanted to wash it out with liquor, but at least he did not think he would be sick.

Lan Wangji walked by his side the whole time. Wei Wuxian would not have noticed if the man had not taken hold of the stick he was still gripping tightly and said, "Your hand."

Wei Wuxian dropped the stick and looked at his palm. It was still bleeding slightly. "It's nothing," he replied.

Lan Wangji frowned at him and said nothing more.

The Nie disciple led them to a small clearing right at the crook of the mountain. Jin Zixuan and his shidi were busy pulling out the thick plants hiding a hole in the ground from view, and Wen Chao was there too, ordering them to be quicker.

He seemed to have completely forgotten about Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian's hand flew briefly over his hip, wishing his sword to be there. When Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli joined him, he made himself smile at them, willing away the memory of the man's breath on his face.

Jin Zixuan finished clearing out the hole. One by one, the disciples from each sect climbed down into it, calling when they touched ground for others to follow. Wei Wuxian followed Jiang Cheng into the darkness when his turn came, and told himself that the eyes he felt on him were the fruit of his own imagination.

Though the cave's only entry had been shut by vegetation, it was wide and deep, and air circulated easily through. It didn't stop the stench of rot from reaching them and making most hold their sleeves to their faces. A young boy from the Ouyang clan, the youngest of them all, retched into a dark corner.

Firelight swept over the walls as they made their way as deep into the cave as they could. There was a heaviness to the place that felt to Wei Wuxian as if someone were pushing down on his shoulders and trying to make him kneel; a somber and age-old sense of danger that made the wariest of them quiet.

For hours they searched every nook and crevice of the place. A pond licked at the rocky shores in the deepest part of the hole, its water deceptively clear, a round rock emerging from the middle of it. The light from their torches flickered off of it in shades of blue and green. Maple leaves danced over the pond's surface and left in their wake the gentlest of ripples.

"Anything yet?" Wen Chao spat.

They were all beyond exhausted. Even Wei Wuxian, who slept at night with soft pillows and a warm hearth, felt tired to the bone. Jin Zixuan stepped forth out of the group they all made and said, "You expect us to hunt for something without telling us what it is and without arming us. Shouldn't you at least explain what we're looking for, Wen Chao?"

Wen Chao clicked his tongue in disdain. "You don't get it, do you," he said darkly. "I give the orders. You carry them out like the good dogs you are. Unless you want a taste of my Core-Melting Hand's power, you will obey."

Jin Zixuan looked a second away from attacking. Next to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli tensed anxiously. But Wen Zhuliu's hand glowed red, the sound of his power whipping through the air like lightning, and at last the Jin sect heir stepped down.
Wen Chao did not pay the matter any more attention. "It must be in the water," he said, kicking a rock into the pound. It sank without making a noise. "You," he told his fellow Wen cultivators, "bleed one of them to bring it out."

"What!"

"You can't do this!"

Many voices rang at once, echoing off the smooth walls in a fracas of sound, as all the disciples around grew angry. Jiang Chang kept an arm around his sister and the other at Wei Wuxian’s shoulder, but his face spoke of the same fury.

"Silence!" Wen Chao roared. In the agitation, all clans had tightened ranks, and those who had come to Qishan unaccompanied now stood awkwardly apart. He pointed to a frightened-looking girl who had found herself alone and said, "Bleed her out!"

Wei Wuxian tensed. Jiang Cheng’s hold on him hardened. The girl looked around wildly as the Wen cultivators approached, crying for help here and there. She was ignored by all.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said.

"Don't," Jiang Cheng replied.

The girl took refuge behind Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan, who had stepped away from their respective groups.

"Move," said one of the Wen sect, threatening them with his sword.

Neither obeyed.

"Is this treason?" Wen Chao bellowed. He had come down from the high rock where he had stood, Wang Lingjiao by his side wielding one of the Wen branding irons Wei Wuxian had often heard about. It seemed she was more than just show. "Do you rebel against me?" Wen Chao yelled. "Not one of you is worthy of your clan names, all of you rotten and worthless, abusing your standings—"

"You're right," Wei Wuxian said.

He had enough.

Wen Chao turned to look at him. Any remnant of sickness Wei Wuxian felt from their earlier encounter was gone now under the weight of his outrage; he smiled as nastily as he could and said, "Those who abuse their clan names deserve nothing but death."

Wen Chao became so pale that his skin seemed to turn blue. "What?" he said.

"Did you not hear me?" Wei Wuxian shook off Jiang Cheng’s hold on him and stepped closer. Some cruel malice was raging inside of him; for a second he delighted himself with visions of Wen Chao burning, of him being cut piece by piece until nothing remained. "Those who abuse their clan names deserve nothing but death," he repeated. "More than death—they should be beheaded and reviled as the worst scum to all future generations."

"Wei Ying," Wen Chao seethed, his grip on his ruby-red sword so tight that it shook around it, "enough of your attitude. Scum? Reviling? You should be the one to be reviled, you worthless bearer."
"Do you know who first said those words?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"I don't care who did!" Wen Chao was almost foaming at the mouth now. "I'll kill them like I'll kill every single one of you!"

Wei Wuxian laughed.

It was neither warm nor happy. He laughed as he had never laughed before, cold throughout the body, hatred coiled within him like a rope. Though he had no tools on him to use, he felt energy at the tips of his fingers, almost painful to the touch. It was as though the air of the cave was gorged with it; as though he only had to extend his hand and grab it within his palm.

"It was the founder of your clan, Wen Mao," he told Wen Chao. "Jiang Cheng, remind me what the punishment is for badmouthing the past leaders of the Wen sect?"

He looked at Wen Chao's ashen face, at the near-drooling state of him as he simmered in rage.

"Oh, right," he said. "That punishment is death."

Just as he had in the rocky maze of the archery tournament, Wen Chao rushed at him with his sword. Unlike that time in the mountains, Wei Wuxian was prepared.

Wen Chao was as poor a swordsman as he was an archer. He must have been taught his clan's techniques and style, and he knew how to grab and swing a sword, but rage blinded him. He was slow and heavy. A lifetime of claiming the accomplishments of others had rendered him weak.

Wei Wuxian sidestepped the attempted stab aimed at his stomach; the bell at his waist rang as it hit Wen Chao's blade, and Wen Chao himself gasped upon feeling Wei Wuxian's hand grab his wrist.

He kneeled Wen Chao's forearm harshly. His sword fell from his fingers, and Wei Wuxian picked it up, putting it at its owner's throat.

"Everyone stop!" Wei Wuxian yelled.

In the time of their exchange, the cave had filled with the sounds of battle. Already he could see that a few Wen cultivators had been disarmed—Lan Wangji, Jiang Yanli, and Jin Zixuan all had swords in their hands—and Wen Zhuliu was in a rage, hitting people left and right, though thankfully not with his core-melting technique.

When Wen Zhuliu saw that his master had a sword at his throat, he fell deathly still. Everyone seemed to follow suit, their eyes wide at the sight of Wei Wuxian holding Wen Chao hostage. Wang Lingjiao was crimson with fury, the branding iron in her hand glowing orange against the glistening wall, and Jiang Yanli had one hand over her mouth.

Lan Wangji stared at Wei Wuxian fixedly.

"I'll kill you," Wen Chao hissed in an even higher voice than usual. Wei Wuxian focused on him once more, dragging him toward a high rock and making him climb it with him. "I'll have you crawl at my feet, Wei Wuxian, mark my words."

"Aren't you tired of always saying the same thing?" he replied through his teeth.

Wen Chao was taller than Wei Wuxian, heavier and broader, and it was difficult to keep him in place without actually killing him. The close contact meant that Wen Chao's scent burned in his nose and made him feel sick, and Wen Chao seemed to notice how hesitant his hold was, for he struggled
even harder. Wei Wuxian stopped listening to the words coming out of the man's mouth so he could hold him in place instead. He smelled blood when the heavy sword in his hands cut into Wen Chao's neck.

"Stop," Wen Chao begged screechingly.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to reply, *Then let them all go.*

Then the cave shook all around them. It was as though an earthquake had struck, and Wei Wuxian wondered for a panicked second whether the roof would collapse atop them all and bury them in the belly of the mountain. His hold on Wen Chao slipped. The foot he put back to avoid falling from the rock slid on its slippery surface, and he heard Jiang Cheng's voice cry, "Wei Wuxian!"

Forgetting all about Wen Chao, Wei Wuxian turned around to catch himself, and was met with the sight of a giant yellow eye.

The beast roared. Its immense jaw snapped onto thin air, the sound so loud it ached through Wei Wuxian's head, and then it swung its head sideways and made him fly high above the pond in which it sat.

Wei Wuxian bit his tongue under the blow. Blood filled his mouth and dripped down his chin as wind slapped at his every side. He crashed into the other side of the cave, his head hitting hard against stone, pain blinding him instantly.

He must have passed out for a few moments. He came to perched atop a rocky arc, spitting blood out, dizzy and sluggish. Wen Chao's sword almost slithered out of his grasp before he managed to tighten it. With his free hand, he patted the crown of his head; stinging pain made him stop, and his fingers came back slick with blood.

Only then did he look down.

The battle raged again, even more confused than before. The giant monster—a tortoise of some kind, with a gem-like shell covering its wide back—grabbed and swallowed whichever fool came close enough to water, indiscriminate in its choice of food. The sound that their bodies made as its teeth tore flesh and bone apart was nauseating.

Wei Wuxian saw Wen Chao face off against Jiang Cheng, who must have stolen a sword as well. He saw Lan Wangji and Jin Zixuan trying their best to keep their unarmed juniors out of harm's way, Lan Wangji limping slightly, Jin Zixuan's face stained with blood.

He saw Jiang Yanli alone in front of Wen Zhuliu.

"Shijie," he mumbled.

Climbing down would take too long. Wei Wuxian had no hope of being able to fly Wen Chao's sword either—the very touch of it seemed to want him gone, seemed to want back to its master's side, and he shuddered to think of trying to feed it his spiritual energy. In the end he had no choice but to drop directly into the water.

The cold bit him to the bone. He coughed and spat as he emerged from the surface, swimming as fast as he could to the shore, hoping against hope that the monster would be too distracted to see him.

He almost cried when his hands touched stone. It seemed so long ago now that he had grabbed a branch and cut his palm with it, but it stang as he hoisted himself out of the pond and then used the sword to push himself to his feet. Jiang Yanli was still alive, still holding off Qishanwen's Core-
Melting Hand, but Wei Wuxian's smile halted even as it grew.

Wang Lingjiao was heading toward her. In her hand she held the branding iron, its sun-shaped extremity glowing a bright orange.

Wei Wuxian discarded the too-heavy sword and ran as fast as he could toward his shijie. He pushed every confused disciple out of his way, calling her name over and over, though there was too much noise now for her to hear. He knocked into Wen Zhuliu's back. He pulled Jiang Yanli aside so harshly that she fell, too, the unmistakable sound of a breaking bone ringing even through the chaos.

As the iron touched his chest, the only thing Wei Wuxian saw was Wang Lingjiao's surprised face.

Chapter End Notes

Indoctrination arc was supposed to fit into 2 chapters but as usual I am too fucking long-winded. Why do I write like this. I want a writing style that is a mix of Crossy's and Catsby's. Sharp, powerful, deadly.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: vomiting, brief gore, mentions of child death.

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 6

It was pain like Wei Wuxian had never known. At first he felt none of it; it was the smell, he thought, that was worse than anything. Scorched fabric and then burned flesh, burned meat, replaced any and all scent in his nose. Wang Lingjiao's acrid wateriness and Jiang Cheng's faraway sharpness and his shijie's comforting woodsiness—all faded away, even the stench of the monster, as Wei Wuxian breathed in that sickly smell, as he remembered in a flash of panic the streets of his childhood and the dogs who fought him for a piece of rotted meat.

Then the pain reached him.

The scream he let out seemed to rip apart his throat. Wang Lingjiao dropped the iron in shock, or perhaps because she herself had tripped when he had jumped into her path. It didn't matter. The burn only worsened when touched by the cave's miasmic air, so wet was it from the pond and its poisoned water.

Wei Wuxian kneeled, clutching the torn fabric of his clothes right under where he bled. "A-Xian!" Jiang Yanli cried, struggling to stand, and it took more effort than Wei Wuxian had ever spent to look her way and see if she was hurt.

She was. Her left arm was bent an awkward way, and her face was as pale as death.

"Shijie," he whispered.

The world swam before his eyes in shades of grey and white. He swayed with it, putting a hand on the damp ground to keep himself upright. Bitterness gathered at the back of his tongue and made saliva flood his mouth. His chest burned.

Though Wei Wuxian took little notice of it, his scream and the sight of Wen Chao's beta mistress harming him pulled the battle into a lull. Wen Chao himself gathered what was left of his clan and grabbed Wang Lingjiao, all of them running toward the exit of the cave. Some followed suit with weapons or their bare hands; some stayed behind to fend off the monster. The tortoise grabbed a corpse lying close to the water's edge and pulled it along as it sank, water rippling over its shell and making it glow eerily.

Jiang Cheng only seemed to realize what was going on when the monster was gone. He looked around and saw the eyes of all around him turned the same way—he looked and saw Wei Wuxian kneeling on the filthy ground, blood staining the hand he had put over his chest.

He hurried over, as did Jin Zixuan and Nie Huaisang. "I'm fine," Wei Wuxian gasped at them—his wound throbbed, but he wasn't harmed in any worrying place. He could walk and fight still, and that
was all that mattered.

He rose to his feet, refusing Jiang Yanli or Jiang Cheng's help. Everyone else was too shy to touch him. Nie Huaisang found the strength to blush bashfully in such a situation, and though Jin Zixuan glowered, he stayed away. "Shijie is hurt," Wei Wuxian told him without knowing the reason why. "Her arm—"

Jin Zixuan nodded. "I'll look at it," he replied.

He walked toward Jiang Yanli, who grimaced but showed him her now-purpling arm. Jiang Cheng stepped closer to Wei Wuxian and tried to pull his hand away to better look at the wound on his chest.

"It's nothing," Wei Wuxian said, trying to hold him back.

But it was too late. Wei Wuxian felt too faint to look himself, but he guessed that through the bleeding, the shape of Qishanwen's red sun must already show on his skin. Jiang Cheng's face turned a shade of dark and hateful that Wei Wuxian had never seen before. "She branded you," he raged.

Whatever else he wanted to say seemed lost under that simple statement. Wei Wuxian watched distantly as anger veiled Jiang Cheng's muddy face.

Nie Huaisang had told him of the Wen sect's branding irons before. When Wei Wuxian had first seen it in the hands of Wang Lingjiao and asked what it was, Nie Huaisang had whispered to him with disgust and fear about the magic tool created by Wen Ruohan to brand his slaves. You need no fire to heat it, he had said. It scars the skin forever and can even harm your spiritual energy.

Jiang Cheng must be hung up on anyone from the Wen clan—one from any clan—claiming someone as property this way. Wei Wuxian, however, was used to being property. The bell hanging from his waist, no matter how proudly he wore it, was a brand of another kind. So was the lonely house at the Pier that an old man had once died in, alone and unloved.

A burn scar was nothing next to that.

"We need to get out of here," he said out loud, chasing the thoughts out of his mind. There were better things to worry about now than the anxiety his idle hours. "Where did those Wen-dogs go?"

His eyes met Lan Wangji's, who was standing some distance away. He was clutching his thigh with one hand and a sword with the other. He turned his face sideways to avoid Wei Wuxian's stare.

At that moment, those who had left in pursuit of Wen Chao and his group came back, out of breath and looking desperate. "They sealed the exit!" the Qinghenie alpha who had led them to the cave earlier said, her voice shaking with fear. "They cut the ropes and tore the rocks apart, there's no way out anymore!"

Panic spread around immediately. The youngest of them—some no older than fourteen—fell to their knees or huddled close together, and the older looked no better. Jin Zixuan was done strapping Jiang Yanli's arm with torn cloth and what looked like a piece of broken bow; she looked at Wei Wuxian, tired and too-thin and frightened most of all.

"Calm down," Wei Wuxian found himself saying.

He could not stand to see her so afraid.

"Calm down!" he repeated. Some stopped moaning to look at him with wide eyes. He took a deep
breath, wincing as the skin of his chest stretched and tugged at the raw wound. "There has to be another exit. Everyone, look around for one."

"What would you know?" said a young Lanlingjin boy, flushing at his own audacity but still looking angry and desperate. "We wouldn't be in this much trouble without you—"

"Be quiet," Jin Zixuan ordered.

The boy's mouth snapped shut. Wei Wuxian shot Jin Zixuan an annoyed glance—he didn't need others to speak up for him. "This monster must have come in from somewhere," he said. "We just need to find where."

"We looked around this cave for hours already!"

"Even if it did, that way might have closed years and years ago."

Other protested the same way. And then Lan Wangji said, "Maple leaves."

Wei Wuxian looked at him in askance. Lan Wangji wasn't staring at any of them, however; instead the sword in his hand pointed toward the deceptively calm waters they had all run away from.

The leaves that Wei Wuxian had noticed when they first came by the pond were still there. A few more seemed to have risen to the surface, even, floating gently around the tortoise's shimmering shell.

"Of course," Wei Wuxian muttered. "Remember, we searched through a forest full of maple trees the other day, right below the mountain." He wiped cold sweat from his brow. "There must be a way out through the water."

Jiang Cheng caught on immediately, of course. He and Wei Wuxian had spent too many hours in the waters around Yunmeng, swimming and diving and making a mess of themselves for Yu Ziyuan to frown at. However—"Sister can't swim," he said, the smile growing on his face falling immediately. "Her arm is broken."

"You can help her," Wei Wuxian replied. "Come, let's dive and look around."

Jiang Cheng nodded. His eyes flickered down to Wei Wuxian's injury, but he stayed silent.

Some were not so easily convinced. "Do you mean to swim in that state?" Jin Zixuan asked, anger shaking through his voice. "What about that monster? You'll both be killed!"

"It hasn't moved in a long time," Wei Wuxian replied, irritated. "With everything it ate earlier, it's probably asleep."

"You're still—"

"I'm still what?"

He was done playing nice with any of them. He pushed away the hand that Jiang Cheng tried to put over his shoulder and walked toward Jin Zixuan with his head held high. They had once been of a height, but now Wei Wuxian stood an inch or so taller. A flush came over Jin Zixuan's face at their proximity. He must really be angry.

So was Wei Wuxian. "I'm the fastest swimmer in Yunmeng," he declared. Any other day and Jiang Cheng would have disputed that claim; now he stood silent behind him, no doubt understanding that this time was not for play. "Do you think status matters now? You're welcome to try and swim too if
you think you have a better chance, sect heir, but you won't stop me."

And then he called, "Jiang Cheng, let's go."

He turned away from Jin Zixuan as they both approached the water. On the way there Wei Wuxian met Lan Wangji's eyes. He frowned at the man, daring him to interject as Jin Zixuan had, but Lan Wangji only nodded.

Wei Wuxian felt a strange sort of relief.

"You go left," Jiang Cheng said once they stood at the very edge of the pond. "You're fast, but you're hurt. There's less distance to cover there."

"Fine by me," Wei Wuxian replied. "You're better at holding your breath than I am anyway."

Jiang Cheng looked at him in surprise. Wei Wuxian smiled and said, "Be careful."

Then he bent down and breached the water's surface.

Pain flared in his wound immediately. Wei Wuxian let go of some precious air under the feeling, wasting a second to press futilely against the burn to try and soothe it, but of course it was useless. He knew that putting water on such a deep burn was the worst idea, but there was no choice.

Despite how poisoned it was by death, the pond's water was crystal-clear. If not for the lack of light, Wei Wuxian thought that he could have seen to the bottom. As it was the glow of whatever torches were still burning above traversed the surface and lit everything a soft orange. Wei Wuxian followed along the tortoise's thick shell, looking everywhere for a hole in the rock, feeling ceaselessly for a current, a difference in temperature, anything indicating a way out.

He found nothing. He went up to the surface once to breathe and plunge again, his ears plugged to whatever the other disciples said at the sight of him. Once again he looked, keeping his own fear at bay by focusing his energy on swimming.

He went as deeply as he could. He went deeper than any other could go without the kind of training he possessed, haunted by the idea that the exit may be farther still, open but out of their reach. When he came back up again, he almost passed out, dizzy and exhausted.

He swam carefully back to shore. No one nearby offered to help him up, and Jiang Yanli was standing too far. By the time she had reached him, Wei Wuxian had already pushed himself to his feet.

"A-Xian?" she called anxiously.

He shook his head. At her defeated face, he said, "There's still Jiang Cheng. I'm sure he'll find it."

Right then, the cave trembled again.

Wei Wuxian's heart dropped to his stomach. He jumped backward, suddenly remembering that he had let go of Wen Chao's sword and was unarmed again. He watched with growing terror as the blueish shell of the tortoise rose, water running down its smooth sides, until the head of the beast breached the surface of the pond.

He heard shouts behind himself. He pushed Jiang Yanli back so she would run to safety. He saw movement near the beast's rear, right as Jiang Cheng emerged from the water as well.
All the others had hidden themselves out of the tortoise's reach. Wei Wuxian looked behind himself with a call for help stuck in his throat, but one look was enough to tell him that no one would come to his aid. No one else had noticed Jiang Cheng trapped in the water.

The tortoise's great yellow eyes stilled upon him.

He was only quick enough to avoid its snapping jaw by rolling sideways. Once again the pain of moving felt unbearable, but Wei Wuxian forced past it, glad for the monster's attention—Jiang Cheng was still safe. From the corner of his eyes he saw yellow robes, white robes, even the green of Qinghenie as some finally figured out why Wei Wuxian had not fled.

But the monster must have felt something in the water. Its giant head turned sideways and saw at last that it wasn't alone.

"No!" Wei Wuxian yelled. "No, look here!"

Terror gripped him as he watched it open its mouth over where Jiang Cheng swam, as fast as he could but not fast enough, wishing for a spell, a tool, anything—

The tortoise had eaten many of the dead left behind their earlier fight, but not all of them. Some were too far out of its reach. Wei Wuxian had seen how deeply the monster was set into the pond, as if fused with its stone floor by the ages. Its long neck could only stretch so far.

There was a body near him wearing the Wen sect's uniform. Wei Wuxian ran to it and pushed it to its back, tearing apart cloth until, at last, his fingers closed on two fire talismans. He stood again, heart beating in his throat, and lit one with as much energy as he could.

Light exploded through the cave.

The beast roared. Its eyes had grown attuned to the dark after so many years, and the sight of such a bright fire must hurt it. It reared its head back, snapping its jaw aimlessly, but the heat and light kept it at bay. Wei Wuxian turned his head aside and screamed to the others, "Help him! The spell won't last long!"

At least now they listened to him. A few youth ran toward the shore to help Jiang Cheng out of the water and out of the monster's reach. Jiang Cheng limped toward Wei Wuxian immediately, saying, "I found it! There's an exit, it's wide enough for six to swim through at once."

Elation swelled through Wei Wuxian's chest. "Those who can swim pair up with those who can't," he ordered, "and no one say anything about propriety! This is your life at stake! Follow Jiang Cheng to the exit and go back to your sects as fast as possible." Then to Jiang Cheng: "I have another talisman, I'll distract it while you run."

Jiang Cheng's face went bloodless. "I can't leave—"

"I'll be fine," Wei Wuxian snapped. "Your sister is hurt, she needs you to make it through. Just go! I'll follow as soon as I can."

Already the others were pairing up. Nie Huaisang clinged to Jin Zizuan's arm for dear life as they entered the water where it was the shallowest, submerged to the waist and shaking from fear and cold.

Jiang Cheng's jaw tensed painfully. "You better follow, Wei Wuxian," he said. "You better come back alive."
Exhausted and filthy as he was, his voice still rang deep and true. In that moment Wei Wuxian saw him as he would look in the years to come—a true heir, a man and brother and the only leader in the world Wei Wuxian wanted to follow. Not a child anymore. In that moment, Wei Wuxian saw in him his mother's power and his father's charisma.

If his hands had not been taken by the half-burned talisman, he would have bowed.

Jiang Cheng ran to his sister, grabbing her carefully, ready to dive and lead everyone out. Others pressed after him, afraid of losing him in the dark. Wei Wuxian looked back at the giant tortoise, who kept mouthing uselessly at the dimming fire.

Pain shot up his right arm and made him cry out.

He dropped the talisman. Its light flickered out, forever wasted now, as he fell and heaved and cradled his arm against his chest. An arrow was sticking out of it, buried deep in his muscle. Blood was already trickling down his forearm and dripping onto the wet ground.

With another cry, Wei Wuxian tugged the arrow out. He tried best as he could to stop the blood-flow with his hand. He looked at the group of disciples with hazy eyes, too tired now to even voice his anger. A man wearing Gusulan’s white dropped his bow, his face twisted with fear.

"I, I didn't," he stammered, "I only wanted to shoot that monster—"

"You bastard!" Jin Zixuan shouted with surprising lack of control. "What did you do!? What did you do!?"

"I didn't mean to shoot him!"

Jiang Cheng was already struggling out of the water, fury darkening his eyes and making his hands shake. "I'll kill you—"

"Just go!" Wei Wuxian roared.

His left hand was all sticky with blood now. He kept back any sound of pain as he took the last talisman and lit it, letting it suck all the spiritual energy out of him to distract the beast once more.

"Wei Wuxian—"

"Go! It's nothing, I'm fine!"

But all of them hesitated. In their eyes Wei Wuxian saw some realization, some shame. They must be understand exactly what it was they were doing now, fleeing for their lives and leaving him behind. Even the one who had called him responsible earlier was red in the face.

Now was no time for politeness. No time to think of status, of propriety, of honor. "Go!" he yelled as loudly as he could.

All of them left at last. Wei Wuxian turned his attention back to the monster now staring past the bright flame and directly at him. It had come from light, after all. Years spent in darkness could only ail it so much when faced with it again. The talisman held strong for a moment longer before burning out, feeding on whatever dust of energy remained in Wei Wuxian's body. It flickered out with a brief sizzling sound.

Wei Wuxian rose to his feet. The giant tortoise glared at him, saliva dripping out of its open mouth and making its sharp teeth glisten. The air around the cave once more reeked of malice, stinging at
Wei Wuxian's fingertips, a kind of power he knew not how to grab.

How he wished he knew. How he wished that all this resentful energy could come in handy and allow him to live.

There was no time to run to safety; he had witnessed the beast's speed and strength enough to know that. So he stood tall as it roared and lunged at him, determined to die as he liked to think his parents did.

Determined to be himself to the end.

Lan Wangji had spent much of his time in Qishan looking at Wei Wuxian.

He was not the only one. Just like in Gusu three years ago, just like in the Nightless City when they all competed for glory, eyes followed Wei Wuxian around. Many of them shone with distrust. Many more with disgust. A few, like Jin Zixuan, with an odd sort of longing. He knew some held their breaths when honey sweetened the air, richer now than it had been when Wei Wuxian was still young and Lan Wangji had felt the boy's arms around his middle.

The decision to stay behind was not a hard one to make. In the hurry to flee, in the mess of disciples leaning on each other for help so that they could swim to safety, no one paid him any mind. Lan Wangji stood by the edge of the water and watched Wei Wuxian hold strong despite his wounds, his arm still bleeding liberally, his chest red even in the distance. He chose to stay, he told himself, because it was his duty. Because it was better than putting his borrowed sword at the throat of the young man who had dared shoot at Wei Wuxian. Because someone had to make sure that Wei Wuxian too could reach safety.

When the fire talisman burned out and Wei Wuxian did not run from the monster's approaching mouth, he lost any thought of regretting his choice.

He ran into the attack without a single doubt. His leg had not stopped aching since Wen Xu broke it under his foot, hurting him during the long day hunts and keeping him awake at night in the alpha encampment, but he was able to push past it. And even when teeth the size of his fists dug through the leather of his boot and tore up his flesh, he found that this was an easy sacrifice.

He was pulled into the air. The beast swung him around like a cat playing with prey, shaking him this way and that until he had no choice but to cry out from pain; then it threw him upward and opened its wide mouth, ready to swallow him whole.

For the second time in his life, Lan Wangji felt Wei Wuxian's arms grab him as he fell. He struggled to stay alert, his nose filled with the man's scent, sweetness spreading over rot and making the weight in his chest heavier.

Wei Wuxian broke their fall at the last moment. Despite his own injuries, he was quick on his feet, unhesitant as he put Lan Wangji's arm over his shoulder and dragged him to safety. He laid him down slowly against the stony wall and immediately looked at his leg.

"You shouldn't have done this," Lan Wangji heard him say through his stupor, "I don't know if I can save your leg."
"Be quiet," he answered raspily.

Wei Wuxian stared at him in incredulity. Strands of ink-black hair had fallen out of the string he tied it with, wet from his earlier swimming, sticking to his neck and shoulders. Some dipped into the blood congealing against his wounded chest. He laughed emptily, looking away, and said: "Lan Zhan, I don't understand you at all."

_I don't understand you either_, Lan Wangji thought.

He dared not think of how much he wished to.

Wei Wuxian left his side. Lan Wangji's head turned to follow him, fear once more gripping him as he ventured close to the water. It seemed the monster had gone back under, for only its glossy shell could be seen. He saw Wei Wuxian drag some corpses out of its reach and start rummaging through their sleeves and belts.

He should feel outraged at the sight. Sickenened, even. All he felt was exhaustion.

Wei Wuxian came back with a handful of sealed pouches and every bow he could find. "Keep the strings," Lan Wangji mumbled, and Wei Wuxian nodded, giving him the pouches and replying, "See if there's anything useful in there."

Lan Wangji obeyed as the other worked to build them a fire. One bag contained money, another some trinkets for luck. When he opened the third, the smell of herbs reached him. He brought it closer to his face for a better look. "Some of those… can stop bleeding and clear toxins," he said with some pain.

Fire crackled next to him. Wei Wuxian chuckled. "I knew someone had to have hidden medicine on them," he declared. "Lan Zhan, can you reach your leg?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji replied, though there was no way he could.

Even the thought of bending over made him want to hurl. The weight in his chest pressed closer to his throat; he swallowed back, sweat dripping down his temples.

"You shouldn't push yourself," Wei Wuxian said, crouching next to him once more. He grabbed a fistful of powdered herbs from the bag and, looking at him, added: "I know this is all very improper, but please let me tend to your injury."

"No," Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian frowned. "You'll lose your leg if it's not treated," he said. "Stop being so stubborn."

"No."

Wei Wuxian had already saved him and carried him to safety. He had already touched him far beyond what was appropriate, and Lan Wangji could only be grateful that no witnesses were present at the time. Wei Wuxian's life would be over if there were. Lan Wangji couldn't ask him to risk more.

But Wei Wuxian did not listen. He bent over Lan Wangji's bleeding leg and tore up the leather of his boot, wiping away the blood till he could see exactly where exactly the skin was punctured. Lan Wangji felt him do so with only very distant pain; he felt swollen, feverish, as if something were burning in him and turning his lungs to ashes.

"Wei Ying," he hissed.
"I'll stop as soon as I'm done," Wei Wuxian answered with a frown. Indeed his hands were quick: as
soon as he saw enough, he spread the medicine over the gashes, his fingers barely grazing Lan
Wangji's skin. He raised his head when he was done, grinning. "See? No harm done. You can just
tell them you did by yourself."

Lan Wangji did not answer. He did not say what he was thinking—that when people learned of them
being trapped in a cave together, it would not matter whether they came out dead or alive.

Wei Wuxian's torn clothes had dragged down over his chest. The wound there looked as raw as if
the iron had just left his skin. Though the bleeding seemed to have stopped, thin strips of flesh hung
loosely where they once had been unblemished, leaving what lay underneath glistening and exposed.
Clear liquid seeped in fat drops out of Qishanwen's blackened sun.

Lan Wangji felt sick at the sight. "Your chest," he said haltedly.

Wei Wuxian shook his head, though he didn't look down. Lan Wangji wondered if he had even
looked at the burn. "It's nothing," he replied, and someone else would have probably believed him.
"I got so angry when I saw that woman attack shijie. If she'd been branded like a slave, her life
would be over."

"The scar on your body will stay forever too," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian was the one branded like a slave.

Wei Wuxian laughed dryly. "I'm unmarriageable now, I suppose" he replied. "I don't find that so
bothersome."

He looked away after that, as if he had not meant to say it.

Lan Wangji sat still for a second longer. Then he set the pouch onto the ground, grabbed some of the
powder, and slapped it against Wei Wuxian's chest.

Wei Wuxian cried out, rearing back immediately at the pain, but his eyes were very wide. His open
mouth seemed for once at a loss for words.

"If you know it will hurt," Lan Wangji rasped, "then don't act so rashly next time."

His hand ached to be pulled away. As always when in the presence of Wei Wuxian, it seemed that
Lan Qiren's voice lectured close to his ear. You mustn't touch an omega under any circumstances.
Not to hurt, not to own, not unless you are married.

Lan Wangji bit his lip. The swelling in his chest rested closer to his throat, flooding his mouth with
acrid saliva. He made sure to spread the medicine evenly over Wei Wuxian's burned flesh.

In the end Wei Wuxian was the one to break contact. He pushed Lan Wangji's hand away with his
wrist, saying, "There's not much powder left now. You shouldn't waste it."

"But—"

"My injuries are nothing. Your leg needs to be tended to properly."

There was no time for any other protest. Wei Wuxian looked around himself briefly; then he unlaced
the braces around his forearms, wincing when he moved the arm that the arrow had pierced, and
threw them to the floor. He tore up the fabric of his sleeve with his teeth. Without asking for Lan
Wangji's permission, he then carefully grabbed his injured leg and proceeded to strap the braces to it.
"You're so stubborn, Lan Zhan," he muttered as he did it. "Now both of us are trapped and injured. You should have fled and gone back to Gusu."

Lan Wangji's heart ached. "There is nowhere to return to," he replied.

Only ashes blackening the mountainside and the bare bones of Gusulan's ancestral hall. Even the omega house at the summit stood empty.

Wei Wuxian's face showed no surprise at the news. "Is everyone all right?" he asked softly.

"My father is dying. My brother… is missing."

"I'm sorry."

Lan Wangji did not know what pushed him into saying it. Perhaps the heavy feeling of sorrow that had followed him since he and his uncle reached the house after the fire, or perhaps it was guilt, laid so thickly under his skin at the sight of the brandmark on Wei Wuxian's chest. "The omega," he said, throat suddenly clogged. He grunted, metal and salt on his tongue. "We couldn't—we couldn't save them."

Wei Wuxian looked at him in confusion.

Lan Wangji grabbed the fabric of his own collar with one shaking hand and said, "They choked on the smoke. They couldn't get out."

And suddenly he was the one choking.

It was as if he were back at the Cloud Recesses and watching men and women dressed in sun-sewn clothes set fire everywhere. As if he were laid underneath Wen Xu's foot, unable to move as his leg was broken, his brother gone and his father bleeding next to him. His uncle restrained at his back and mourning in plain sight.

They had trekked so slowly up the side of the mountain after all was over, Lan Qiren berating him for moving without the heart to actually stop him. Lan Wangji knew he had to see for himself.

He had never met the two omega living in the blossom-scented house. He had never even seen them. At all times of the day the curtains at the windows were drawn, and only rarely could he glimpse firesmoke above the roof, proving that someone did live there. He saw them for the first time on the floor of that little house, embracing each other, almost peaceful-looking. One old woman, her face wrinkled with smiles. One little girl in her arms with tear tracks on her soot-stained cheeks.

"—Zhan, Lan Wangji, breathe!"

I'm sorry, Lan Wangji thought over and over. He hadn't stopped thinking it since watching his uncle kneel by the two bodies and cover their faces. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

There were hands on him, tugging open the collar of his uniform and pressing against his upper chest. Lan Wangji reeled back and grabbed Wei Wuxian's wrists. "What are you doing?" he rasped, blood so thick on his tongue that there was no hope of swallowing it back now.

Wei Wuxian frowned at him. "You need to breathe," he replied. He pressed his hands to Lan Wangji's chest again, his warm fingers digging here and there on his skin to try and ease the way for air.

Lan Wangji felt cold all throughout. "Wei Ying," he warned.
Then he coughed, and blood sprayed between the both of them, staining the white of his robes and flecking Wei Wuxian's hands with red.

Wei Wuxian immediately drew back. Lan Wangji dropped his wrists and, for the first time in weeks, breathed in fully.

"There," Wei Wuxian said. "The bad blood is out."

Lan Wangji would have answered, but air felt too heavenly after so long inhaling smoke. His lungs swallowed mouthful after mouthful of it as if they had been starved for it all along.

Wei Wuxian smiled at him. "I'm sorry for touching you," he said, and he sounded perfectly sincere. "I know you don't like it. I will not embarrass you further."

And for the rest of their time in that cave, he did not.

For the rest of their lives, he did not.

---

For three days they saw neither head nor tail of the beast they lived with. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian practiced inedia, unwilling to approach the water for drinking or eating. Too much death had poisoned it. Much of that time was spent in silence, which Lan Wangji knew Wei Wuxian found tiring. He saw him walk around from the corner of his eyes. He saw him yawn, and lie down, and sit up, never still for more than two hours. Lan Wangji fell asleep at night with Wei Wuxian sitting some way; he woke up in the morning to find him somewhere else, in a different position, boredom painted over his face.

They seldom talked. Despite his wounds, Lan Wangji felt calmer than he had in a month. He focused his energy on healing his leg as quickly as he could, refusing at first to reapply the medicine until Wei Wuxian threatened to do it himself. On the other man's chest, the brand stayed red and leaking.

Every hour of every day, honey covered the stench of the pond.

"I heard a tale," Lan Wangji told Wei Wuxian, "of a monstrous tortoise who killed hundreds of cultivators. It hid in Qishan's mountains and was never found again."

"It's just our luck," Wei Wuxian said, grinning, "that we should be trapped here with the Xuanwu of Slaughter."

Nothing seemed to deter his mood. Not his injuries, not the almost-certainty of death, not the knowledge that if word ever got out of he and Lan Wangji being locked together here, his reputation would suffer. Wei Wuxian smiled and hummed at odd hours of the day and night. He crafted fine objects out of broken bows and the dead's torn clothes, showing the same eye for detail that he had once when painting Lan Wangji.

If Lan Wangji closed his eyes and listened only to his voice, he could think himself back to those days in Gusu. He could feel the clean air of the Recesses wash over him. He could feel light on his skin from the library pavilion's windows and goosebumps over his arms as Wei Wuxian brought down his certainties day after day.

He managed to walk on the second day, though he was limping badly. Without a word, he picked up
the bowstrings that Wei Wuxian had preserved and tied them together end-to-end. When all of them were one string, he used one of his clan's deadliest techniques to cut through stone.

Wei Wuxian applauded him. He sat for longer than usual after that, drawing figures into the ground and mumbling under his breath. Eventually, he shared a plan with Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji thought it incredibly dangerous; but he looked at the edge of despair in Wei Wuxian's eyes, at his hands which spasmed by his sides in his hurry to move, and could not find the heart to refuse. They would die if they did nothing. They might as well die doing something.

He didn't want Wei Wuxian to be unable to get out, too.

He woke up on the third day to an unfamiliar scent. Something earthly and incredibly strong that he had never smelled before, either on someone or in nature. He moved his head aside and blinked sleep out of his eyes; Wei Wuxian was sitting by the dying fire, a small pouch open in his hand, looking at it with a strange face.

He closed it when he noticed Lan Wangji looking. "Lan Zhan," he greeted, putting the pouch inside his belt. Sweet honey once more came to Lan Wangji's nostrils, making him breathe deeper and easier. "Today is our last day of waiting."

"It is," Lan Wangji replied, sitting up.

So they waited. Hour after hour stretched in the silence of the cave, only broken by a crackling ember or some ripple in the water. Wei Wuxian sat very still for once, blinking slowly from time to time, massaging his own neck. He looked as if he had not slept.

Finally, their time came. Wei Wuxian stood with awkward movements, wincing from some ache or another that Lan Wangji did not ask about. Silently, he took the long string that Lan Wangji had made out of the bows and approached the water. Lan Wangji could only watch as he climbed to the roof of the cave and prepared the trap that they had fashioned together. The whole time he held his breath, afraid of seeing his foot slip on the rock, of watching him fall to the water.

Wei Wuxian's agility did not betray him. He jumped back to shore and rubbed his hands free of dirt, before grinning at Lan Wangji. "I'll lure it out," he called. "The formation is all ready."

Lan Wangji nodded and replied, "Be careful."

Wei Wuxian barely made a ripple when he dove into the pond.

From high up on his own rocky bluff, Lan Wanji waited. It seemed to him that he had never waited so long before; not when Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng had swam around looking for an exit days ago, not when Xichen had run into the burning pavilion and never come out again. Only moments must have passed before the Xuanwu's shell shook in the water, but to him, they felt like eons.

The tortoise did not emerge immediately. Some battle must be underway in the depths that Lan Wangji had no way of seeing, and his heart thrummed wildly in his chest as he imagined the worst. When the head of the beast broke out of the surface, roaring and shaking fiercely, there was no sign of Wei Wuxian.

He called his name again and again. With each time his hope seemed to fall even lower, and he was persuaded, as he ran to the edge of the cliff-like rock, that Wei Wuxian was dead. That his body must have sunk into the depth of the pool never to rise again. But then the Xuanwu growled, and something came out of the soft scale under its jaw, and red light poured from its wide-open mouth.

It was a kind of energy Lan Wangji had never felt before. Malicious and darker than night, it
shrouded the cave and made its air unbreathable. For a moment he choked and thought himself back to the burning Recesses, afraid of opening his eyes and seeing Wen Xu's cruel face looming over him. He forced himself to watch and recognize the gleaming blade in the tortoise's neck for what it was.

"Wei Ying," he let out.

The monster was too loud for him to listen for any answer, but it mattered very little. He knew who the hand gripping that sword's handle from within the Xuanwu's throat belonged to.

Lan Wangji set fire to the string. The Xuanwu roared, as afraid of the light now as it had been when Wei Wuxian held it at bay. It thrashed and screamed and tangled itself deeper in the trap that the both of them had set up. Lan Wangji pulled on the string till his fingers bled, tightening it round the monster's throat right where the blade pierced its scales.

For hours he held on. For hours he tugged and pulled until the skin of his hands was torn every way. He wrapped his fingers in cloth so that his blood may not slicken his hold, digging inch by inch into the beast's neck, watching Wei Wuxian stab again and again from inside the monster.

Scales made way to muscle. Muscle made way to bone. Lan Wangji cut into the tortoise's trachea with all the power left in him, voicing his own effort as he had never done before. He thought he must look as mad as tales said the Nie heirline did, choked by the resentful energy flooding the cave, edging far too close to qi deviation. With one last scream, he cut off the beast's head.

It fell into the water with a deep splatter. Lan Wangji's knees hit the ground and made his injured leg spasm with agony. He breathed as deeply as he could, sweat dripping down every inch of his skin, barely able to keep his eyes open.

Wei Wuxian did not surface.

"Wei Ying," he said, dragging himself closer to shore. He gasped and swallowed and repeated, "Wei Ying!"

There was no sign of him anywhere. Lan Wangji found that despite his exhaustion and pain he had room still for fear; in a last stretch of energy, he jumped into the water.

It was so dark. So very cold and unwelcoming. Even with the beast's corpse guaranteeing safety, the very touch of the pool around him felt evil and unnatural. He felt in his chest something bright shiver, some last hint of warmth and life shrivel and try to pull away. He realized that it was his own golden core reeling from such darkness.

Finally, he saw him.

Wei Wuxian floated in the midst of diluted blood. His long hair flew every way around him. His eyes were closed. His open mouth let out no air.

Lan Wangji swam as fast as he could toward him.

He was so very heavy when Lan Wangji pulled him out of the water. So very still. There was no thought at all in his head to flee when he brought him close to the fire they had camped around all those days, no worry for propriety or status as he pushed him to his side and dug his fingers into the man's back to try and expel all the water he must have swallowed.

It seemed an eternity later that Wei Wuxian coughed. An entire lifetime before he choked and vomited wetly onto the ground, his limp hair sticking to him, his eyes opening at last. Every breath
out of his mouth came as a gargle. He shook from the cold like a wounded animal.

Lan Wangji sat him up against the rocky wall and took his hands back as if they had been burned. He saw that his own blood had stained Wei Wuxian's clothes everywhere he had touched him, but he could only worry about Wei Wuxian's half-awareness.

"Wei Ying," he called. "Wei Ying—"

"I'm here," Wei Wuxian breathed.

His voice was only a whisper, yet relief flooded Lan Wangji at the sound of it. "Do not sleep," he ordered.


There was nothing to keep him warm with besides the fire. Lan Wangji crawled to the closest dead body, ignoring both the smell of rot and his own misgivings, and took the coat off of its back. Wei Wuxian only gazed distantly at him as he laid it over his shivering form.

"You mustn't sleep," Lan Wangji said again.

"I know," Wei Wuxian replied.

He seemed so tired. His scent was stronger as well, sweeter somehow, almost sickly.

Before Lan Wangji could say anything, Wei Wuxian opened his mouth and murmured, "I'm sorry. I found no exit. It must have closed while that monster fought us."

"Don't apologize," Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian smiled at him. The look of him was softer now than ever before; while drying some of his hair curled around his lips, bleeding all of his rough edges away, drawing vulnerability out of him with every word. "I must inconvenience you again, Lan Zhan," he said. "I'm truly sorry. I wanted us to escape before it happened."

Lan Wangji did not understand what he meant. Wei Wuxian shivered, yet he was not pale anymore. Blood flushed his face and made sweat mix with the water still clinging to him. His hand trembled as it held onto the stolen coat. His next exhale came shakily.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "I know you don't want to see this. I don't want you to see it either."

He grunted softly, painfully.

Lan Wangji sat very still onto the cave floor. A memory from his childhood came unbidden to him: Lan Qiren gathering him and Lan Xichen from a spring day spent reading and telling them to get ready for departure. The soft warm wind on his face and hands as they traveled to Lanling, a banquet laid out before them where for the first time he met Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. She had been holding her brother by the hand. Jiang Cheng was very small then.

"Welcome," Jin Guangshan had greeted, "to the ceremony."

A young man draped with silk and jewels sitting quietly by his clan leader's side, admired by all, his sweet scent washing over the assembly. Men and women lined before Jin Guangshan to admire him and make offers.

Lan Wangji's hands settled onto his thighs. He resisted the urge to clutch them till his fingers dug
through fabric and scratched blood out of his skin. He didn't know what to say. He barely dared to breathe for fear of smelling Wei Wuxian—for fear of bringing him more shame.

**What do you need?** he should ask, but there was nothing he could give.

**I will leave you,** he should promise, but there was no way out.

"Don't look at me," Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji crawled backwards till his back hit a wall. He turned around to face it, feeling very distant from his own self. His leg hurt from his kneeling, yet he couldn't bring himself to sit any other way. He feared that any movement from him would make Wei Wuxian look more afraid than he already did.

From time to time he heard a sigh, a whisper of discomfort. From time to time he forgot to breathe out of his mouth and felt honey on his tongue, as sweet and cloying as if he were eating it. Lan Wangji did not turn around no matter what he heard. He let Wei Wuxian fall into heat with warmth crawling up his own neck and sorrow filling his heart. He knew he should walk away; he knew he should find another nook of the cave to hide in, to guarantee Wei Wuxian privacy, but he found no heart to move.

He heard the sound of cloth a few hours later, a pained wheeze, a body hitting ground. Lan Wangji's head turned sideways without thought, but Wei Wuxian snapped, "Don't look at me."

"Not looking," Lan Wangji replied, facing the wall once more.

There was a silence. Then Wei Wuxian laughed, tense and foolish at once, as he always was.

Lan Wangji could not understand how he had ever thought this man to be carefree.

"Las Zhan," Wei Wuxian called sleepily. "I can't stay awake."

"Do not sleep," Lan Wangji ordered.

"You won't do anything while I sleep, will you."

There was such fear in those words; such hopelessness, such evidence that Wei Wuxian believed he would not be listened to.

Lan Wangji bit his lip. "Don't sleep," he repeated.

Another silence, heavier than the first. Wei Wuxian sighed and said, "Then play me a song."

There was nothing to play a song with. No guqin, no flute, no bamboo to carve out or deerskin to drum on. Lan Wangji still took the bloodstained length of bowstring out of his sleeve and stretched it between his belt and his cut-up fingers. They ached when he strummed it, and the sound was almost inaudible for lack of an body to echo in.

He played anyway.

Singing along helped him chase away the sting. His fingertips bled again within a few seconds, but Lan Wangji did not stop. He played and sang a melody he had started working on the night before Gusu had burned and any trace of it had turned to ash. He found that he still recalled enough of it to make it anew. To make it better.

Wei Wuxian sang along with him when he caught on to the tune. His voice was clear and elegant
despite how tired and pained he was. Sometimes he simply followed Lan Wangji's voice; sometimes he went away on his own, turning the song into something entirely new.

There was no sound inside the cave aside from them. Only the dripping water, the quiet noise of the strings, and their voices mingling till Wei Wuxian fell asleep.

Jiang Fengmian found them four days later.

With every day that passed, Wei Wuxian's state had gotten worse. Lan Wangji could hear him cough, dehydrated and fevered, every few minutes. At first he woke from time to time and requested a song; after the third day came, he did not wake at all.

Lan Wangji understood for the first time in his life what helplessness felt like.

He was still looking at the same piece of wall when the sound of shattering rocks came to him. He had not moved from that place except to keep the fire going, exhausting all the talismans he could find on the dead bodies around them for the sake of keeping Wei Wuxian warm. Not once did he look at him directly. Not once did he touch him, even to check on the fever. The sound of his continued breathing would have to be enough.

The body of the beast had started rotting too by the time a way in was cleared. Lan Wangji was too tired to move and help; instead he watched torchlight bounce off of the Xuanwu's shell and shadows move deeper through the gallery, until Jiang Fangmian and his son appeared before his eyes.

They coughed at the stench and put their sleeves over their noses. They looked wildly around, strikingly similar in their manners. They found Lan Wangji kneeling by the wall and looking at them quietly, and Jiang Cheng's face lit up at the sight of him.

He approached and started, "Where is—" before stopping abruptly.

He must have smelled it too.

His face turned pale, then red, then pale again. The eyes which had brightened with hope at the sight of Lan Wangji now burned with outrage.

"You," he seethed, wordless in his anger. "You—"

Lan Wangji said nothing. He deserved any insult, any punishment they chose to impart upon him.

Jiang Fengmian was silent. He walked carefully toward where Wei Wuxian lay, crouching by his side, no doubt checking over his state. Lan Wangji dared not look for fear of seeing Wei Wuxian's face and betraying his word.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Fengmian called, "bring young master Lan back to the Cloud Recesses. Make sure his wounds are tended on the way."

Jiang Cheng looked as though he had been stabbed. "Father!" he exclaimed. "Father, you can't just let him go!"

Jiang Fengmian met Lan Wangji's eyes, then. He was still crouching over the ground; still holding one hand over Wei Wuxian's blanketed form.
"Lan Wangji," he said. "You will go home, and you will speak of this to no one. Not your uncle, not your brother when he is found. My son will also keep quiet and not harm you. This must stay between the four of us." He hesitated for a second before nodding his head, one hand pressed over his heart. "If you do this, consider me in your debt."

Jiang Cheng's shock was almost palpable. He dared not protest while his father was bowing, however.

Lan Wangji found the strength to nod back. He put a hand over his own chest; the scabs on his fingers itched and ached when he spread them.

There was no gentleness to Jiang Cheng when he picked Lan Wangji up from the ground. No bigger contrast could be made between how he held Lan Wangji and how his father held Wei Wuxian, cradling him as gently as one would porcelain. Lan Wangji followed him out of the cave silently, accepting Jiang Fengmian's help in climbing out before putting one arm around Jiang Cheng's shoulders for support. Jiang Cheng gripped his waist and wrist harshly.

"I won't forget this," he promised lowly—too low for his father to hear. "You're indebted to us, Lan Wangji. You will never approach Wei Wuxian again."

Then he looked back toward his father. Lan Wangji followed his gaze tiredly.

Jiang Fengmian's sword was unsheathed. It was hard to discern his scent against the backdrop of forest and winter, but Lan Wangji thought he could find it anyway. Too earthly and too wet. Like the aftermath of a storm.

With careful hands, the man held Wei Wuxian against him and stepped onto the blade. Purple light glowed out of the metal as they rose; without another word, they both disappeared high above the mountain.

Of Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji only saw black hair flowing from the crook of the man's arm.

Chapter End Notes

*posts this and runs back to my Yanxi Palace marathon*

Also please leave comments! There's so many of you following this but you'd think only 20 people were reading based on who takes a minute to say hi. It's very disheartening.
Wei Wuxian woke up at home.

He woke up peacefully, bit by bit, cold winter sun bathing his face out of some uncovered window. The smell of incense filled his nose and made his eyelashes brush open. Though awareness came to him of his own body's weakness, greater than he had experienced from any previous heat, he felt very little fear. It seemed to him that he had fallen asleep less lonely; that someone must have watched over him and kept him from harm.

He smelled something familiar. Tilled earth, damp forest grounds. The aftermath of a storm. "Uncle Jiang," he breathed with no voice at all.

There came the sound of soft steps on wooden floor, of fabric shuffling through the air. Jiang Fengmian sat by the edge of his bed and replied, "A-Xian, how do you feel?"

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes.

He was indeed home. He saw before even meeting his sect leader's eyes the old drawings he had hung from the wall when he was just a child—him and Jiang Cheng and his shijie, playing and holding hands, the three of them keeping an awkward-looking dog at bay with swords too big for their tiny hands. He smiled faintly.

"How…"

"Drink first," Jiang Fengmian said.

His hands were not hesitant when he helped Wei Wuxian sit. Wei Wuxian allowed the touch, still dazed, and took with shaking fingers the cup of hot tea that was offered to him. It soothed his throat and quieted his empty stomach. He wondered if Jiang Fengmian had waited long by his side, keeping the tea warm with bursts of spiritual energy.

"Why am I here?" he asked, setting the cup back on the cabinet by the bed.

He knew that Jiang Cheng must have found a way to free him from the cave and bring him back to the Lotus Pier. He just couldn't understand why he was here, in his bedroom, instead of waiting out the heat in the omega house. His body told him that there were still a few hours to go till he was completely free of fever.

Jiang Fengmian must have understood his meaning. "You were very ill," he answered. "I thought it best to have you recuperate here."

Wei Wuxian looked at his hands. The scrapes on his palms and fingers had scabbed and did not hurt at all, even if the burn on his chest ached distantly. "Won't Madam Yu be unhappy?" he asked at last.

Jiang Fengmian sighed. "Don't worry about this," he replied, pressing a wide hand over Wei Wuxian's shoulder. "She made an exception."
Wei Wuxian very much doubted it.

Jiang Fengmian called for food to be brought over. Wei Wuxian settled more comfortably against his pillows, fists clenching weakly in the sheets, bothered by his own lack of strength. His mind felt as muddled now as it had upon waking up. He felt that he was forgetting something—something very important.

It came back to him as a maid came into the room, her face red with disgust at Wei Wuxian's state, holding a steaming bowl of soup over a platter. White cloth marred with blood and dirt, bleeding hands strumming bowstrings into music, the scent of sandalwood over the stench of death. A soft voice singing to him.

Wei Wuxian suddenly lunged from his bed and said in a panic, "Lan Zhan!"

The maid yelped in surprise. Jiang Fengmian caught Wei Wuxian as he struggled out of the sheets, pushing him back and quickly ordering the woman to leave. "A-Xian, calm down—"

"Uncle, Lan Zhan was hurt—is he okay? Is he here?" And then, with more horror: "What about shijie's arm?"

He hissed in pain as the wound on his chest flared with movement, cutting off his air. Jiang Fengmian lowered him back onto the sheets as he struggled to breathe, saying, "They're fine. A-Li's arm is on the mend, and young master Lan was brought back to the Cloud Recesses by A-Cheng. They're both fine, A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian took in a deep inhale. His fingers clutched the fabric of his clothes over his now-bandaged wound. "He didn't even want me to help with his injuries," he muttered. Then he laughed, "He killed that monster all by himself! The Jade of Lan truly deserves his title."

"That is odd," Jiang Fengmian replied. "Lan Wangji told A-Cheng that you were the one who killed it."

"What? Of course I didn't." Seeing Jiang Fengmian's disbelief on his face, Wei Wuxian insisted, "I'm not lying. I only lured the beast into a trap, but Lan Zhan was the one who fought it for hours until it died. I barely did anything."

"It was a joint effort, then. You should not give him full credit."

Wei Wuxian waved a hand dismissively. "You weren't there, uncle. If you were, you'd think differently."

"Of course," Jiang Fengmian said placatingly. "Now eat. Your body is very weak."

The broth was mostly flavorless so as not to upset Wei Wuxian's stomach, but it was warm. It was more food than he had eaten in over a week. He had to pace himself, to force himself not to swallow all of it, while by his side Jiang Fengmian cut fruit into slices. The man's expression had grown thoughtful.

"A-Xian," he asked once Wei Wuxian had emptied the bowl. "What do you think of Lan Wangji?"

Wei Wuxian remembered suddenly in what circumstances Jiang Cheng must have found them. He pushed away from the backing of his pillows and said, "Uncle, it wasn't his fault. If I'd kept taking the tea Madam Yu gave me—"

"Tea?" Jiang Fengmian cut in, frowning.
Wei Wuxian hesitated.

He had thought that Yu Ziyuan must not have told her husband of the moonless tea. She had given it to him in something like secrecy, accepting to touch him even, just so that she could make sure no one could see what it was she was giving him before he left. He could not lie to Jiang Fengmian, however.

"Madam Yu gave me a tea for stopping heats before we left," he explained, chest tight. "I kept it with me always. But the water in that cave was poisoned, so I couldn't take it. I tried to chew on it, but it didn't work." He raised his head and added, "Lan Zhan did nothing wrong. I know the circumstances were completely improper, but if you must blame someone, please blame me. He had nowhere to go either."

Jiang Fengmian looked at him for a long moment without speaking.

"I don't believe Lan Wangji took advantage of the situation," he said at last. Wei Wuxian's shoulders relaxed all at once, the burn over his chest almost a relief in contrast. "He swore he would not tell anyone, and I believe him. But that is not what I asked."

It was Wei Wuxian's turn to be confused.

Jiang Fengmian gave a brief smile. "What do you think of him?" he asked again. "You spent almost a week in that cave with him. How is your relationship with him?"

"I don't think we have much of a relationship," Wei Wuxian replied. "He disliked me when we met in Gusu years ago. I suppose his feelings didn't change with what I put him through."

Jiang Fengmian spent another moment in silence, his fingers rubbing the length of what looked like a jade hairpin. It seemed to have broken in half. "I want you to have a good life, A-Xian," he said then. "Perhaps I could have done more for you over the years. Perhaps I made some mistakes, but I can't regret them, even knowing how much they cost you."

"Uncle," Wei Wuxian started.

A raised hand silenced him. "That mess with Jin Zixun made me realize that I might have robbed you of more than I thought in my selfishness," Jiang Fengmian said.

"No," Wei Wuxian replied. "No, you didn't. I didn't want to marry him—I don't want to marry anyone."

"But what if you change your mind?"

I won't, Wei Wuxian thought. He had spent too many nights haunted by the thought. He had spent too many days in the Wen omega house, watching Wen Linfeng crush herself down under the expectations put upon her, watching Wen Yiqian and Wen Yueying cling desperately to childhood. He had watched Jin Zixun look through him rather than at him; he still remembered, with a frisson of fear, Wen Chao creeping close to him and saying, I wonder how sweet you smell during heat.

"A-Xian," Jiang Fengmian said, and Wei Wuxian snapped out of his thoughts. His throat was dry. "For as long as I live, I promise you will never be forced to marry."

Wei Wuxian nodded silently. His chest was too clogged with relief to allow him to speak.
"But I am your clan leader. You are my..." Jiang Fengmian hesitated, looking over his shoulder quickly. "I care about you," he said. "I care about your happiness. It could be safer for you to marry someone willing to understand you, even without love, than to risk the alternative."

"I've not met anyone like this," Wei Wuxian laughed, joyless.

"What about Lan Wangji?"

Wei Wuxian was so surprised that for a long while, he could not answer. "Lan Wangji is very rule-abiding," he said at last. "He could never stand to marry someone like me, especially... especially not now."

Speaking of Lan Wangji in such terms felt so wrong. Blood rushed to Wei Wuxian's face like it almost never did—he had never thought of anyone, and especially not Lan Wangji, in that light. No matter how beautiful and talented the Lan heir was.

Lan Wangji hated to even touch him. How could he possibly marry Wei Wuxian? They had barely spoken in that cave. Wei Wuxian had no doubt insulted him more than ever before by falling into heat in front of him, worse than when he had watched him bathe all those years ago. He would be lucky if Lan Wangji ever accepted to be in his presence again.

The thought saddened him.

"Never mind, then," Jiang Fengmian said. Wei Wuxian had almost forgotten what it was that the man had asked. He blushed more as he remembered. His hands itched for the handle of his sword or the tense string of a bow, any way to externalize the odd energy now running through him. "I did not intend to make you anxious. Forgive me."

He rose from his chair; Wei Wuxian immediately bowed as properly as he could while still sat upon the bed. Jiang Fengmian patted his shoulder once, and Wei Wuxian accepted it with guilt weighing down on him.

"I'll leave you alone now," Jiang Fengmian declared. "A-Cheng and A-Li will surely visit you as soon as your fever is gone."

"That's good," Wei Wuxian replied emptily.

He didn't dare ask why Jiang Fengmian had visited him before that.

Soon enough he was alone in the bedroom. At this stage of heat all that remained was the eponymous fever and some soreness in his back. Wei Wuxian lay still over his bed, trying his best not to toss and turn, else his chest wound burned fiercely. He touched it often, tracing the swelling under the bandages with the tip of his finger. He had yet to actually look at it.

Why bother; he knew what he would find. Seeing Qishanwen's sun branded onto his skin would only worsen his mood.

The rest of the day abated like this. Slow and uneventful. Sometimes Wei Wuxian heard noises from outside his door, no doubt servants going from one place to the next, or cries from the window of an apprentice or two training by the water. He wished he could join them. He wished he had his sword; the thought of Suibian in Wen Chao's clutch, so far away in Qishan, made him queasy.

He thought of the three Wen omega he had left there.

He thought of Lan Wangji's ashen face as he realized that Wei Wuxian was in heat.
He closed his eyes and willed his shame away.

Wei Wuxian spent one more day confined to his room before deciding that he had enough of lying around and doing nothing. He left for the training grounds despite Jiang Yanli's urging—and it was hard to look at her as well, to know that the arm she kept cradled to her chest was broken because of him—and shot with bow and arrow till his numb fingers stopped aching. He bruised his knuckles, splitting target after target, Jiang Cheng silent by his side. They spoke very little.

There were swords aplenty at the Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian took a spare one out of storage and trained as fiercely with it as he could. It felt off, different, lacking compared to Suibian. It held no spirit. It couldn't make him fly. No need to ask Jiang Cheng what he thought of his, either; each sparring session had him looking at the sword in his hands in frustration. No doubt he wished for Sandu as much as Wei Wuxian did Suibian.

Day after day, Wei Wuxian sat at the edge of the Pier and looked into the horizon. Though sunlight was more frequent now, the weather was still cold. Jiang Yanli often sat by him in worry, but he had not the heart to tell her what it was he was waiting for.

He just couldn't chase off the apprehension that kept him awake at night.

It became obvious within a few days that Jiang Cheng was holding thoughts to himself as well. He acted as normally as possible in his sister's presence, but whenever he found himself alone with Wei Wuxian, he became morose. His words came sparsely. He sparred in silence, frowning, avoiding Wei Wuxian's eyes.

It would take heartbreak and argument to make him open up—What about me? What about sister? We trekked for days without food and water, but did father acknowledge us?

Jealousy and guilt all mixed into the ugliest of fears, the antonym of sympathy. Wei Wuxian had known for a long time how much Jiang Cheng envied him, how ashamed he was of envying him. He had always tried his best to uplift the one he considered a brother; he had always tried not to overstep his freedom in this.

He still wanted to reply to him: Do you envy this?

He still wanted to show him the lonely little shack, the tea he drank every morning, the memory of three children trapped in a silk prison. Soft clothes on his body as he was sold to a man he had never met before. Nightmares of nameless hands touching him as he tried to run away. Alpha-scent choking him, freezing him more thoroughly than snow and iced mud did—I wonder how sweet you smell during heat.

Do you envy this, Jiang Cheng?

"One day you'll be sect leader, and I'll follow you," Wei Wuxian told Jiang Cheng, one hand over his shoulder and the other clenched by his side. "Just like my father and yours. And if anyone says you're not fit to be heir, I'll beat them up!"

Jiang Cheng's smile in that moment was such a fragile thing. Wei Wuxian had glimpsed in that cave
the man he would become; he saw now the child he had always been, the one who chased Wei Wuxian around and basked in his attention, the one who felt such pride at keeping dogs away, at scowling at those who stared and whispered.

"Gusulan has its Jade; well, Yunmengjiang has its hero."

Not even Jiang Cheng could afford to envy an omega. Wei Wuxian could not allow him to. No matter how he felt about it.

Jiang Cheng started speaking to him again. Jiang Yanli's worry abated. They laughed in those suspended days of peace despite the ache of what had happened and the fear of what was to come; they trained, fooled around, rested. They warmed themselves in sunlight. They waited for the other shoe to drop.

Yu Ziyuan lived in a pavilion at the far end of the Lotus Pier. It stood so close to shore that oftentimes water would spill against the walls and wash away their paint. She never ordered them to be fixed; she seemed to like the sight of red bleeding into pink and then bright, pure white. Hers was a place Wei Wuxian had always avoided as he grew. There was no way to know beforehand if she would simply ignore him or take time out of her day to insult him when their paths crossed.

He could not avoid it now.

He hesitated in front of the doors for a long time. The wooden path linking her home to the rest of the manor was empty. He knew that at this hour, she must be meditating. Although it may not be the ideal time to interrupt her, it was better to do it then, away from servants' eyes, than in full sight. At least if she grew angry, he would be the only one to know.

His arm felt very heavy when he raised it to knock on the door. He snatched it back almost immediately, almost afraid to feel wood burn at his contact, so strong was Madam Yu's dislike of him. The wood did not burn. A moment later a maid opened the doors and allowed him inside.

It was Wei Wuxian's first time entering Yu Ziyuan's quarters. The maid did not offer him a seat in the parlor where she left him, and he did not take one. He didn't think he would be able to sit still anyway. Instead he looked at the ink paintings decorating the walls and the ancestral weapons laid onto dark cushions.

One sword caught his attention more than the rest. He approached it without much thought, feeling for it the way he used to feel for Suibian—the way he failed to feel for the sword he was using now. To his surprise, the sword called back to him. Wei Wuxian blinked as he examined it. It was a rough thing, ugly compared with the fine blades and bows around it. Its wooden pommel bore neither gold nor silver, no gemstones or fine carvings.

Its sharp blade gleamed softly. A bird-like shape had been chipped where wood met metal. Wei Wuxian extended a hand forward with the vague intent to trace it with his fingers.

"What are you doing here?"

He took his hand back. Yu Ziyuan stood in the frame of a door that must lead to her chambers, the same maid as before following behind her.
Wei Wuxian bowed to her. "Madam Yu," he said, "I apologize for taking time out of your day. I have something I need to ask you."

She did not answer. When Wei Wuxian straightened up, he saw that she was looking at the sword he had almost touched.

She murmured, "Leave us," to the maid before making her way toward the wide couch at the other side of the room. Once more Wei Wuxian was left standing, but it was nothing he hadn't expected. "Speak, then," Madam Yu said, and Wei Wuxian put a hand inside his belt.

He took out of it the pouch she had given him before he left for the Nightless City. At the sight of it, Madam Yu's face grew somber.

"Don't just show this around carelessly," she snapped at him.

"So you do know what it is," Wei Wuxian replied.

"Of course I know what it is. Would I have given it to you otherwise? Foolish child."

He hid the pouch again. All the words he had come here prepared to say refused to come out of his mouth; he stared his clan leader instead, hoping without reason that she would give him anything to go on.

She said nothing, of course. Wei Wuxian had to force open his own mouth and declare, "There's no more left."

He had drunk the tea diligently since coming back, but a small bag's worth was only so much. There hadn't been much of it left after Qishan anyway.

Madam Yu huffed uncaringly. "What do you suppose I should do about it, Wei Ying?"

"You were the one who gave it to me. Can't you…" He hesitated. "Can't you give me more?"

"You're here now. Why should you have more?"

Wei Wuxian ground his teeth together.

There was no way for him to make her understand, he knew. Even if Yu Ziyuan had not lacked empathy wherever he was concerned, it would be hard to make her understand. Wei Wuxian did not think even Jiang Yanli would.

"My fevers are incapacitating," he told her, forcing himself not to look down. "I would prefer to continue avoiding them."

"You are mistaken if you think I gave this tea to you out of concern," Madam Yu replied. "The Jiang sect simply can't afford to have its only omega getting knocked up unmarried."

Nausea settled at Wei Wuxian's throat.

Madam Yu knocked twice onto the wooden arm of the couch. The maid came back with a pot of tea in hand and busied herself by pouring it for her, before getting dismissed once more.

"Why are you still here?" Madam Yu asked, bringing the tea to her lips.

Wei Wuxian licked his lips. They were dry. "Why do you think I would end up…" he couldn't finish.
She laughed coldly. "Who knows what you get up to when no one's watching?" She took a sip of tea, unflinching, her eyes piercing through Wei Wuxian with the strength of a loose arrow. "It's what your mother did, after all."

She put such disgust, such hatred into the words, that Wei Wuxian felt the hair of his arms rise. *Your mother.*

"You won't get more moonless tea unless circumstances call for it," Madam Yu went on. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to obtain? How humiliating it is? You should be thanking me on your knees, boy."

"I won't," Wei Wuxian replied.

Yu Ziyuan's teacup tapped loudly against the tabletop. Liquid spilled over the rim and wetted her fingers.

"Wei Ying," she hissed, finally showing the anger he had grown used to bringing out of her.

Wei Wuxian refused to cower this time. "Why do you hate my mother so much?" he asked.

"Did Jiang Fengmian put you up to this?"

"He did not," Wei Wuxian answered hotly. "He would never, because he has too much respect for you."

Madam Yu rose to her feet. She was tall, so much taller than him, the very image of alphakind; strong and beautiful and absolutely deadly. She must have grown up praised by her family, nurtured for greatness, pushed forth toward glory.

Wei Wuxian had never known such bitter jealousy.

"You have no idea what you speak of," she seethed. "Get lost!"

"Of course I don't have any idea—how could I?" Wei Wuxian scoffed. "You've made it so I could never know. Well, I'm asking now."

"I should've killed you when you were a child," Yu Ziyuan said.

A few years ago, such words would have frozen him to the bone. If he had not experienced how cold she could be toward him, how cruelly she took to his status and existence, he would have stood breathless. Now all he felt was hollow.

Madam Yu was not done speaking. "I knew the moment I laid eyes on you that you would end up as rotten as her," she said. "Blood doesn't lie, Wei Ying, and you have in you the worst blood that this age has known."

"Did you even know her," he replied emptily.

His mother, whose memory was but a faded dream, a hint of applescent and laughter. His mother whose name was enough to make Jiang Fengmian look grieved; his mother who could make Yu Ziyuan exude such hatred.

Where was the truth?

Madam Yu laughed so loudly that she bent forward with it. "Did I *know* her?" she repeated at him. Wei Wuxian saw with great shock her look turn to something like despair. "Which clan do you think
Cangse Sanren fled from!?”

"What?"

She was shaking with anger now. "I was there when she was born," she said in that same haunted voice. "I was the one who found her the first time she fled from the Yu omega house—she was so small I could lift her up with one arm. She kept laughing. She thought I was playing with her."

Wei Wuxian could not speak at all anymore. He watched with wide eyes as Yu Ziyuan covered her face with her hand; he saw her long nails dig into her temples and leave red marks in their wake.

"It was on my watch that she escaped for real," she said. "For years until she came back, I was blamed for her death. I was estranged from my own clan. Just because a stupid little omega couldn't understand the meaning of duty.

"And then she was back!" Madam Yu's voice grew louder and angrier, her face red from the strength of her memories. "She came down from that mountain acting like the world belonged to her—and of course, I was charged with putting her back on the right path." She sucked in a deep breath. "I was the one who let her escape, so I was the one who had to reign her back in! I had to follow her around, I had to watch over her every move, I had to convince her to go back to seclusion. But who could compare to Cangse Sanren? It didn't matter how ugly she was, oh no," she laughed. "She was brilliant. She was the greatest cultivator of her time. Every alpha forgot their manners around her and begged their sect leaders for the authorization to marry her, even—even—"

She needn't finish that sentence.

"That ungrateful little bitch never appreciated anything she was given," Madam Yu spat. "It's only right that she died the way she did. She took everything out of everyone, made everyone love her, and never gave anything back. The world is well rid of her."

She sat back down with trembling hands. Wei Wuxian could only watch as she rubbed her face again and made a mess out of her makeup. She seemed not to notice at all.

He felt very far from the moment. In his mind he recalled the mourning so stark on Jiang Fengmian's face whenever the man praised him, whenever he made him a promise. For so long he had wondered why such a proper man had raised him so improperly. For so long he had wondered how Yu Ziyuan could allow it, no matter how much she raged and spat, no matter how close to a beast the matter of Cangse Sanren made her look.

"Did you learn about the tea from her?" he asked softly.

The look Yu Ziyuan gave him in answer was ripe with resentment. "How else would I know?" she snapped at him.

Wei Wuxian nodded. He bowed again, though she wasn't looking at him, and made his way toward the door. His eyes once more caught the gleam of the oddly rustic sword she had added to her renowned collection.

There was only one person at the Pier who shared the same love for weapons that Madam Yu did. Wei Wuxian went to find Jiang Yanli that night.

"A sword with a bird engraved below the handle?" she asked as she prepared tea for the both of them. Her arm was almost fully healed now. "Where did you see it?"

Wei Wuxian accepted the tea with a nod of thanks. "I just heard someone talking about it and got
curious," he lied.

Jiang Yanli hummed in thought. "Mother has one of those, I believe. They're very rare. She told me that only the sage in the mountains makes them and that no one but their owner can ever unsheathe them."

The teacup burned against Wei Wuxian's fingers. "Baoshan Sanren?" he asked weakly.

His shijie nodded. "Your mother probably had one too. How lucky."

Wei Wuxian remembered the day Yu Ziyuan had lost her father.

The news had come to them from the Yu sect a few days after the fact. It hadn't come with fanfare, for the man had been omega. Wei Wuxian knew through Jiang Cheng's knowledge that Yu Ziyuan was not always the Yu heir. That she had an elder alpha sister once who had died before her time—the daughter of her sect leader father and his cultivation partner. The direct heir, as opposed to her, who was born of an omega spouse.

It was sickness, he thought, that had taken her omega father away. Wei Wuxian had still been very young then; still very new to the Jiang clan. He still woke at night in a cold sweat, thinking he had heard dogs in the distance. But he remembered that messenger who had come on horseback and delivered the news to Madam Yu. He remembered how angry she had been at the servants that night. She had even scolded Yu Jinzhu.

She hadn't shed a single tear. He remembered being more terrified of her then than ever before.

Always, anger was the weapon which Yu Ziyuan held most avidly. Always she directed it toward those around her as if the smallest inconvenience was her being scorned by the gods; as if she suffered a great injustice every day that she lived.

She made everyone love her and never gave anything back.

Perhaps hatred wasn't the only reason Yu Ziyuan had kept that sword with her for so long.

The other shoe dropped.

The cry came as the day died: "The Wen clan took sixth shidi!"

It was only days after Wei Wuxian had been denied more of the tea by Yu Ziyuan. Madam Yu had been angrier than usual since then, never missing an opportunity to berate her husband and children. Earlier he and Jiang Cheng had seen Jiang Fengmian stalk away to the docks without a word while his wife screamed at him from behind, and Jiang Cheng had asked, "What happened this time?"

His voice bore such fatigue that Wei Wuxian had immediately dragged him away to hunt. He had found his smile again, then, happy to race him for the fattest birds they could find.

Now Wei Wuxian's second shidi was running at them, desperate and out of breath, tears spilling out of his eyes. He told them that a man and woman wearing the Wen sect uniform had come and beat up their youngest disciple. He said that the woman was waiting now to meet Yu Ziyuan.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng dropped their catches and ran toward the main house.
They found Jiang Yanli on their way; there were tear tracks on her face and blood on her fingers. They all came in to face their enemy.

"I've come here to ask for punishment on behalf of my master," Wang Lingjiao said gleefully.

She smelled, as always, like rot.

In the end there was not much that Wei Wuxian could do. He withstood for the first time in his life the burn of Zidian on his back, once, twice, as many times as it took for his skin to break apart and bleed. Through the ringing in his ears he heard the sound of Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli's pleas; through the shaking in his hands he felt the cold, hard ground, the heartbreak of a promise he had once made to himself and not managed to keep.

Yu Ziyuan's face looked wild in the early hours of night.

"Madam Yu," Wang Lingjiao laughed, delighted, "I didn't think you had it in you. You whipped an omega!"

She came closer, her footsteps so loud in the silence that they seemed to echo through Wei Wuxian's head. With one long-fingered hand, she grabbed him by the hair.

"You brought this on yourself," she murmured to him. "Don't think my master is done with you."

Then, louder: "So very obedient, Madam Yu! I can see that we shan't have any problems building a supervisory office in Yunmeng."

Wei Wuxian was too dazed by that time to truly follow along what happened. He heard Wang Lingjiao's screams of terror. He saw Wen Zhuliu's glowing hand face off against Zidian. He cried out when someone grabbed him under the arms and pulled him away, making the wounds on his back burn deeply.

His nose picked up the sharp scent of Jiang Cheng, "Come, we need to build the barrier—"

"I'll take care of it," Jiang Yanli said from Wei Wuxian's other side. "You two get some help."

"Father took most of the clan with him earlier! We need to warn him!"

A sword was put into Wei Wuxian's hands. It had never felt as foreign as it did now in the face of such danger. All around them, Wen cultivators emerged, bows at the ready and swords unsheathed. Wei Wuxian tightened his grip on the borrowed sword and wished with all of his power that Suibian was here.

There was nowhere they could go. No one they could call. Wen Zhuliu killed the cultivators who brought up the shield and tried, again and again, to take away Madam Yu's core. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng fought as close to her as they could against the endless numbers facing them. The borrowed sword's blade was slick with blood and guts, the air heavy with the smell of it, as heavy as a storm. It seemed to Wei Wuxian that Zidian was just another lightning bolt against the darkening sky.

So many dead bodies littered the ground around them now. Wei Wuxian forgot to voice the pain in his back, though it worsened when the rain started. He slid against the wet ground as he cut again and again into the bellies of his foes, watching from the corner of his eyes as Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli did the same, as Yu Ziyuan kept the Core-Melting Hand at bay.

Madam Yu slipped. Blood splattered against her open eyes and blinded her for a second. Jiang Yanli howled at the approaching Wen Zhuliu and managed to chase him off, and in the moment that
followed, Yu Ziyuan had grabbed both of her children and leaped onto the nearest roof.

"Come!" she roared at Wei Wuxian.

She brought them all to the farthest of all the docks. From there the sounds of battle were faint, almost identical to the rumbling thunder overhead. Wei Wuxian's back had become numb to pain thanks to the beating rain. His heart, however, stung.

"You both need to go," Yu Ziyuan told her children, hugging them firmly.

From behind her, Wei Wuxian saw that her back was shaking.

"Mother?" Jiang Cheng asked, achingly soft.

"You leave right now, and don't come back. A-Li—"

"Mother," Jiang Cheng cut in, "we can't leave you here, let's just wait here for father, he—"

"Listen to me!" Yu Ziyuan shouted.

The sky cracked open; for a second, everything was washed to white.

Madam Yu was holding something in her hand. It wasn't until she slipped it on Jiang Yanli's finger that Wei Wuxian recognized Zidian. "You take care of your brother, A-Li," she said.

"Mother," Yanli cried.

Madam Yu rubbed her daughter's tears away. They were immediately replaced with rain. "My girl," she said, kinder than ever before. "You go now."

She snapped her fingers. Long glowing ropes shot out of the ring around Jiang Yanli's finger and trapped all three of them; Madam Yu pushed both of her children into the nearest boat and turned to face Wei Wuxian.

He was tied with Zidian's power too, but he felt no pain from it.

"Wei Ying," Madam Yu said, grabbing him by the collar. Wei Wuxian had no breath left in him at all. "You will defend my children with your life."

"Madam Yu," he tried.

She shook him harshly. "No, you listen to me," she hissed. "You protect them, understood? Don't give me any nonsense now—I'm asking you. Will you protect them?"

"I—"

He saw the fear in her eyes, the blood still clinging to her face. He saw the two people he cared the most about trapped in a boat and yelling at him, at her, to let them go. To let them fight.

"I will," he replied, heartache bringing tears to his eyes. "I promise."

She threw him into the boat as well.

"Mother!" Jiang Cheng cried. "Mother, come with us, let's all wait until father gets back!"

"So what if he doesn't come back?" Yu Ziyuan asked.
She unsheathed her sword slowly. She wasn't shaking anymore.

"Can't I survive without him?"

Their farewells to Jiang Fengmian were not any less hurried.

Wei Wuxian said nothing at all. He knew, deep inside himself, how things would turn out. He made no move to board the boat that his sect leader was on; he listened to the panicked words that the man's children cried to him and met his eyes almost levelly.

It felt almost as though Jiang Fengmian wanted Wei Wuxian to confirm the truth to him. Almost as if he were waiting for everything to be a joke, as if he were ready to believe it, as long as Wei Wuxian said so.

*Don't go,* Wei Wuxian wanted to say.

What right did he have to beg?

Jiang Fengmian pushed his children back into the small boat. He murmured a word, and Zidian once more snapped in place around the three of them. Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli shouted. Wei Wuxian tried to breathe.

*Don't go.*

He saw apology in Jiang Fengmian's eyes; he felt it in the hand that the man put over Jiang Cheng's shoulder, in the words that he said to them all—"Be good."

So did Wei Wuxian let go of his strongest protector. So did he say farewell to the man who had loved and raised him and granted him freedom. He watched Jiang Fengmian's wide back disappear toward the burning Pier without a single word. The darkness of the storm was almost enough to engulf the glow of the man's sword.

In such a weather, his scent was all but gone.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait... had the worst Xmas. I'm still in a daze over it.
Chapter 8

Wei Wuxian had always known the Lotus Pier in shades of gold and green. He had always known the pink of sunrise over calm waters, the cool autumn air on his skin as he wetted his hands picking lotuses. As a child, it seemed to him that his life would unfold bathed in the same soft colors. He put flowers in his shijie's hair and wrestled Jiang Cheng into the mud and watched as the sun burned over the horizon.

Smoke rose over the houses where he had grown. It was impossible to know how much of the darkness which loomed high above was due to it or due to clouds, how much of the fire had been smothered by rain and how much still licked at the walls of the mansion, of Madam Yu's pavilion, of the training grounds where only hours ago he had picked up a bow.

How he wished he had a bow.

The Pier shone red everywhere they walked. They slithered in through the water ways, diving whenever something moved, wading slowly through mud and ash. Wei Wuxian's back had gone entirely numb, his wounds forgotten in the face of his duty. At every little sound, he grabbed the other two's collars and pulled. At every long shadow, he held them still and listened.

Jiang Yanli's tears had grown silent. Jiang Cheng had stopped shedding any.

"Maybe they escaped," he told his sister in a white, shapeless voice. "They must have escaped."

"Yes," Jiang Yanli said, and cried harder.

Now they crouched by the entrance of the main hall, hidden behind a smoldering barrier, unable to flee from the truth. They watched Wang Lingjiao whimper in the arms of her master. They watched Wen Chao pull a sword out of Jiang Fengmian's still chest, jade and blood flecking the ground and glinting in the flamelight. Wei Wuxian's fingers dug into the burning barrier. The pain stinging his palm was nothing next to the one in his heart.

In the end his golden core was melted, and he was stabbed by a nobody.

Madam Yu's body lay not far from her husband's. The gold ornaments had been ripped out of her hair; Wei Wuxian saw them shine above Wang Lingjiao's head.

"Sir, we didn't find Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng," said a beta standing by Wen Zhuliu's side. "They must've fled before we arrived."

"And took Zidian too, I bet," Wen Chao answered with a sneer.
"We're still counting the items, but it seems the treasury wasn't touched by fire. Sect leader Wen will be very pleased."

"What about the omega house?" Wen Chao asked.

The beta woman bowed deeper. "Untouched as well," she replied, "but it doesn't look like anyone was living in it."

"That Wei Ying was just walking around," Wang Lingjiao simpered, cuddling closer to Wen Chao. "They let him free even here, how despicable."

"Decadence," Wen Chao declared. He dropped his hold on Wang Lingjiao and stepped away from Jiang Fengmian's corpse, kicking away broken pieces of blackened wood. "No wonder their clan stopped birthing omega decades ago. Yunmengjiang is finally reaping what it sowed. They should've known that they would be punished for their impudence."

Next to Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng let out a broken moan.

"Find the children and kill them," Wen Chao ordered his troops, satisfaction dripping from his voice. "When you find that omega, bring him to me alive. I'll kill him with his own sword."

Wang Lingjiao laughed. Wen Chao turned his back to them. His white coat flew around him, carried off-ground by the hot air, baring at his hip the bronze pommel of Suibian.

Wei Wuxian barely remembered how they escaped again. He had known that coming back was a mistake—he had known what they would find, he had known that the sight would only break Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng more thoroughly—but he hadn't had the heart to refuse them. He hadn't had the heart to lie.

He felt no hunger and no pain as they ran into the mountains. His throat was dry from the smoke, parched and rough when he spoke, but he did not stop to drink. He felt the wounds in his back pull and open again. He felt cloth stick to his skin from sweat, water, and blood.

"We need help," he told the other two when they finally stopped. "Gusu is closest, we should seek shelter there."

There was a stream singing behind the rocks where each of them took time to drink. Though the night was deep and cloudy, this path was as it had always been: mountains rose around them and shivered under the wind, cool and quiet and infinite.

Wei Wuxian felt that they should shake. He felt that the earth ought to open under his feet and the heart of the world to howl.

"Gusu is no more," Jiang Yanli replied. "The Lan sect is already weakened, A-Xian."

"Lan Zhan will—"

"What about Lan Zhan?" Jiang Cheng cut in.

They were the first words he had spoken in hours.


But Jiang Cheng did not look at her. "What about Lan Wangji?" he repeated, glaring at Wei Wuxian. "Didn't you hear what they said? Are you in such a hurry to prove those Wen dogs right?"
"Who cares what they said?" Wei Wuxian retorted. "We need help and Gusulan is the closest sect. Lan Wangji is a just man, he will shelter you."

"Oh, yes, Lan Wangji is the epitome of righteousness," Jiang Cheng said with such cutting sarcasm that Wei Wuxian felt his heart ache. "You'd know all about that, Wei Wuxian. Father should've let you take his name before he saved you from that cave."

Wei Wuxian's blood turned to ice.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli said in shock. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Wei Wuxian replied before Jiang Cheng could. He felt once more as if he were watching himself speak from a distance; as if he were floating above, the scene he was in the middle of laid very far under his feet. "We should go—"

But Jiang Cheng was not done speaking. "Ashamed, are you?" he said, rising from the rock upon which he had sat. His hurt was so stark over his face, dug deeply into the lines of his mouth and eyes, as if ready to crack his skin apart. It dyed his words into a different sort of violence. "Whatever for? You're the one who defended him—you're the one who made a spectacle of yourself with him in Qishan. It's because of your faith in Lan Wangji that our home is burning, isn't it?"

Wei Wuxian's mind ran emptily. The cold spread from his chest and toward his extremities, stiffening his limbs, plunging his heart in lethargy.

Jiang Cheng's stare tinted itself with disgust the longer Wei Wuxian stayed silent. He turned to his sister and said, "Wei Wuxian is in such a hurry to go to Gusu because that's where his alpha is. He already spent a heat with him, after all. Who's to say he's not carrying a little Lan—"

Wei Wuxian's hands had grabbed Jiang Cheng's collar before he realized it, tugging him close in rage and sudden, painful fear—but Jiang Cheng was faster, his back unhurt and his soul pushed forth by anger, and he pushed Wei Wuxian to the ground with both hands wrapped around his throat. Wei Wuxian's gasp of pain was choked right out of him.

"No!" Jiang Yanli yelled in anguish. "Stop it, both of you!"

Wei Wuxian's fingers tightened at Jiang Cheng's collar. "You don't know anything," he wheezed through the hold strangling him.

Jiang Cheng's eyes glinted in despair. "Am I not right?" he roared at him. "Would we be here if you hadn't made an enemy of Wen Chao, would my parents be—be—"

Jiang Yanli had thrown herself at her brother, trying to pull him off of Wei Wuxian, her face once more running with tears. Each of her sobs made Wei Wuxian feel a little more breathless.

Jiang Chang's hands tightened again. Wei Wuxian's sight was blurring. He felt tears spill over his cheeks and realized too late that they didn't belong to him.

"Why couldn't you just stay in your place?" Jiang Cheng cried. His hold loosened at last, yet Wei Wuxian didn't cough, didn't breathe, didn't try to get away. "Why can't you just accept who you are!??"

At last, Jiang Yanli managed to pull her brother sideways. Jiang Cheng fell onto the muddy ground with sobs shaking his shoulders; she held him tightly against her, her own face twisted in agony, begging him not to hurt Wei Wuxian. Please, she said over and over. Please, A-Cheng.
Jiang Cheng dug his fingers into the dirt and pleaded, child-like, "I want my mom and dad."

Wei Wuxian's eyes burned. He pressed the heels of his palms against them and crushed his own tears away.

He, too, wished for his father.

"I'll go to Lanling," Jiang Yanli said a few hours later as they dove deep into the mountain, away from the oft-walked paths and roads. "I'm sure Jin Zixuan will help us."

"Shijie, that's too far, you can't—"

She raised a hand, silencing him. Zidian glowed on her finger more brightly than it should. "A-Xian," she said, "I'll be fine. I'm armed, and I know the way very well."

"Let us come with you," he begged.

Madam Yu's words still rang through his head: Will you protect them, Wei Ying?

"I'll be faster alone," she replied. "I'm inconsequential—Wen Chao wans A-Cheng because he is the heir, and he wants you because he hates you. He won't care if I escape. He'll come after you two, so you have to stay together and protect each other." She looked apologetic as she added, "Plus, even if we disguise our identities, traveling with an omega will give us away immediately."

"What are you two muttering about now?" came Jiang Cheng's voice from where he had lagged behind them.

Wei Wuxian stared at Jiang Yanli. He too often forgot how much older she was than him and her brother, yet he could see it now in every line of her face. She had inherited all her looks from her father.

"Go to Gusu," she told him. Her hand braced his elbow, squeezing tightly. "Ask Lan Wangji for protection. I'll come back as soon as I can with help from the Jin sect."

Wei Wuxian's chest ached. "What Jiang Cheng said earlier—"

"It's okay, A-Xian. It's okay."

He didn't know what she meant by it, but her smile was warm. Her fingers lingered on his arm in affection and trust.

Wei Wuxian watched distantly as she explained her plan to Jiang Cheng. He refused at first, of course; he shook her arm and pleaded with her and held her tight against himself, unwilling to let her go. Unwilling to separate from the last of his family. Jiang Yanli brushed his hair out of his face and kissed his forehead.

She wasn't crying anymore.

They split up at dawn. Jiang Yanli headed north and they headed westward, silence heavy between them, their clothes stained with all sorts of grime and blood. Wei Wuxian thought tiredly that even if he could disguise their scents, their physical state would give them away.

It was the first day of spring. The sun that lit their way was warm; the flowers budding on each trea, on each green patch of damp grass, softly drank in the rain and dew.
Wei Wuxian had never before felt so wary around other people.

The first village they stopped at was one he had visited several times before. At no point of those previous visits had he ever felt cowed by his status or anyone else's—he walked proudly besides Jiang Cheng or Jiang Fengmian, on his way to a hunt or heading for another town. He had teased his shidi in the middle of the widest street, where everyone could see. He had laughed loudly.

Now his head hung low as they slithered through the smaller passageways. He hid his face and hair, covered his training clothes with a stolen cloak, took the bell off of his waist and shoved it in his sleeves. He breathed shallowly.

He made a mistake when he stole money from an old beta seated in front of an inn. The man caught his scent and went wide-eyed and loud, almost catching Wei Wuxian altogether. Only the presence of many other people prevented him from knowing to which cloaked figure the treacherous omega-scent belonged.

"You'll have to go get us food yourself," Wei Wuxian told Jiang Cheng when he came back to the narrow alley where they hid.

"I'm not hungry," Jiang Cheng replied.

Wei Wuxian grit his teeth. "You are hungry," he retorted as calmly as he could. "Jiang Cheng, you don't want to eat, but you need to. We don't know when we'll be able to stock up again, and inedia must be avoided unless we have no other choice."

"What do you know—"

"I've lived in the streets before. I know what I'm talking about." Wei Wuxian added, "Please."

For a moment he thought Jiang Cheng would not listen. Words from the previous night still rang through his ears hourly, anger and shame both coiling within him at Jiang Cheng's accusations.

Who's to say he's not carrying a little Lan?

Wei Wuxian couldn't stop hearing it, and each time seemed to make him feel sicker.

But Jiang Cheng relented. He pushed himself to his feet and roughly took the money that Wei Wuxian handed him, leaving the shadow of the alley after covering his head with his hood. Wei Wuxian sat against the wall and ignored the pain in his back.

There were posters even in this town bearing his face and the siblings'. There were written descriptions of their crimes and appearances, of their status, of their scents.

Honey, Wei Wuxian's said.

He thought of Wen Chao breathing too close to him and calling him sweet. He thought of grabbing Suibian from the man's hip and cutting off his head as he should have done months ago.

Jiang Cheng was taking much too long to come back. Wei Wuxian tried to keep calm at first, knowing how shocked his shidi was, how confused he would probably feel on his own. Perhaps there were many people queueing to buy food from the street vendors. But minutes turned into an hour, and soon the sun started setting over the town. Wei Wuxian's heart was hurried when he rose
to his feet and exited the alley, looking wildly around for a sign of Jiang Cheng.

He searched like this for an hour more. He avoided close contact with other people, but looks were still thrown his way as he ran around the little town. Night had fallen by the time he came back to the alley, hoping desperately to see Jiang Cheng waiting for him there.

He wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere. Wei Wuxian let go of prudence and approached the nearest vendor.

"Sure I saw him," the woman told him, "he got dragged away by a couple cultivators in white clothes."

She continued talking, but he didn't listen. Not even when her face suddenly turned suspicious and she inhaled loudly, rudely, exclaiming, "You're that omega!"

Wen Chao's orders indicated that Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli could be killed on sight. If his lackeys had not done so, then they must have carried him back to the Lotus Pier. That was the only hope Wei Wuxian could hold on to.

He ran as he had never ran before. He grabbed the training sword at his hip and poured as much energy as he could within it—until his very core seemed to sag with exhaustion, until new aches rose through his body and heat choked him that felt too much and too familiar—until, at last, the sword rose.

Wei Wuxian jumped upon it.

Even when flying, he was slow. He pushed and pushed himself over the mountains they had painstakingly crossed on foot, mindless of the cold numbing his face and hands, guiding himself with starlight. It took hours for him to reach the Pier; he landed in Yunmeng behind a mansion he used to climb as a child, falling immediately to the ground, unable to breathe.

Pushing himself to his feet again felt like the greatest effort he had ever spent on something. Greater even than holding to the cursed sword inside the Xuanwu's throat and waiting for Lan Wangji to finish cutting off its head. He stumbled and walked and ran his way to the Pier, hiding when Wen cultivators crossed his path.

"... delivered himself to us just like this," one sneered as she walked past the wall behind which he had crouched. "How far has Yunmengjiang fallen!"

Wei Wuxian could not, would not, cry.

He took to the Jiang house by water again. He crawled through spaces once meant for playing, breathing in the smoke still rising softly over what had been his home, looking everywhere for a hint of stormscents. He found it near the dorms where his dead shidi used to sleep. He knocked out the beta guarding one of the rooms before the man could cry out in alarm and broke open the door.

Jiang Cheng lay over one of the small beds. He was still as a statue. Wei Wuxian's fingers shook when he placed them over his open mouth, looking for air. He almost sobbed when he found it.

Already outside people were gathering. He knew his own scent must have been noticed among the guards, and no sooner had he put Jiang Cheng over his back and opened the window that someone barged into the room and yelled, "Wei Wuxian is here!"

He climbed above the roofs, running as fast as he could, exhaustion weighing on him more heavily than even Jiang Cheng's slack body did. He barely avoided the arrows shot at them from the ground.
He felt his very heart stop when cultivators rose to his level on their swords and started their own chase.

He tripped near the row of houses where his bedroom was. This part of the Pier had not burned as thoroughly as the main mansion did—walls still stood tall, barely blackened by smoke. Wei Wuxian lost his footing there and felt gravity leave him as he swayed over the edge of the roof. He only had the presence of mind to switch so that his back hit ground instead of Jiang Cheng's head.

The pain on his still-healing wounds was unbearable.

"Shit," he expelled as he rose again. "Jiang Cheng, please, wake up."

But no amount of shaking him and slapping his face took him out of his slumber. If Wei Wuxian could not feel his breaths on his fingers or how warm his skin was, he would have thought the other dead.

He lifted Jiang Cheng once more, a pained moan escaping his lips. He walked toward the door of his bedroom hoping that no one had seen which way he fell. He stuck his back to the wall when voices rang from the entrance of the courtyard, obviously headed toward him.

And then someone grabbed him and tugged him inside the room.

Wei Wuxian fell harshly to the floor, Jiang Cheng sliding out of his grip much the same. He was blind to anything but fear when he unsheathed the training sword—its blade blunted by the spiritual energy he had forced onto it earlier—and stuck it to the throat of the smoke-smelling man who had captured him.

"I'll kill you if you make a sound, Wen dog," he whispered with all the hatred his heart could hold. "Don't think I'll hesitate for a second."

The young man lifted both hands in surrender. He was shaking and looking at Wei Wuxian in an odd mix of relief and fear. "I'm—"

"Silence!"

The blade dug into the man's neck. Skin bent around its tip. Had it been sharp, he would be bleeding already.

Yet the young man did not stop. He breathed in and spoke again in a softer voice: "Young master Wei, I'm not going to hurt you."

"What did you say, dog?" Wei Wuxian replied.

"Don't you remember me?" the young man asked. His hands came forward as if in offering, bare and unharmed but for the calluses born out of archery. "The competition…"

Wei Wuxian stared at those hands without understanding. He breathed again the scent of smoking wood, pleasant if a bit strong, and the memory came to him of an earnest smile in sunlit, rocky mountains.

"You're… Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian said.

Wen Ning nodded slowly. His smile looked the same as it had on that faraway day.

Wei Wuxian dropped his sword and fell to his knees.
"Young master Wei!" Wen Ning said worriedly, crouching by his side.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian breathed. He crawled toward the fallen form of his shidi, grabbing his wrist so he could feel his pulse and reassure himself of Jiang Cheng's continued living. "What, what happened to him?"

"I'm not sure," Wen Ning replied. "I heard he was captured earlier, but I don't know what they did…"

Wei Wuxian rose again. Wen Ning immediately helped him lift Jiang Cheng onto the bed, making sure that his head was comfortably laid on the pillow and tugging the cover over his body for warmth. The familiarity of the room ached in him the same way that the Wen branding iron did when it touched his chest; he looked unseeingly at the childish drawings pinned above the bed, at the closet and drawers still full of his clothing. Not much had changed, and yet he could not believe that he had slept here only two night prior and not known any grief.

Wen Ning fidgeted with the sash around his middle. "I, I'm not staying long," he said, mistaking Wei Wuxian's apathy for anger. "It just smelled nicer here than…" He blushed and shut his mouth. "I'll go prepare a tonic for master Jiang to drink."

"Please," Wei Wuxian said emptily.

Wen Ning nodded and left.

It occurred to Wei Wuxian that the other may be lying to him. That perhaps the next person to enter the room would be another Wen lackey, armed to the teeth, or even Wen Chao himself.

He was so tired. This place—this room—made him feel for the first time just how little rest he had taken since Zidian had bitten into his back. Every shift of his shoulders pulled at the scabbing lashes. Every intake of air made him feel a certain emptiness where usually his energy shone.

He pulled the cover away from Jiang Cheng and checked him over for wounds. He found one painful cut from a discipline whip on his belly, as well as a few bruises around his ribs from being kicked around, but he looked otherwise unharmed. There was no bump or blood over his skull, no broken bone that Wei Wuxian could see.

Still he would not wake up.

Wei Wuxian grabbed Jiang Cheng's hand and squeezed it as tightly as he could. His own fingers felt terribly cold.

Wen Ning came back a few minutes later with a steaming bowl in his hands. He set it next to Wei Wuxian nervously, eyeing him sideways. "Young master Wei," he said, "you look hurt too."

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian replied.

"Please, I can help. Let me help you like you helped me."

Wei Wuxian chuckled bitterly. "Like I helped you?" he said, vaguely recalling a group of young cultivators bullying Wen Ning in Qishan—recalling Wen Chao's arrival and the first words he ever exchanged with the man.

Would he be here now if he had bowed to Wen Chao back then?

Would the Lotus Pier have burned?
Why can't you just accept who you are?

His hand left Jiang Cheng's slowly. "What you're doing now far exceeds what I did then," he said. "You have no obligation to help me."

"I do," Wen Ning replied—he smiled as he said it with a different air about him, looking as if he understood something that even Wei Wuxian failed to. "I really do. You see, I—"

The door opened.

Wei Wuxian did not think as he jumped to his feet and unsheathed his sword. The woman who walked in held pride in her every step, painting her as alpha even if her arrival had not brought with it a strong, peppery scent. She froze at the sight of Wei Wuxian pointing the blade at her, the door slamming close behind her by the strength of the wind outside.

"What did you do," she barked at Wen Ning.

He seemed to cower before her. Wei Wuxian made sure to stay between her and Jiang Cheng as she walked along the side of the room, wondering idly if he would have to protect Wen Ning as well.

"Everyone's looking for you, Wei Ying," the woman said to him.

Wei Wuxian clenched the handle of the sword till he felt splinters dig into his palm. "They won't find me if you stay quiet," he replied.

"Sister," Wen Ning said in a small voice.

The woman sighed, irritated.

Wei Wuxian could see now the resemblance between her and Wen Ning. They had the same nose, the same round eyes making them look younger. On Wen Ning, they seemed to make him perpetually sad and gentle. On her, they simply looked piercing.

Wen Qing, he thought, eyeing the white jade pendant at her waist in the shape of a twisted snake.

He had only ever heard of her before.

"Qionglin, what did you do?" Wen Qing repeated.

Wen Ning's back straightened. "I couldn't let him be caught," he replied with surprising determination. "Sister, I couldn't. I know you couldn't either."

Something pained flew over her face.

"You need to leave," she told Wei Wuxian in an even voice. "We'll all be dead if you get caught here, Wei Ying."

"Sister—"

"It's his business if he wants to parade around like he does!" Wen Qing interrupted loudly.

In the silence that followed, only the wind could be heard.

"It's his business if he doesn't hide," she said to her brother. Wen Ning's face paled. "Do not destroy everything we've built just for him. Do you understand? I won't let you, even if I have to tie you up and carry you on my back till we die."
"What are you talking about?" Wei Wuxian asked.

His arm ached from holding the sword. The depleted core in his chest seemed to sigh in agony with every breath he took.

"It's none of your business," Wen Qing said curtly. "Now leave. The search for you has gone to the other side of the Pier, you should be able to make it out."

Wei Wuxian's free arm came to rest on Jiang Cheng laid behind him. "He won't wake up," he said.

"There's nothing I can do about that."

"You're Wen Qing." Wei Wuxian's sword lowered. "You're the most famous physician in the Wen sect," he continued, uncaring that his words turned to begging. "Please—please, heal him. I'll do anything."

"I won't heal him," she repeated, baring her teeth. "Just take him and go!"

"I don't have any money to offer you," he said.

Wei Wuxian felt as if he had done nothing but kneel through his whole life. Kneeling for meditation and kneeling in Lan Qiren's class—kneeling in front of Wen Yueying, kneeling under Zidian's blows, kneeling as Wang Lingjiao branded his skin forever.

Kneeling in a boat and watching as Madam Yu went to her death.

He kneeled once more with both palms facing the ceiling. The sword slid from his grip and fell to the ground with a clatter of metal. "I have nothing to give you," he said, despair evident on his voice, mindless of Wen Qing's widening eyes. "I know you owe me nothing, but please," he begged. "Please heal him. I promise to go, I promise to never speak of your help to anyone. I promise to help you in any way I can for as long as I live—please."

"Sister," Wen Ning said urgently.

Wen Qing seemed even angrier than before. "Get up," she spat at Wei Wuxian. "Do you bow for so little!? Is this truly the Wei Wuxian that my brother can't stop praising?"

"Would you not beg for your brother?" he replied.

He saw the answer in her eyes just as she saw that she need not give it.

"Would you kneel for just any alpha around you, then?" she asked slowly.

"No," Wei Wuxian answered. "But for this one, I would kneel a thousand times over."

She looked at him in silence. Wind slapped at the windows, some cracks letting air filter in and making the curtains flutter. A door slammed loudly in the tempest. The oil lamp on the desk shook ever-so-slightly, its light flickering over the walls.

"There is no alpha in the world worth kneeling for," Wen Qing said. "Get up. I'll see what I can do."

He did so shakingly. He felt confused over their exchange, but his relief was stronger. He watched with gratitude as Wen Qing approached the bed and took Jiang Cheng's wrist in her hand.

She examined him for a few more minutes, much more finely than Wei Wuxian had. She took a jar from the bag tied to her belt and opened it; a strong, garlic-like smell filled the room as she applied
the cream inside to the whip mark over Jiang Cheng's belly.

"He should wake up in a few hours," she declared once she was done. "I need to check on the state of his core, but I can't do that while he's unconscious."

Wei Wuxian had to hold his weight against the wall so as not to fall from relief. "Thank you," he said.

Wen Qing glared at him. "Wen Chao left this morning," she told him. "He'll be back in five days. In his absence I am to watch over the Yunmeng Supervisory Office, so if you stay quiet, you should be fine. But you and Jiang Cheng need to be gone when Wen Chao returns."

Wei Wuxian nodded.

"Sister, thank you," Wen Ning said, smiling.

The glance she gave him was much kinder, though her voice remained harsh. "Give Jiang Cheng that tonic you prepared—I looked it over, it's not bad. Leave some for Wei Ying as well."

With those words, she left.

"You should sit down," Wen Ning told Wei Wuxian. "You look very pale, young master Wei."

"I'm fine," he replied tiredly.

Wen Ning looked like he wanted to say something else, but his mouth stayed shut. Wei Wuxian sat by the head of the bed and watched him pour liquid into Jiang Cheng's slack mouth slowly, massaging his throat to make him swallow. There was about a third of the tonic left in the bowl when he handed it to Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian drank it without flinching at the bitter taste of plants.

"So you're Wen Qing's brother," he said once he was done. "I never would have guessed."

Wen Ning smiled awkwardly. "Hardly anyone does."

"I never would've guessed she was beta either. The way everyone talks about her, I figured she was alpha. Her scent is pretty strong too."

It had remained behind her, pepper tickling his nose and fooling him into an almost-sneeze. Her being alpha would make little sense in light of their conversation, however, despite how surprised he was that Wen Chao would entrust his newest conquest to a beta. Perhaps Wen Chao was capable of appreciating competence over status from time to time.

Wen Ning took the empty bowl from his hands and replied, "My sister and I are both omega."

"It's what I was trying to say earlier," Wen Ning went on, a faint dusting of pink coloring his face. "The reason I feel like I should help you. You and I, and my sister, we're the same."

"You're not serious," Wei Wuxian let out.

But Wen Ning shook his head and said, "I am telling the truth."

Wen Ning smelled of smoke. In the aftertaste of the fire that had ravaged the Lotus Pier, his scent seemed enhanced, different for its touch of humanity, for its presence. Wei Wuxian remembered noticing how strong such a scent was for a beta when they had met years ago and Wen Ning had
bowed to him with his shoulders.

He tried to look for deceit in Wen Ning's eye, but sincerity in the flesh seemed to look back at him. He tried to imagine any alpha or beta pretending to be omega and found his own mind rejecting the mere thought as inconceivable.

"How?" he asked roughly.

He found himself taking hold of Wen Ning's hand without any forethought. He held it in the same way Wen Yueying had held his, months ago, desperate for a kind touch. Parched for trust and company.

Wen Ning's voice came quiet and empathetic. "There are drugs," he replied. "We use them to change our scents."

"Like moonless tea?" Wei Wuxian said.

"You know about moonless tea?" Wen Ning said enthusiastically. "Yes, like that. There are more. My sister knows them all from our father."

Wei Wuxian couldn't let go of Wen Ning's hand. He felt, all of a sudden, much younger than he truly was.

Wen Ning's face once more softened with understanding. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I met you," he said. "I couldn't believe that there was an omega cultivator somewhere who wasn't hiding who they were. You are incredible, young master Wei."

"I never knew how," Wei Wuxian replied. "I never knew—"

His throat tightened on a sob. He covered his face with his free hand, trying and failing to crush his tears before they fell.

Wen Ning crouched by his side and took his shoulder in his hand.

"There's more of us out there," Wen Ning told him, not once looking down on him for the sobs now shaking him. "You're not alone."

Wei Wuxian had never needed something as much as he did those words.

They talked more after he calmed down, though Wei Wuxian felt that he didn't need to. Wen Ning answered a few more of his questions: he told Wei Wuxian about his and Wen Qing's omega father, who had also been a physician when Wen Ruohan's alpha father ruled the sect. He spoke of the man's early death with well-consumed grief. He said that he had met other cultivators who came to his sister for teas and potions to mask their status and live freely. He said that he didn't need moonless tea himself, for his fevers were few and far-between and only caused some mild headaches.

He never berated Wei Wuxian his ignorance.

Wen Qing came back to check on Jiang Cheng a few hours later. Wen Ning had left by then to sleep
somewhere else, saying that now that Wei Wuxian was here, he didn't want to take his room. Wei Wuxian dozed on and off for a while in the silence, the oil lamp burning slowly, his sword never far from his hand. Jiang Cheng didn't stir at all.

He blinked sleep out of his eyes as she walked into the room. In her hands she held a small clay jar full of a different cream than the one she had used earlier. When she saw him, she said, "This is for you. Take off your clothes."

He obeyed without thinking. A sharp hiss escaped him when he tried to pull cloth away from his back; as he had thought, it had stuck to the wounds.

"You're useless," Wen Qing said, but she crouched behind him and slowly peeled the training clothes away from his skin.

He tried to keep his voice down despite the ache of reopening cuts.

"Qionglin told me he saw some blood on your back," she commented. "You've had quite a whipping."

"Madam Yu wasn't very pleased with me," Wei Wuxian muttered.

There was a short silence. "I take it back," Wen Qing replied. "If this is the work of Purple Spider's Zidian, you're lucky to still have skin."

The cream stung when it touched his inflamed back, but Wei Wuxian did not complain. If anything its cooling effect immediately seemed to soothe the prior burn. He hadn't realized how much pain he was in till it started vanishing.

"A-Lin told you about us," Wen Qing murmured while she worked.

Wei Wuxian nodded.

"He's foolish. Since meeting you he hasn't stopped talking of visiting Yunmeng or sending you a letter. He seems to believe you can't handle your life on your own."

"I'm glad that he told me," Wei Wuxian said. "I wouldn't let you touch me if I didn't know."

Her hand pressed more harshly against what he felt to be the bigger cut. He winced. "Don't make the mistake of thinking every omega you meet is your friend, Wei Ying," she said. "Many will resent you just as much as any alpha does, whether or not they live hidden."

"I know that."

"I don't think you do."

She bandaged his back in quick, assured moves, glancing with distaste at the sun-shaped scar on his torso. It was still very white and tender to the touch, though it had stopped leaking weeks ago.

"Wen Ning said that your father taught you," Wei Wuxian said once she was done. Wen Qing stoppered the cream jar without a word, waiting for him to finish speaking. "Your other parent…?"

"He died before father gave birth to Qionglin, but he knew, of course," she answered.

"I thought the odds of having so many omega in one family were almost non-existent."

Wen Qing didn't immediately answer. She switched the oil in the lamp and took Jiang Cheng's pulse
for a moment, apparently satisfied with whatever it told her. Wei Wuxian relaxed a little.

"It's not impossible," she said at last. "Especially outside of bigger cultivation clans, who care so much about monetizing their offspring that they forget to care for them. There are very few omega cultivators, since they know what they risk if they are caught, but some more lead normal lives as merchants or craftsmen."

"And they all know to find you for drugs?" he asked, surprised.

Wen Qing snorted. "Of course not. I'm not the only person in the world who knows how to make these potions. But hearsay works for those who can't make them by themselves, and it's not as if they know I'm omega either. I'm risking enough just by doing business with them."

"Then why do you do it?"

It was the one question Wei Wuxian truly wanted to ask: why would someone as careful and ruthless as Wen Qing, who was ready to throw Wei Wuxian out wounded for the sake of protecting herself, risk being discovered like this? It couldn't be for money.

Wen Qing looked distant when she replied, "I don't want my life to be spent waiting for an alpha to rape a child into me, Wei Ying. If someone comes to me wanting to escape that fate, I will help them no matter the cost."

He thought of Wen Linfeng, so young and so afraid in her fine, silken clothes. He thought of the burned main house only a few steps away where once a man had come to bargain for ownership of him.

He understood.

Jiang Cheng woke up at dawn the next morning.

Wei Wuxian thought he had stopped feeling hurt by his shidi's animosity and blame. He knew his own responsibility in the fall of Yunmengjiang, as much as he wanted to shake and roar and cry that he had no idea at the time what his actions would bring. But Jiang Cheng's sharp accusations of having sided with the enemy ached in him—he couldn't help but feel guilty for the comfort he had experienced here, for letting Wen Ning hold his hand and tell him You're not alone, when Jiang Cheng lay lifeless right next to him, his sister gone and his parents dead.

Jiang Cheng shoved him away weakly and asked, "Did you feel my spiritual energy?" and Wei Wuxian discovered for himself the depthlessness of grief.

It seemed that his whole body ached as he watched Jiang Cheng fall on the bed with a needle in his forehead, Wen Qing snapping at them to be silent lest they attract attention. He felt as though his world was shattering again, as though the recovered strength in his own chest was betrayal of the worst kind.

He had promised Yu Ziyuan to protect her children. Less than a day later, her son and heir had lost his golden core.

This kind of despair felt to him like fever. He spent hours sitting by Jiang Cheng's bed and watching
his own hands glow with power, wishing that he could share that strength. Let Jiang Cheng take half, take all of Wei Wuxian's spiritual energy; let it be reparation enough for Wei Wuxian's mistake and how badly he had failed as senior disciple of the Jiang sect.

Shame consumed him for a whole day before he found the strength to move. In his mind an idea had brewed, born out of the rumors he had heard about Wen Qing when he was still young, when he still thought his life would be spent with his feet underwater and his head turned to the sun.

He waited for Wen Qing on his knees. He asked her for help once again.

"You're out of your mind," she replied, wide-eyed and so much closer to terror than he had ever seen. "You have no idea what you're asking."

"I know you wrote about it," Wei Wuxian said evenly. "It's possible."

"In theory! Do you think I've ever tried to do this before, you madman?"

"He can't live like this!" Wei Wuxian shouted.

It was almost night, and no one but the two siblings seemed to ever come around here unless they needed Wen Qing's help. He risked raising his voice because he had no choice; because what he wanted to do was the right thing to do, the only thing to do.

"He's the Jiang sect heir," Wei Wuxian said, nails digging into his own thighs. "I swore that I'd protect him. I swore that I'd follow him, that I'd help him. He can't take revenge without power. He can't be the person he was raised to be without a golden core."

"Jiang Cheng will learn to live with it," Wen Qing said. "You and I both know it's possible to live outside of what people expect from us."

But Wei Wuxian shook his head, eyes fixed to the ground, kneeling still in front of her.

There was no point in trying to make Jiang Cheng live like this. Even if Jiang Yanli found them again and the Jin sect extended its protection—and how Wei Wuxian dreaded meeting her and admitting to her how badly he had failed her last remaining family—Jiang Cheng would not accept it. He would rather die than live out his existence so soullessly. He would end his own life.

Of this, Wei Wuxian was certain.

"Please," he told Wen Qing. He put a hand over his heart the way Jin Zixuan had all those years ago, hoping despite how useless the gesture was coming from him that she would understand. "Please. He's my brother."

In all but blood, in all but lineage: Jiang Cheng was Wei Wuxian's brother.

He was his family.

That night Wei Wuxian lay in his childhood bed for the very last time. It had taken hours for Wen Qing to figure out how to apply her year-old theory to practice; he had spent them trying out different anesthetics and sleepily feeling her jolt his core this way and that with her own energy, shaking her head, trying every few minutes to dissuade him again. Wen Ning watched all of it happen with frightened eyes. He never said a word.

"I can't use any anesthetic or numbing agent on you during the transfer," Wen Qing told him once all of her trying turned fruitless. "Do you understand what that means? Do you understand how much
"I understand," Wei Wuxian said.

"You may die, Wei Ying. You may die tonight if I do something wrong, or even if I do everything right."

"That's fine," and it was fine, he thought, calmer now than he had been in days. "Just make sure to finish the transfer even if I do."

"Young master Wei," Wen Ning whispered helplessly.

Wen Qing turned away, clasping her two hands together, and ordered her brother to tie Wei Wuxian to the bed as securely as he could.

So did Wei Wuxian lie in the bed that Jiang Fengmian had once laid him in after picking him from the streets of Yiling. His arms and legs tied with rope to all corners, his torso secured to the sheets. He saw the fear and anger with which Wen Qing gathered what she needed and thought he understood why she did what she did, why she spoke as she did.

She must have sacrificed so much and worked so hard to maintain her own freedom, to become such a renown cultivator. She must ache at the very thought of him sacrificing his own struggles for any alpha.

What she didn't understand was that Wei Wuxian did not think of it as sacrifice, but as duty.

Wen Qing finished installing wide recipients full of boiled water by her feet. She finished lining up the scalpels and other tools she had cleaned and prepared beforehand. She looked at Wei Wuxian and asked, "Are you ready?"

"I am," he answered with no doubt in his heart.

The worst thing wasn't the pain, he found through the long hours that followed. The sun rose and set and rose again before she was done, and Wei Wuxian screamed and whimpered and expressed the physical pain in many more creative ways, soon losing sight of why he was here in favor of wishing it was all over. It was terrible. It was painful. Many times he felt himself slip toward unconsciousness with relief, only to be woken up by Wen Ning and thrown back into hell.

But the pain was not the worst. The worst was not even when, twelve hours through, Wen Qing's bloody hands emerged from his torso holding a small, golden sphere.

No, the worst was loss.

It was a kind of hollowness that Wei Wuxian could not have described for all the riches in the world. He felt separated from something more precious and vital than he had ever suspected, something cherished, something he selfishly wanted to keep for himself forever. The worst was the loss and grief that his soul experienced, deeper than any physical pain and so much harder to heal.

He slept for a whole day after they were done. When he woke up, his eyes flew to Jiang Cheng still resting atop the table. Wen Qing was sat by his side and looking at her own hands in horror.

Wei Wuxian's stomach dropped. "What's wrong?" he asked. Her head jerked in his direction. "Did it not work, is he—"

"It worked," she interrupted, her face once more free of anything but irritation. "He's fine. The core
is healthy and working."

The relief he felt at her words was oddly muffled. Even looking at the color and peace that Jiang Cheng's face had grown back, Wei Wuxian felt very little joy.

Wen Qing cleared her throat. "I'll do what you asked me to do once you two leave, but that's all," she said. "This is the last thing I do for you, Wei Ying."

He nodded his head in thanks.


It was easy to play him, easy to deceive him. Jiang Cheng already looked so much healthier now, with four uninterrupted days of sleep and a brand new golden core. He ate with enthusiasm, questioning Wei Wuxian about his mother and Baoshan Sanren and how long the trip to Yiling would take.

Wei Wuxian lied to him with surprising ease.

In a way, things felt much easier now. Wei Wuxian still knew of his sins and faults, but they didn't ache as they used to. He found simple satisfaction in knowing Jiang Cheng to soon be out of harm's way. His mind ran slowly through idea after idea of how to take care of Wen Zhuliu and make sure Jiang Cheng's core was never again at risk.

They walked to Yiling slowly. Wei Wuxian's body felt sore and overheated, but this too was distant, almost as an echo. Wen Qing had warned him that he may develop a fever from the shock of surgery. He found it nothing to be alarmed about.

During the day, he guided Jiang Cheng in silence. During the night, he met with Wen Ning and Wen Qing and put final touches to the charade. When the day came to abandon Jiang Cheng at the foot of a deserted mountain, he was ready.

"Remember," he told Jiang Cheng, tying white cloth over his eyes. "You mustn't take this off under any pretext. There are no beasts on this mountain, but you mustn't look, even if you fall. When someone asks you who you are—"

"I must say I am Cangse Sanren's son, yes, I know," Jiang Cheng cut him off, impatience rolling off of him in waves. Wei Wuxian would have laughed at him, once; now he felt nothing. "I'm ready."

"I'll wait for you at the village we saw on our way. Come find me when your golden core is restored."

Jiang Cheng started walking up the mountain. Wei Wuxian looked around his shidi's feet out of habit, searching for rocks or roots he could possibly stumble on. Wen Ning was in charge of chasing beasts away, but one couldn't be too prudent. If only Wen Qing had allowed him to climb as well; she seemed worried that his body wasn't in good enough condition to, but Wei Wuxian disagreed.

Suddenly, Jiang Cheng stopped. He turned around. Wei Wuxian straightened his back and frowned, wondering what danger was holding him this time, but all Jiang Cheng did was open his mouth and ask, "You'll really be waiting for me?"
Surprise rendered Wei Wuxian silent.

"Yes," he replied at last. "Of course I will be."

"And Baoshan Sanren can truly restore my core?"

"I promise she can."

Jiang Cheng seemed to have one more thing to say. His face was tense under the white cloth, his knuckles pale around the stick he was using to walk. "Thank you," he declared. "When I'm back, I'll…" he struggled. "We'll talk then, Wei Wuxian. I shouldn't have called you a traitor."

Emotion flickered through the gaping hole in Wei Wuxian's chest. "Go get your core back and then we can join shijie," he replied.

Jiang Cheng smiled and once more started ascending. He didn't turn around again till he was out of sight.

Wei Wuxian sat on a thick root with a sigh and thought, *Now there is nothing more I can do.*

He expected to feel relieved. He expected to feel panicked.

He felt nothing at all.

There were still several hours to go before he needed to be back at his inn. Wen Qing had given him money for it, and then slipped a vial of mud-like substance into his sleeve, avoiding his eyes. "In case you need to mask your scent fully," she had said.

"Oh," Wei Wuxian had replied. "I should take it now."

Wen Qing had shaken her head. "No need. Your scent is… well, it's a lot weaker now."

He hadn't fully believed her till the innkeeper had smiled and accepted his money without a hint of suspicion.

Wei Wuxian waited idly for a few hours. He glanced at the path that Jiang Cheng had taken and which so far led up the side of the mountain. He wondered how Wen Ning was faring, watching over Jiang Cheng's ascension while making sure not to be seen or heard. Wei Wuxian hoped Jiang Cheng took his advice to heart about the blindfold, at least when he reached Wen Qing at the summit. The whole plan would fail if he caught a glimpse of her.

The forest grew louder as night approached. Small animals scurried between the branches overhead, birds and squirrels, owls perhaps. Wei Wuxian saw a deer run through faraway bushes. He listened to the cracks and shuffling sounds of nature around him.

It was the reason he noticed when one noise came louder than the rest.

He jumped to his feet despite the pain tugging at the stitched wound in his torso. His hand found the handle of his blunt sword, and for a second he regretted not taking the time to sharpen it before he left Yunneng. He had no other weapon on him.

It seemed the noise he had heard, suspiciously close to a footstep, was only the fruit of his imagination. After a while of waiting he relaxed his stance, the tip of his sword falling to graze the ground.

Then he turned his head sideways and saw Wen Zhuliu jump toward him hands-first.
Wei Wuxian sidestepped it with a cry, but he wasn't quick enough to escape the second blow. Wen Zhuliu's palm struck him flatly on the chest, making the surgery wound throb in answer and pushing Wei Wuxian backwards. Pain tore into his right shoulder. Wei Wuxian shouted, looking down, glimpsing with horror the end of a blood-stained sword.

The person behind him pulled the sword back harshly; Wei Wuxian fell to his knees, agony blinding him for a moment, unable to do anything as a hand gripped his hair and Wen Chao's voice exploded in laughter.

His back ran with cold shivers.

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Chao crooned, bending so that his smug face appeared within Wei Wuxian's eyesight. His fingers tightened in Wei Wuxian's hair, ripping entire strands away and forcing his head upwards. "There you are at last, omega. I so wanted to see you again. Did you enjoy seeing the Lotus Pier burn?"

Wei Wuxian stared at Wen Zhuliu, finding the sight of him a tad less griping than that of Wen Chao. Wen Zhuliu stared back with a frown, the hand with which he had struck him twitching oddly by his side.

Wen Chao jerked his head around till Wei Wuxian was looking at him again. "Did you abandon that poor, coreless alpha?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian smirked.

Immediately, Wen Chao's smile fell. It was with anger in his voice that he went on, "You won't be smiling long. Wen Zhuliu will melt your core, and then I will kill you, Wei Ying."

"That's fine," Wei Wuxian replied.

Blood splattered down his chin warmly. He licked his lips.

Wen Chao grit his teeth and asked, "Do you recognize this sword?"

Wei Wuxian had recognize it the second he saw its tip running with own blood. Still, seeing Suibian's handle be held between Wen Chao's wiry fingers made nausea simmer in him.

"That's your sword, Wei Ying," Wen Chao said, tapping the flat of the blade against Wei Wuxian's neck. "I'm going to kill you with your own sword. I'll keep it as replacement for the one you stole from me."

"Kill me, then," Wei Wuxian answered, "It doesn't matter."

He found that he could still experience delight. He found that although his heart had felt detached from him ever since his golden core had vanished into Jiang Cheng's body, this sort of cruel amusement, of vow of revenge, could still elicit joy out of him.

"It doesn't matter what you do to me," Wei Wuxian spat at Wen Chao, grinning at the man's dumbstruck face. "Torture me, kill me, do whatever you want with me. I'll come back to haunt you, and I will be the fiercest of ghosts. You will never know peace again, Wen Chao."

"You little bitch," Wen Chao seethed, brandishing Suibian high over his head.

Then he cried out in pain. His fingers untangled from Wei Wuxian's hair as he grabbed his own wrist, and Suibian fell from his grasp, leaving behind a burned-red hand. The handle of the sword
seemed to be smoking slightly.

"Master," Wen Zhuliu exclaimed.

"It's nothing!" Wen Chao shouted. "Leave us!"

"But—"

"Leave, dog, before I make you!"

Wen Zhuliu's mouth closed tightly. He bowed at the shoulders and walked away, disappearing slowly through the thick foliage.

Wei Wuxian stared at Suibian. Its handle had stopped smoking, and he put all of his strength into reaching it, though the movement made his chest throb and his shoulder weep blood all over his clothes. He was almost touching it when Wen Chao's foot planted itself on his wrist.

He grunted in pain. Wen Chao glared at him more fiercely than ever before. "What the hell did you do to that sword?" he asked, still nursing his burned hand.

"Have you never heard of such things before?" Wei Wuxian retorted. "It's obvious that Suibian found you unworthy of wielding it."

"Unworthy," Wen Chao repeated softly. "Unworthy?"

He lifted his foot from Wei Wuxian's wrist and kicked him in the ribs.

Wei Wuxian immediately rolled to his side, spitting blood onto the grass. He had all but felt bone break under the strength of the blow, and now another ache was added to the remnants of surgery, the branding mark on his skin, and the hole in his shoulder. He moaned pitifully. He tasted dirt on his lips.

Wen Chao fell to his knees beside him and, grabbing him by the arm, forced him face-down onto the forest floor.

"Unworthy," he said again as he kneeled astride Wei Wuxian's thighs. "I'll show you who's unworthy, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian wanted to laugh. He wanted to repeat to Wen Chao what he had said before—that no matter what torture was brought to him, no matter which horrible way was chosen to kill him, he could handle it. He had survived two nights and one day of surgery, wide awake in the ruins of his own home, with next to him the brother he had failed more than anyone in the world. He wasn't afraid of anything, he thought. Not anymore, not ever again.

But Wen Chao's hand grabbed him by the neck. He leaned over Wei Wuxian's back with all of his weight, the scent of him suffocating, and said: "I'll show you your fucking place."

His lips brushed wetly against Wei Wuxian's ear.

_I don't want my life to be spent waiting for an alpha to rape me._

He found that fear, like devotion, had no limit that a human could reach.
The Yiling Burial Mounds spread under their feet like the painting of a nightmare. Wei Wuxian heard little of Wen Chao's spiel as the man explained to him just how his flesh and soul would be torn apart, never to return again. He took in the smells of rot and decay, the burned aspect of the valley and hills, as if a great fire had once ravaged everything. No plant grew as far as the eye could see. If was as though the grassy path that they had walked to the edge of the cliff-like hill was the only touch of color around.

Wen Chao grabbed Wei Wuxian by the hair and balanced him at the edge of the precipice. He forced Wei Wuxian to turn around and face him again, to Wei Wuxian's dismay. He never wanted to see this man's face again.

Behind Wen Chao, Wen Zhuliu watched silently.

"You'll never haunt anything or anyone," Wen Chao declared, tangibly satisfied.

It was that satisfaction. That smugness. That air of superiority as he rose from Wei Wuxian's body earlier, the memory of him as heavy, it seemed, as the real thing—

Wei Wuxian used the last of his strength to spit in Wen Chao's face. The saliva that sprayed over the man's cheek was pink.

Wen Chao groaned with disgust, wiping himself with a sleeve. "You really are such a blight on your kind, Wei Ying," he said. "Not even worth the price that someone would've paid for you. What happened to that lovely scent of yours?"

"Fuck off," Wei Wuxian replied.

He tore himself out of Wen Chao's grip and fell into the abyss, unwilling to give the man the joy of throwing him himself.

Down, down, down he fell, till all he saw of Wen Chao was a white spot against the sky. Till all he felt was the wind in his hair washing away every other touch. Till his eyes closed and consciousness faded away from him at last, taking away all the pain, all the terror, all the shame.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who just wrote this entire chapter in one afternoon
Jiang Yanli traveled the way to Lanling faster than she ever had before. Though she missed her sword terribly, she saw too often the shadow of Wen cultivators roaming the air above to risk trying to fly on the poor replacement she had taken out of Yunmeng's armory. It had taken her months to learn to channel energy through a weapon forged for and with her; even if she did try, she knew this one would not obey her for twice that time.

Thinking of her sword made her think of her mother—Yu Ziyuan framed by the halo of flames as she worked iron and ice together almost ten years ago, Jiang Yanli standing by her side, wide-eyed and a little scared.

"There is nothing to fear, A-Li," her mother had told her.

She had briefly touched her head with her hot fingers. She had smiled that smiled reserved for her and no one else. Not her father, not Wei Wuxian, not her brother. Too often had Jiang Yanli experienced selfish pleasure at being the one person around whom her mother could smile so.

"Don't be scared."

And Yanli had not been.

When she touched Zidian fit so snugly to her finger, Jiang Yanli yearned for that pleasure. She had longed for the day her mother would gift it to her—she had known she would, after one day in silence of the Pier Yu Ziyuan had said so: "You're my heir. You're my child." She had carried this secret in her for years, knowing that A-Cheng thought he would be the one to inherit this as he would everything else. She had never told him otherwise; sometimes A-Cheng could be a little selfish, she thought, and Yanli ought to have some selfishness for herself too.

She only had to use it once during the trip, when a man in a village where she stopped at for food recognized her face from one of the Wen clan posters. Jiang Yanli's scent was mild enough to lose itself to most things around her. She wore her hair differently, wrapped herself in cloaks, smeared dirt over her face to mask the last thing that could give her away, and it was enough. Mostly.

When this man had grinned and grabbed her arm, no doubt planning to collect the bounty for her head, she had called Zidian for help. The whip had appeared in her hands with barely a thought from her, as if it had always meant to one day obey her.

She walked away from roads. She lost herself through woods and rock and fields. She preferred the cover of night despite the risks that came with it, crouching low among bushes as she waited for the way to be clear. For days she walked and ran her way through the countryside, avoiding all bigger towns, keeping an eye out for white robes and red suns.

At night she dreamed of her home burning. She dreamed of Yu Ziyuan's smile as she put Zidian on her finger; she dreamed of A-Cheng's empty rage and A-Xian's fear, which he so poorly concealed from her. She woke up longing for the smell of honey.
The entrance of Lanling's Tower was always guarded. The day she reached it, those guards were aplenty, alpha and beta smells locked together round the gateway and making her head ache. She hadn't eaten in two days. She hadn't slept in three.

"Please," she told one of them, "I need to speak with Jin Zixuan."

"The young master isn't here," he replied curtly. He no doubt thought her to be a vagabond, and Jiang Yanli knew with a bitter heart that she must look the part. She couldn't remember the last time she had bathed. "Now leave, girl."

For a second she let her hope fade into despair. If truly he was not here, if she couldn't ask for his help…

She felt so cold when she remembered Wen Chao's sharp silhouette against the backdrop of flames and smoke. She froze over at night recalling his hateful words, his loud laughter, his foot on the face of her dead mother as he commented idly that she had once been beautiful.

"Then take me to Madam Jin," she said in a louder voice.

Weeks ago one could not have asked of her to make a commotion. Jiang Yanli hated bringing attention to herself almost as much as she hated the secret and jealous parts of her, the ones who still recalled her father's proud face when A-Cheng had been born, when A-Xian had joined them, in foul loneliness.

But that was before she had seen her home destroyed. That was when her father and mother still stood between her and any danger she could know.

"Take me to her!" she shouted, pulling the hood of her cloak away and baring her filthy face fully. "Take me to see her, I need to speak to her—"

Another guard grabbed her around the wrist, saying, "You can't make a scene here! I'll beat you to an inch of your life and see if you learn manners."

How she wished to use Zidian again and bind them all to the stone pillars. How she wished to scream her name in their faces and demand to see not Madam Jin, not Jin Zixuan, but Jin Guangshan himself. She wanted to make him hear her; she wanted to run him through the memories of her home laid to waste and ask him, then, if he still wished to remain Wen Ruohan's lapdog.

She couldn't. No matter how angry and desperate she was, she couldn't let them know who she was without Madam Jin or Jin Zixuan's support.

For a minute more she struggled against one, two, three guards. She walked on their foot and knocked them away with the scabbard of her sword. She was caught every time before she could step foot into the Tower, and she saw with a rush of fear that now one woman was unsheathing her sword and preparing to attack, to maim.

"Madam Jin!" she cried as loudly as she could, held in the grasp of a burly beta man while the woman advanced, sword glinting in sunlight. "Madam Jin!"

"What's going on here?"

She could have wept from relief at the sound of his voice alone.

Jin Zixuan came in through the wide hall of the tower, sword in hand and stained with dirt from head to toe. He must be back from a hunt, she thought, and then she thought nothing at all as he squinted
at her and suddenly dropped the game he had been holding.

"Young master," the burly man holding her said, "please forgive us, the lass was trying to enter the Tower by force—"

"Release her," Jin Zixuan ordered.

The moment it took for the three guards to obey seemed to be too long for him. He approached with quick steps and pulled the man's hands off of Jiang Yanli's arms himself, stopping short of checking her for injuries. He frowned when he saw the bruises and cuts she had acquired on her journey.

"Did she not tell you to fetch me?" he asked the guards briskly.

"Yes, but—"

"Why didn't you, then?"

The three cultivators mumbled and stuttered their excuses. Jiang Yanli was shaking when she bowed, hitting her fist to her palm as quickly as politeness allowed—then she said, "Please, I need your help, we don't have much time."

Jin Zixuan nodded. "Follow me, please."

"Sir!" the others protested.

"Silence! You're not to speak of this to anyone, not even my father. Any word reach anyone's ears and I'll send my horsemaster to punish all three of you."

He turned around and walked away, gesturing for Jiang Yanli to follow.

They soon left the main hall she had so often visited as a child. And oh, how heartbreaking it was to be back here again, to think that she had once walked through these golden doors and been called *little mistress*, been thought of as the future clan leader of these grounds, the wife holding Jin Zixuan's hand. She never would have imagined to be welcomed so callously in her life.

"No one will bother us here," Jin Zixuan said, holding a door open. "Come quick."

"Thank you," Jiang Yanli replied.

What lay behind was a small and dusty study. They were near the tiny gardens of the servant quarters, she knew. The smell of spring flowers reached them through the open window.

Jin Zixuan closed it before saying anything. "I heard about what happened to your family," he said once he was sure no one could hear. "Words cannot convey how sorry I am for your loss."

Words could not convey how sorry Jiang Yanli was either. "Thank you, young master Jin," she said, blinking tears away. "You must know why I am here, and I apologize for asking this of you, but please." She swallowed. "We need help. We need somewhere safe to stay."

"Golden Carp Tower isn't safe for you," he replied. "My father… I have tried to make him see reason, but he refuses. I tried to ask for help to be sent as soon as the news reached us, but he fears that sheltering you and your brother would be seen by Wen Ruohan as a declaration of war."

Jiang Yanli's heart sank. Her hand found the surface of a table for balance, Zidian knocking against wood with a small sound.
"Mistress Jiang," Jin Zixuan said, visibly distressed. "I can try again. If you come with me and we both present my father with evidence of the Wens' wrongdoings... my mother, she loves you, she'll support you. Sheltering you at least shouldn't be an issue, but your brother—"

"I won't abandon him," Jiang Yanli cut in, shaking her head. "I can't. I'm—"

For a terrible moment, she thought she would shatter in front of him. The long trip ached in her legs and back. She worried for A-Cheng and A-Xian so fiercely that too often her heart leaped out of her chest and forced her to stop and gasp for air. She was standing in front of the man she loved filthy and homeless and begging.

She jumped when his hand came to rest on her arm. "Please stay," Jin Zixuan said, his brow tense with worry. "At least a few days—I can hide you for that long while I plead with him, my father will have no idea. You're exhausted. I'll find you a room and some food."

"I can't," she replied.

Zidian was warm against her skin. She stroked the ring with her thumb and felt some of her mother's strength suffuse her heart.

"My brother and A-Xian are in Gusu," she said. "I need to join them and make sure they're safe."

"Wei Wuxian?" Jin Zixuan replied.

Jiang Yanli looked at him again; his face had gone very pale.

"Wei Wuxian is alive?" he asked her in that same strange voice.

"Yes," she answered. "He's with A-Cheng."

Jin Zixuan stayed silent for a moment, looking troubled. "When we learned of what happened in Yunmeng, they told us that everyone except you and your brother had been killed," he said.

Jiang Yanli shook her head, throat tight with misery. "A-Xian escaped with us. We probably would have been caught by the Wen sect before even leaving town if not for him."

Jin Zixuan opened his mouth and closed it again quietly. Jiang Yanli wondered through her fatigue and pain what about what she had said was so incredible to him; then, at last, she remembered.

A-Xian dressed in purple silk and looking so very lost in the main hall of the Pier, while her father chased away the man who had come to buy him. Jin Zixuan who, upon hearing from her very mouth the reason why she had come to fetch Jiang Fengmian from their night-hunt, had immediately chosen to ride his sword with them. Jin Zixuan bowing to A-Xian with a hand over his heart.

She had ached then as she thought, naïvely, that she would never ache again.

"Wen Chao hates him," she found herself saying to him now. "He hasn't forgotten what happened in the tortoise cave. He said—he said he wants to kill A-Xian himself, use A-Xian's own sword to do it."

There was no doubt in her mind what else Wen Chao would do if ever he put his hands on Wei Wuxian. Judging by the sickly pallor on Jin Zixuan's face, he felt none either.

Every word she said hurt her in small and silly ways. Urgency made the pressing weight of grief feel distant and allowed for pettier things to move forward in her—jealousy, envy, the spark of pained
anger in her every time she thought, *He gets father's love and he brings mother sorrow and he makes Jin Zixuan look at him in such a way.*

Silly things. Childish things. Things she should not even consider now that her parents were dead and A-Xian, who had asked for none of this, faced so many dangers.

"I'll talk to my father," Jin Zixuan said with renewed urgency. "If—If Wei Wuxian—he should not be running around now."

"He'll never stop," Jiang Yanli said, smiling emptily. "That's just who he is."

"I'll protect him," Jin Zixuan replied.

She did not think she was meant to hear those words; she did not think he fully realized he said them. Understanding tightened in her chest. Jiang Yanli yet again said goodbye to one of her precious few childhood dreams.

"I'll protect him even if he doesn't want me to."

---

Wei Wuxian was nowhere when Jiang Cheng came down from the mountain.

There was no trace of him among the trees where they had last seen each other only hours ago. There was no trace of him at the inn where they had slept the night before either. The woman at the counter whom he asked if she had seen him replied, "Oh, that young master with you? No, he hasn't come back yet."

*Young master?* Jiang Cheng thought, something nagging at him oddly.

It was rare for strangers to show so much respect for Wei Wuxian.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian had simply left for a stroll. He wasn't one to sit still for long, after all. Far too often in their childhood he had left in the middle of night, knocking sometimes on Jiang Cheng's door to wake him up and force him to follow. Jiang Cheng had so often insulted and bemoaned in those dark and quiet hours. He couldn't understand the pain that Wei Wuxian took to bring him somewhere in the cold until he saw what he was meant to see.

Sometimes it was a flower. Sometimes it was an odd-shaped tree become all black against the starlit sky. Sometimes it was nothing, and Wei Wuxian ran around the sleeping pier and pushed him in the water, as if he couldn't stand to see any surface that wasn't rippled, to spend any hour without sound or movement.

Jiang Cheng slept deeply and easily that night. The excitement that had shaken him when Baoshan Sanren had told him, "Now use your spiritual energy," and he had *felt* that energy in him, different and somehow familiar… It hadn't faded, no. How could it, after those days of emptiness, the perspective of his own bleak future without power to hang on to?

He wanted to see Wei Wuxian. He wanted to tell him that his plan had worked and to thank him for his idea. He wanted to say the words that he had not quite managed to as they split up in the mountains: *I'm sorry for what I said*, and *Thank you for being here.*
But Jiang Cheng was tired from climbing up and down the mountain and whatever else the old sage had done to fix him—surprisingly little—and so he slept. Deeply and more easily than he had since the Lotus Pier had gone up in flames.

When he woke up, Wei Wuxian was still gone.

He searched for days. Through the mountain where he had last seen him, through the small town at its foot, through the neighboring villages. The money that Wen Qing had lent them ran out and he was forced out of the inn, but he didn't leave. He slept under the canopy of trees, tired and famished, and wondered where Wei Wuxian had gone.

He wondered if he had died.

He wondered if he had finally had enough of Jiang Cheng and left.

He wondered, in the darkest hours, if he had joined the enemy for a chance at his own safety. Even Wen Chao would surely stop short of killing an omega, no matter what he had said in his anger.

But Wei Wuxian had promised that he would be there; he had found someone who could give Jiang Cheng his golden core back; he had nursed him back to health and not made use of his many opportunities to flee before. If he wasn't at the foot of the mountain after promising he would be, then it must be because something happened to him.

People started throwing Jiang Cheng odd looks as he wandered between mountain and town. Parents started pulling their children close at the sight of him. There were no posters of his face here, no Wen cultivators ready to take him away. No one thought of him as a man on the run, only as a vagabond, but he found that the difference was only in name.

Then one day a voice from behind him in the mountains said, "Jiang Wanyin."

Jiang Cheng turned on his feet with the training sword in hand immediately. It was blocked by the silver scabbard of an elegant, familiar sword—by a man dressed all in white he had last met covered in blood and grime in a cave and kneeling a few feet away from a fevered Wei Wuxian.

"Lan Wangji," Jiang Cheng said with only a hint of hostility; his confusion was stronger.

Then he saw the small silver bell held in the man's hand, and fury turned his vision white.

He seemed to come two only a moment later, sword drawn again and blunting itself to Bichen's sharp edges, words coming out of his mouth as a river: "... did you take him, where is he, I'll kill you."

"I do not have Wei Ying with me," Lan Wangji replied.

He sounded as if he had said it many times already, but Jiang Cheng only heard it this once.

He lowered his sword at last. Lan Wangji did the same with Bichen without another word, completely unruffled by the attack, looking as poised as ever. Dislike squirmed in Jiang Cheng's belly.

"Where is he?" he repeated, more harshly perhaps than was warranted.

Lan Wangji looked away from his eyes. "I do not know," he replied. "I found this yesterday." He held up the small bell.
Jiang Cheng extended a hand to take it, but Lan Wangji brought the bell back toward himself almost protectively. "I shall need it for Inquiry," he said.

"You can find him with it?" Jiang Cheng asked, forgetting about the strange gesture.

Lan Wangji stepped toward the city and replied, "Only if he is dead."

The words weighed heavily in Jiang Cheng. He sat by Lan Wangji that night as the man played the guqin, watching blue light surround them, feeling it brush his skin coolly. Like this the scent of sandalwood almost vanished from the air around the Lan sect heir; instead, he seemed to smell like his brother. When the man finished his song and told Jiang Cheng that the dead had not heard of a Wei Wuxian joining them, Jiang Cheng realized that his nails had bitten his palms till he bled.

Lan Wangji sent him to Gusu with one of the two junior cultivators accompanying him. He told Jiang Cheng that he would stay behind and look for Wei Wuxian. Jiang Cheng wanted to protest—he wanted to bark at Lan Wangji that he remembered his promise, that he would never again allow him to be in Wei Wuxian's presence—but then, he remembered his own words to Wei Wuxian. His own baseless and crude accusations upon what he glimpsed to be one of Wei Wuxian's worst fears.

How dare he now put himself in the way of Lan Wangji saving Wei Wuxian again? Jiang Cheng had not been the one to kill the Xuanwu of Slaughter who had swallowed Wei Wuxian whole. He had not been the one to save him from drowning, or the one who had sat with his back turned away has heat slowly consumed him.

Jiang Cheng had been the one who ran away and left his clan's omega behind.

So to Gusu he went with a very heavy heart. In Gusu he stayed in the weeks that followed, waiting for word of his sister, for word of Wei Wuxian. He found one of the two when delegations arrived from all over the country, clan banners held high in shades of gold, green, white.

"A-Cheng!" Jiang Yanli cried at the sight of him, dismounting from the horse given to her by Lanlingjin.

She held him. She cried for him. She cried for Wei Wuxian, once he told her that he was missing, and then for the remains of their parents that Wei Wuxian had given him, telling him that Wen Ning had been the one to find them. He tried to hold his sister as tightly as he could.

"Lan Wangji is looking for him?" Jin Zixuan asked minutes later as all of the delegations slowly joined the rebuilt ancestral hall of Gusulan. "Wei Wuxian," he added.

Jiang Cheng nodded, surprised to even be addressed, let alone about such a thing. "He was in Yiling when we parted, but I don't know where he is now."

"My brother has been slowly approaching Qishan in his search," said a voice nearby them. They all turned around.

Lan Xichen had changed very little since the last time Jiang Cheng had met him. Cool-scented and composed and a little less glaringly perfect than his younger brother. His months of missing did not seem to have changed him much outside of faint outward signs of fatigue.

"Wangji has not found sign of young master Wei yet, but the dead are still positive that he is not one of them," he told them.

Jiang Cheng felt something in him loosen. "What is going on, master Lan?" he asked, gesturing to
the horses and servants gathered at the gate of the Cloud Recesses.

Lan Xichen smiled and replied, "War."

The little bell had been almost buried under-earth, almost crushed flat by someone’s heavy foot. Lan Wangji saw it only because there and then the sun had shone and flickered off of it and caught his eyes.

After taking it in hand—after recognizing it, in a pang of crushing helplessness, as Wei Wuxian's—he examined his surroundings. He saw within the dirt the footprints of animals. He saw traces of a fight, as faint as dust on glass: torn grass ripped off the soil by hand or boot, a burned spot of earth, the gash of a thin sword in the bark of a tree.

Dry blood on the leaves of a crushed flower.

It was a miracle that dew had not washed it away. Lan Wangji picked the blue flower between his fingers, rubbing them against the flaking spots of blood. They crumbled away until the leaves were green once more.

There was no sweetness on the wind, no call for him to follow, not trail of breadcrumbs or stones. Even the bell in his hands only wore the faintest trace of honey, as if already all trace of its owner had started vanishing.

Wei Wuxian was long gone.

Chapter End Notes

Short transitory piece before we jump some 15 years ahead.
Mo village was a quaint little place not too far from Gusu. It stood in a valley lush with greenery and surrounded by forest and fields, right at the curve where mountain ranges sloped the gentlest. A river crossed through the houses and streets, which were joined together with a series of wooden bridges. Jingyi never stopped praising the sight from atop his sword as he and Lan Sizhui flew there; he ooh-ed and aah-ed at the flowering trees, at the merchants in colorful clothes loudly calling from their stalls and the shine of the sun overwater. Despite the coolness of the air this early in spring, he forgot to shiver. His sweet berryscent tickled Sizhui's nose with every gust of wind.

"Calm down, please," Lan Sizhui said as they dismounted their swords before the biggest house. Servants were emerging already, staring at them in a mix of wonder and apprehension; after all, seldom did cultivators come to such a peaceful place. "We'll visit when we're done warding the place."

"I know, I know, we're here to work," Lan Jingyi replied, shaking a hand at him dismissively. "Look at those hens, Sizhui! They're so much fatter than in Gusu."

He was pointing at an enclosure not far where a pair of round birds pecked the soil for their daily feed. Sizhui couldn't help but smile as Jingyi made to approach them. He caught the back of his white robes just in time—an old alpha woman smelling strongly of firewood had come to them, putting her hands together in salute. She must be the head servant of the household.

"Young masters, welcome," she said enthusiastically. Her wrinkled face was goldened by sun and wind. "Please, follow me. There are refreshments waiting for you inside, and Madam Mo will not be long to join you."

"Thank you very much," Lan Sizhui said, bowing in tandem with Lan Jingyi.

The old woman marked a second of hesitation. Her nose twitched ever-so-slightly in that way elders' always did, and her eyes strayed a second too long over Jingyi's profile. He was too busy staring at the fat hens to notice, but Sizhui cleared his throat and made sure to smile as pleasantly as he could once the woman looked his way.

She spoke some more as she led them inside, pointing this way and that around the house and mentioning with fright the recent sightings of fierce corpses, but her demeanor was noticeably colder.

They were served tea and rice wine in the widest room of the mansion. Neither of them touched the wine, but the tea was welcome after the crisp coolness of flight. Lan Sizhui warmed his hands around the clay cup for a while before taking his first sip. Lan Jingyi, still in the same state of excitement, seemed to take having to sit still as the worst kind of punishment.
"It smells so different here," he said while they waited for their host, grinning from ear to ear. "Is it always so exciting to visit different regions?"

"I haven't visited many, you know," Sizhui replied against the rim of his cup.

"You went to Qinghenie's archery competition last year, though."

Sizhui shivered at the memory. Although sect leader Nie was a vain and easily-scared man, he lived in a very grim place. Qinghe had been dark and ominous the way only legends described: marshly, cloudy, ripe with cold ghosts and deadened memories. "You didn't miss much," he told Jingyi, immediately amending: "Ah, please don't tell master Qiren I said that. I do want to participate next year in Yunmeng."

Lan Jingyi snickered.

Speaking of Lan Qiren once more called to Sizhui's mind the stern lecture that the old teacher had given them before they left. Though most of his words were told to Sizhui, none of them doubted that Jingyi was their true recipient. It had taken hours for them to finally be able to leave.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of who he guessed to be Madam Mo. "Young masters," she said with a wide smile, bowing neatly at the shoulders. Sizhui and Jingyi tried to scramble to their feet, but she waved them off and added, "Please, do be seated. You've come a long way."

"Not that long, Madam," Lan Jingyi replied politely. "Gusu is only half a day away by flying."

Madam Mo's somewhat aged face was hidden behind a fan, but judging by the look she gave Jingyi, Lan Sizhui had no doubt that she was using her nose to confirm what her servant must have told her. "I suppose," she simply said, before turning to Sizhui.

How disappointing. Lan Sizhui had hoped that in such a place at least, he would not have to witness those things. He threw Jingyi a quick look and found, as expected, that his friend's smile had waned.

"Madam Mo," he said quietly. "You called upon the Lan sect to help you with an invasion, is that right?"

"Yes, yes," she replied, kneeling behind her own table as her servant poured her tea. "What a dreadful situation. My husband and I have barely slept this past week."

In the next hour, she explained to them that a week ago, her husband had woken in the middle of night and taken a stroll through the gardens, only to find a wakened corpse slowly dragging its feet through his precious flowerbeds. Since then not a night had gone by without them hearing or seeing another, and villagers had come every day to complain of such sightings and ask for cultivators to be called. Parents were too scared to allow their children outside even during the day.

"That's odd," Lan Sizhui murmured. "The corpses you describe seem weak. They shouldn't be able to walk in broad daylight."

"But they are," Madam Mo replied, fanning herself theatrically. "Dreadful, I told you. Travelers have started avoiding the roads here, you know."

"What I don't understand is why fierce corpses would gather here in the first place," Lan Jingyi added. "They tend to avoid humans unless a great source of resentful energy is nearby. Did anything happen recently—some sort of tragedy perhaps? Unexplained deaths?"

Madam Mo shook her head. When she answered, it was to Lan Sizhui: "There has been nothing of
the sort. We're a quiet little town, not one of your great cities. Nothing unusual ever happens here."

She spoke some more—about her fear, about how worried she was for her son and husband, about her good-for-nothing servants who refused to venture to the farthest fields to work. What few of those servants were present in the room lowered their heads, mouths twisted with resentment, and Lan Sizhui found his opinion of Madam Mo plummeting some more.

*Do not judge what you do not know*, he tried to tell himself. Hanguang-Jun's voice was easy enough to recreate at the crook of his ear: *Gauge a person not by their looks or status, but by their character.*

In looks as in character, however, Madam Mo failed to make him feel more than very professional concern. The sideways glances she kept giving Lan Jingyi even as she refused to address him did not help.

Minutes later the talk had turned to entirely different things. Madam Mo praised Lan Sizhui extensively, commenting on his looks and manners in a way that made the small of his back shiver. "My son could have become a cultivator, you know," she cooed, still playing with her embroidered fan as if the weather warranted any sort of heat. "People from Lanling came... well, that was in the past, but he made a very good impression. Say, do you think you could take him with—"

Lan Sizhui had prepared his refusal before she was done voicing the question in full, but he needn't have, for loud noise came to them from the other side of the mansion.

He and Jingyi turned their heads as one. Footsteps ran through the closed door leading to the frontyard before they opened in a bang, and a heavy-set young man stumbled his way in, his red face running with angry tears.

"Mother!" he yelled, throwing himself into Madam Mo's thin arms. "Mother, that Mo Xuanyu is bullying me again!"

"A-Yuan," Madam Mo hissed, pushing her son away briskly. "We have guests. *Cultivators.*"

The one named A-Yuan did not seem to mind. He threw Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi an ugly look before whining again, "Mother, he's saying I stole his creepy cultivation things, the filthy little—"

"That's right!" another bright voice came from the entrance. "Thief! Liar!"

The one who came in this time could not have looked more different from Madam Mo's son. Though there was a faint trace of familiarity on his face, in the shape of his forehead and chin, he was taller and thinner than the first. He looked older by a few years as well.

More strikingly, his face was covered in garish makeup, making him look like a hanged ghost spirit.

Lan Sizhui barely had time to see it; the man fell against the high step of the entrance, and only Lan Jingyi's quick thinking allowed him to avoid crashing face-first to the floor. Jingyi leaned over his table and grabbed his arm, making sure that the man's fall would stop before he hurt himself.

The man muttered something that sounded surprisingly like "short legs" before finding his breathing again. He ripped his arm out of Lan Jingyi's hold rudely and stood, only giving his helper a brief glance before turning away.

Then he stopped and turned again, staring oddly at Jingyi.

"Mo Xuanyu," Madam Mo spat, her voice filled with disgust.
The man, Mo Xuanyu, did not seem to hear her. He crouched right where he had fallen, leaning over the table until his face was only inches away from Lan Jingyi’s. Lan Sizhui could see his friend's skin turn pink from the attention.

Hot fury simmered in his belly. He made no effort to calm it as Lan Qiren and Lan Wangji often taught and instead touched the handle of his sword.

Then Mo Xuanyu opened his mouth and said, "You're omega," in something like wonder.

Lan Jingyi blushed further at the crude words. "So are you," he retorted, no doubt forgetting his own manners.

Lan Sizhui's hand relaxed around his sword.

He could smell it now if he looked beyond Madam Mo's tepid, watery smell, her son's obvious alphascent and Jingyi's own sweetness: a faint and honeyed smell had wafted far enough into the room to reach his nostrils.

Mo Xuanyu did not seem to know what to make of Lan Jingyi's retort. For a second longer he stared at him, then he chuckled and, finally, rose to his feet again. He turned around to look at Madam Mo.

A-Yuan started, "How did you get out of the—"

"A-Yuan," Madam Mo snapped, sudden panic streaking her face.

Mo Xuanyu laughed. "You think a poor little shack could hold me?" he asked. "This one," he pointed at A-Yuan, "stole my things from me after beating me up. I demand he hand them back."

"You're a liar," A-Yuan raged, his face reddening even further. The winemark at his temple looked ready to pop off of his skin. "As if I'd have any interest in your creepy little—"

"A shack?" Lan Sizhui asked loudly.

He all but felt the room freeze around him. At his table by the corner, Lan Jingyi paled with anger. Madam Mo's fan had finally closed. She held it so tightly in her palm that all the skin of her hand turned bloodless, and when she advanced forward into the room, it was with a sickeningly sweet smile stretching her lips. "I forgot to introduce you, how rude of me," she said. "This is Mo Xuanyu, my nephew. He lives in a house at the border of the estate, my late sister used to live with him…"

She swallowed visibly before continuing, "As you can see, he isn't very clear-headed…"

"I am very clear-headed," Mo Xuanyu protested, words which would have born more power if his face was not painted in white and red. "So clear-headed, in fact, that I have reached enlightenment."

Madam Mo looked as though she had just bitten into a lemon.

"Mo Ziyuan," Mo Xuanyu declared with gravity. "If you do not hand back what you stole, I'll take your arm in punishment."

He made a chopping motion with his hand; his sleeve fell back by an inch and revealed a deep, bloody cut at the thinnest of his wrist, as well as old and new bruises running up his forearm.

Lan Sizhui felt sick.

Mo Ziyuan gave chase to Mo Xuanyu in the moment that followed, the both of them disappearing through the opposite door and the garden behind. Lan Sizhui felt more than he saw Jingyi rise to his
own feet, his tea and snacks forgotten, he was in such a hurry to leave.

"Young masters," Madam Mo said more obsequiously than before. She went as far as to kneel and bow before Lan Sizhui, who wanted nothing more than to be out of her sight. "I swear by the heavens, this is not what you think—please do not let Mo Xuanwu's insanity get in the way of your work, the Yiling Patriarch must have taken his soul when he was a child—"

She must see that her pleading had little effect on Sizhui, for she turned to Lan Jingyi next. Lan Sizhui saw her throat bob as she prepared to finally address him for the first time.

He decided to spare his friend the discomfort and spoke before she could. "We have many preparations to make before nightfall," he said. "Please go back to your business, Madam Mo, and remember to warn your household not to come outside after the sun is set. Good day."

Once he walked out of the doors, the sunlight and earthly smells of the village chased some of his anger away. He breathed deeply and tried to remember all that Hanguang-Jun had taught him about mastering himself.

"You were ready to attack them in there, Sizhui," Lan Jingyi said with a smile.

Lan Sizhui felt his cheeks warm. "I was not," he replied calmly.

"Hah. You can lie to master Qiren, but you can't lie to me."

"We have work to do," Sizhui said. Lan Jingyi laughed and followed him around the walls of the main house.

The rest of the afternoon was spent deciding on the right protection array and putting talismans in place. Jingyi sat by a rocky corner of the yard and painted lure after lure, giving them to Lan Sizhui so he could place them where they should be. His smile withered as daylight dimmed, and it was not hard to guess what he was thinking of.

"Are you all right?" Lan Sizhui asked him eventually.

"Yes," Lan Jingyi replied. Then, a second later: "No. I don't know."

"Is it about that young master Mo?"

Jingyi nodded slowly. He bit his lips and asked, "When he said 'shack'... do you think he meant an omega house?"

That was the question Lan Sizhui had been asking himself as well.

"Omega houses have been outlawed for years," he replied, looking over the last lure that Jingyi had given him. "But..."

"But it doesn't mean everyone's stopped using them," Jingyi finished for him. "Did you see those injuries?"

Lan Sizhui nodded somberly.

For a moment longer neither of them spoke. Lan Sizhui took another stroll around the estate, making sure all the talismans and lures were in their right place before coming back near the coop where they had seen those hens hours ago. All the birds must have gone back inside the little wooden house, with night coming so close.
He smelled Jingyi before he saw him approach. The other boy stood next to him, the last unfinished lure in hand, and said, "Maybe Madam Mo was right and the Yiling Patriarch did take Mo Xuanyu's soul."

It tore a smile out of Lan Sizhui. "You know those are just stories for children," he replied. "Hanguang-Jun doesn't like them, he would scold you if he heard."

"Children's tales are much scarier when told by master Qiren," Lan Jingyi said, waving his fingers eerily above his head. "I'd like to see even you sleep peacefully after hearing him tell you the Yiling Patriarch will come and kidnap you if you don't obey the rules."

"Yet you have broken so many rules, and not once has an army of corpses walked on the Cloud Recesses to claim you."

Jingyi let out a wounded, betrayed sound, making as if to chase Sizhui away. Sizhui tried his best to avoid being touched and to keep his laughter confined. Even so far from home, acting boisterously made him nervous; he didn't want to betray the trust that Lan Qiren had put in him by letting him accompany Jingyi on his very first mission out of Gusu.

"Is that a spirit lure flag?"

They stopped fooling around and looked up.

Mo Xuanyu was sitting atop the tall wall surrounding the estate. He had washed his face of the makeup, though some white powder remained at his hairline, and was watching them intently.

Without anything to hide him, it was even easier to place him as omega. His features were very fine, much finer than Madam Mo's, and he was shorter than her as well. Almost delicate in appearance. His honey-like scent sweetened every breath that Sizhui took. "May I see?" he asked Lan Jingyi, gesturing to the half-finished flag he was still holding.

Jingyi's fingers tightened on the cloth. "This isn't a toy," he replied.

Mo Xuanyu laughed and said, "I know."

He jumped down from the wall with surprisingly agility, dusting himself faintly. His clothes were so worn and filthy that the gesture did nothing but smear dirt even further, but he hardly seemed to care. He walked toward Lan Jingyi and took the flag from him, holding his hand high above his head to let it unfold in front of him in full.

"Hey," Jingyi started, but Sizhui raised a hand to silence him.

"Young master Mo," he said softly. "Sunset will be here soon. It would be better if you went inside with the rest of your family, so you aren't in danger while we chase away the corpses."

Mo Xuanyu barely gave him a glance. "You're from Gusulan, right?" he asked Lan Jingyi. "What's your name?"

"Lan Jingyi," came the wary answer.

"Lan Jingyi," Mo Xuanyu repeated. "So you're not just from the sect. You're part of the clan as well."

It was difficult to tell what sort expression he was wearing, but Sizhui did not think it was a disapproving one.
"How long have you been a cultivator?"

"What is it to you?" Jingyi retorted, obviously unsettled.

"Nothing," Mo Xuanyu said. "Simple curiosity."

It took a moment, but Jingyi finally answered, "I've been training since I was a child. Sizhui too."

Another dismissive glance was thrown Sizhui's way, as if Mo Xuanyu could not be bothered to look at him for more than a second. Sizhui wondered what it said about him that disappointment immediately made itself known to him; after all, usually, Jingyi would be the one ignored like this next to him. He had no room to complain.

"A Lan clan omega cultivator, huh…" Mo Xuanyu murmured. He once more looked over the unfinished flag before giving it back. "Make your strokes thinner, Lan Jingyi," he declared. "The surer the hand, the more powerful the flag."

"You—!"

But before he could finish, Mo Xuanyu had leaped to the top of the wall and let himself fall behind it, disappearing from their view.

"What a rude man," Lan Jingyi seethed. "Sizhui, did you see the way he ordered me around? Who's the cultivator here?"

"I'm sure he meant it nicely," Sizhui replied. "Remember, he said that Mo Ziyuan stole cultivation things from him. He must have some training as well. Plus, master Qiren always says your strokes are too thick."

Lan Jingyi groaned in annoyance, but when his last flag was finished, the bottom part of it bore much thinner ink strokes.

The Lan boy was a marvel.

Wei Wuxian had only meant to join the main house of the estate to try and look for clues as to what exactly Mo Xuanyu wished from him. It had taken a while to clean the self-inflicted cuts on his forearms—two on each side—and even now, they seeped blood languidly. He knew they would not heal until he fulfilled his promise.

If only he knew what promise that was.

He had not expected anything more than to cause some turmoil for Mo Ziyuan when he ran after him. Though Mo Xuanyu was obviously omega, it seemed his dear younger cousin held some fear of him. It was just his luck, Wei Wuxian thought with irony, that out of everyone who could have summoned him back from the dead, it had to be an omega. Not that he knew if the body's status would change anything of his own, but he would have enjoyed the chance to try. People raised strange looks his way as he ran through the small village, though Wei Wuxian gathered that it had more to do with his garish makeup than anything else. The shack he had woken into looked very like the one he had once spent his heats in, but it had been unlocked and unguarded until Mo Ziyuan stole the key and left.
Wei Wuxian had joined the Mo family house with fanfare, burst into the important-looking meeting that Madam Mo seemed to be holding there, and felt a little as he had in those fleeting memories of his youth. It wasn't a bad feeling, he found.

Then he had met the omega boy and forgotten all about the curse.

How *intriguing*. How utterly fascinating. Not only his temper, so different from the mild-voiced boy he followed around, so awkward compared to every Lan cultivator Wei Wuxian had met in his time; not only the fact that he was obviously trained and free to go around, only gathering mild looks of disapproval on his way. The boy acted in a carefree way such that Wei Wuxian had never known. He seemed to bear none of the heavy defiance that Wei Wuxian recalled from those few years of his youth, before everything collapsed around him, and he looked…

He looked unburdened.

Wei Wuxian followed the two Lan juniors from a distance as they worked their protective array around the Mo family estate. They both looked serious and experienced, the older one perhaps more so, although Wei Wuxian found him a lot less interesting to look at. They bantered as they worked, speaking softly of this and that, speculating about Mo Xuanyu. He wouldn't have cared what they said, except—

"Omega houses have been outlawed for years," the older boy declared, and Wei Wuxian stared, gutted and exhilarated at once.

What had happened in those thirteen years?

He couldn't help but listen more closely to their conversation. He was surprised to hear his own title be mentioned—frankly, he would have thought the whole world to have forgotten his existence in the span of months. Never had he imagined he would one day become the subject of children's tales. At least not this way, he thought somewhat grimly. Kidnapping children, truly? He may have robbed a few clans of their members, but he had never held anyone prisoner. They were all free to go; that had been the entire point.

It was with more ease than he expected that he inserted himself into the boys' conversation. Lan Jingyi, as he learned the boy's name was, answered him with a sort of defiance and irritation that Wei Wuxian found wonderful. His smell marked him as immature, which could perhaps explain his carefree attitude, but Wei Wuxian had a feeling that there was more underneath it. Things he was not privy to—things shifted and changed from his time as a living man. Lan Jingyi wore the same forehead ribbon that Wei Wuxian remembered seeing on Lan Wangji.

*Lan Qiren must be dead and rolling in his grave*, he chuckled to himself.

As would he, if he were still dead and privy to the knowledge that after all the criticism thrown his way when he lived in Yiling, the cultivation world still chose to use the tools he had created then. Wei Wuxian eyed the spirit lure flags dancing in the evening breeze and smiled twistedly.

"Mo Xuanyu," came an angry voice.

Wei Wuxian met Mo Ziyuan's eyes levelly.

The boy could not be more than a year older than the two junior cultivators currently warding his house, but the winestain on his forehead and the deep creases of anger on his face made him look much older. His scent, a typical smoky alpha marker, made irritation flare up Wei Wuxian's belly.
He hated such scents the most.

"Are you here to apologize?" he asked the boy, smiling widely.

"I won't apologize to you!" Mo Ziyuan yelled back predictably. His finger shook as he pointed to Wei Wuxian, his whole body heaving with fury. All things which Wei Wuxian found detestably familiar. "As soon as those cultivators leave I'll lock you up, just you wait!"

"I am waiting," Wei Wuxian said, pushing himself off the wall he was leaning against. "In fact, I may die of old age waiting."

He had no interest in Mo Ziyuan whatsoever outside of knowing the boy probably had something to do with Mo Xuanyu's wish. The bruises on this body were plenty, old and young, some yellowed with age and some still red and fresh. He could feel in the aches running through him that the beating he had been subjected to upon waking up was only one of several in the last few days.

If Mo Xuanyu's wish was for him to murder the alpha who had so tormented him, Wei Wuxian would find it hard to berate him for it.

He had almost walked entirely past Mo Ziyuan when the boy grabbed his arm and asked, "Why do you smell different?"

"Release me," Wei Wuxian ordered coldly.

To his credit, Mo Ziyuan did mark a second of hesitation. His hold relaxed enough for Wei Wuxian to shake out of it.

He tripped the boy for good measure, before running away to the sound of his outraged cries.

The words stayed at the corner of his thoughts, however, while he waited for night to fall. Wei Wuxian had once held long conversations about scents and spiritually with Wen Qing, so he shouldn't be surprised that Mo Xuanyu's natural scent had died with him and made way for Wei Wuxian's. Still, it was a bother, if only because people seemed to be noticing it again.

It had been a long time since anyone had. He had spent the last years of his life smelling of practically nothing—a fact which had perturbed a great many of his enemies of the time, he remembered fondly.

Wei Wuxian walked through the village as night fell around him. By now shops were closing, and the only noise came out of the small inn at the far end of the road, right where the river forked in two different directions. Wei Wuxian crouched by the water and cleaned the wounds on his arms once again, frowning as he saw that blood had congealed against his grey sleeves.

He really needed to do something about that. Though he had no wish be alive again, he did not fancy having his soul suffer for eternity either.

_Damn Mo Xuanyu_, he thought with little heat and too much sympathy. _Couldn't you summon an actual resentful spirit to do your bidding?_

The small wooden house with its broken furniture showed itself to him again, as well as the faint trace of despair that Mo Xuanyu's soul had left in the afterimage of itself. Wei Wuxian had all but smelled the pain that the young man had lived in and which had pushed him to such lengths for vengeance.

There once was a time when Wei Wuxian may have summoned a Yiling Patriarch for himself, if he
Starlight pierced the heavens. Noise faded slowly from within the little inn, as its tenants and guests joined their quarters for sleep. A tired guard at the end of the village yawned loudly into her hand, readying herself for hours of fruitless watch.

Wei Wuxian walked back toward the Mo estate slowly. The perspective of seeing Lan Jingyi again put a spring to his steps and washed away some of the worries in him—how delightful, he thought for the hundredth time, to meet such a person in a place such as this.

His mood lasted until he reached the front gate and felt resentful energy crawl over his skin coldly.

He stilled. Around him the house was silent as a tomb; he heard nothing alive, human or animal, scurrying around. The familiar energy skittered over his arms and seemed to stop at the cuts which Mo Xuanyu had made, as if recognizing them as kin. Wei Wuxian curled his fingers around it, thinking idly of grabbing it and making use of it.

Instead he followed it to his source, bypassing the open gate of the mansion entirely. The trail of energy became fainter as minutes went by, and Wei Wuxian thought with some disappointment that he would soon lose it. Such things were so fickle. But then his foot hit something surprisingly soft in the darkness, and when he looked down, he found a corpse.

A haunted corpse, no less. Emaciated and grey-skinned, completely sucked out of its spirit. He kneeled by it with curiosity, turning it on its back and recognizing Mo Ziyuan without much surprise. He hadn't thought the boy would heed the Lan cultivators' advice and actually stay out of harm's way.

He shook the sleeves off his forearms. One of the four cuts had vanished.

Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi were eating some of the warm soup prepared for them by the Mo house servants when the scream came.

They jumped to their feet immediately, letting the bowls fall to their feet. Jingyi's broke upon contact with the ground, spilling liquid over the hem of his robes. Neither of them took the time to care as they rushed toward the back gardens, exchanging worried looks.

They found a servant there howling with all of his lungs' capacity and pointing to something on the other side of the wall. It seemed to have crumbled overtime, letting enough room for two people to pass through shoulder-to-shoulder. Sizhui slowed as he approached it, murmuring to Jingyi to take care of the frightened servant as he looked over the corpse behind.

It was very obviously killed by non-human means. Its skin was dry and emaciated, as if the victim had aged all at once before their last breath left them. He was about to ask what happened when his eyes met Mo Xuanyu's.

The man was crouching outside the wall, on the other side of the corpse, looking oddly calm. "Your array wasn't much use," he told Lan Sizhui quietly. "Too bad. It was rather well-made."

Before Sizhui could answer, another cry came from behind.
"A-Yuan!"

It was with a faint sense of nausea that he finally recognized Mo Ziyuan in the prone and skinny body laid in front of him. "Madam Mo," he said, rising up with a grim face.

She ignored him in favor of throwing herself at her son, openly sobbing. She looked nothing at all like the proud woman who had welcome them hours ago.

The next minute was miserable. Madam Mo sobbed and howled as she held her son's corpse to her breast, as if trying to make him fuse with her and breathe life into him. Despite his opinion of the woman, Lan Sizhui found that pity was too weak a word to describe what he felt at the sight of such obvious grief.

"You," Madam Mo said when she saw Mo Xuanyu a moment later. "You, it was you, you killed him!"

"I did not," Mo Xuanyu replied calmly. "His stupidity killed him."

Sizhui heard Jingyi suck in a shocked breath behind him. Himself felt somewhat surprised by such lack of compassion—Mo Ziyuan was Mo Xuanyu's cousin. Did he truly not feel a thing, to say such horrible things minutes after the boy had died?

But then he saw the imprint of sleeplessness under Mo Xuanyu's eyes, the blue bruise on his cheekbone, the dirt and grime all over him. He remembered the bleeding wrist and marbling of hematomas running up the man's forearm.

"You took his arm!" Madam Mo shouted, her voice so loud that it rang through Lan Sizhui's head like a migraine. "You said you'd hurt him, how could you, he was just a boy—"

She tried to attack him like a wild animal, her long painted nails extended like claws. Mo Xuanyu jumped to his feet with the same elegance of movement he had shown earlier as they talked, avoiding her attack and letting her fall pitifully to the grass. "A boy?" he said with honest surprise. "How old was he—seventeen? Eighteen? He was hardly a boy. He heard those two cultivators tell us all to stay inside, and he chose to brave danger like a fool. His death is no one's fault but his."

Madam Mo screamed. Her words mixed together into an unintelligible string of sorrow, loud enough to make lights shine in the way of the village, no doubt from people coming out of their homes to see what the commotion was about.

"We need to bring them all back inside," Lan Jingyi said worriedly.


"I'm not leaving my son!" Madam Mo screeched.

Mo Xuanyu at least had enough presence of mind to heed them. He stepped over Mo Ziyuan's corpse and back into the garden, his face thoughtful. He didn't return Lan Sizhui's gaze at all.

Lan Jingyi had crouched by Madam Mo. She howled again when he gently touched her arm and spat, "Don't touch me, you filthy omega!"

Lan Sizhui's concern immediately tinted itself with rage; he saw Jingyi's face pale a little, his own anger held at bay only by a lifetime of education.
A shadow brushed past Lan Sizhui’s elbow—he recognized Mo Xuanyu only as the man’s foot connected with Madam Mo and sent her rolling away.

"Young master Mo!" he exclaimed, breathless with shock.

Mo Xuanyu didn't even look at him. This time the disgust on his face was unmistakable, and he snapped at Madam Mo's shivering form, "Is that any way to speak to the people trying to save your life?"

"Mo Xuanyu," Madam Mo heaved. Her hair had fallen in disarray during her fall, and she sounded winded with pain. "I should've killed you when you came back from Lanling, you worthless maggot, I should've left you for dead like your wench of a mother—"


Lan Sizhui turned to him. He was pointing at the corpse with his finger; looking down, Sizhui saw what had caught his attention.

"Madam Mo," he said loudly, "we know what killed your son."

Her haggard face turned toward him slowly.

He didn't know what she caught out of his explanation about the spirit lure caught in the lapels of Mo Ziyuan's clothes. Mo Xuanyu at last seemed to understand well enough, even if he remained uncaring.

It was with great effort that he convinced her to come back to the mansion. The noise had brought the master of the house out, and he was a sickly man, Sizhui thought while eyeing him, skinny and pale as he hung from the arm of his wife. He collapsed halfway through.

So did a servant walking in front of them, vile energy suddenly pouring out of him and turning his skin to paper.

Too soon, they were forced to draw their swords. The servant, A-Tong, attacked them with a fierceness seldom seen before, his powerful arm swinging at them and armed with claws as sharp as blades. They tore into Lan Sizhui's shoulder when he lost his footing, dragging blood to the fabric of his clothes, before running to Sizhui.

He didn't know for how long he fought. His heart beat wildly in his chest as he tried to protect Jingyi.—Jingyi wasn't as apt with swords as he was with bows, but the speed and strength of the creature attacking them made shooting arrows impossible. Jingyi held as strong as he could next to Sizhui, swinging his sword valiantly, but soon the ghost overpowered them.

Lan Sizhui was too far to do anything as A-Tong's haunted body approached Lan Jingyi. He felt his friend's name catch in his throat with despair, and then his breath as well, as something hit him in the back and projected him forward.

He landed against Jingyi's front. A-Tong's hand made contact with his back, and light exploded around them, warmth running over his skin as a different energy chased off the miasma.

"The uniform," he realized out loud. "Jingyi, the array in our clothes—"

"I got it," Jingyi said.

In tandem they took off their cloaks and put them over A-Tong's struggling body. For a second the
spell blinded them, forcing Lan Sizhui to put an arm over his eyes so as not to lose complete sight, until at last all noise vanished. Panting, he blinked tears away and looked.

A-Tong laid under the two white robes, still and breathless. The left sleeve of his upper clothing was empty.

"Young master Mo," Lan Jingyi said with a wide smile. "How did you know that it would work?"

Sizhui realized that Mo Xuanyu was standing where he himself had been only a moment ago. "Mmh?" the man replied. "I didn't. I just thought you looked like you needed your friend's help."

"What! You just threw Sizhui into danger—"

"Thank you," Lan Sizhui interrupted. Mo Xuanyu glanced at him; Sizhui hit his fist to his palm and bowed as deeply as he could. "Thank you for saving his life," he added, closing his eyes with relief.

If anything happened to Jingyi, he would never forgive himself.

Silence greeted his words. Lan Sizhui straightened up slowly, surprised to find Mo Xuanyu frowning at him.

"Why do you bow like this?" the man asked in an odd voice.

Sizhui felt himself flush. "Er," he replied, "I'm sorry if I offended you, young master Mo. This is just a habit, I wasn't thinking."

If anything, Mo Xuanyu looked even angrier.

"You're not omega," he said coldly. "Why would you bow like one?"

Jingyi's hand touched Sizhui's shoulder warmly. He replied in his stead: "Sizhui's like this with everyone, young master. Our seniors renounced trying to teach otherwise long ago—he's just a weird alpha."

"Jingyi," Sizhui protested, face burning.

Lan Jingyi laughed. Mo Xuanyu kept staring at Lan Sizhui for a second longer, his delicate face pinched with anger, before turning his back to them. He said no other word. With the powerful energy gone from the garden, his scent came stronger, honey thick on the nightwind even as he walked away. It left Sizhui feeling strangely bereft and strangely young.

That fleeting loneliness left as vile power once more rose over the estate. Lan Sizhui tensed, his hand on his sword. "Do you feel that?" he asked Lan Jingyi.

Jingyi nodded wordlessly.

From the other side of the garden, Madam Mo rose, her skin greyed out and her hair thinning to dust.

The demonic arm attached to Madam Mo's body was unlike anything Wei Wuxian had seen before. The energy it exuded was stronger than any fierce spirit or ghost. Thicker and viler than a ghoul's,
even more potent than a god's. The fact that it had managed to attach to two different bodies and control them enough to fight—to fight well, for neither of the Lan boys was weak—was impressive in and of itself, but four murders in a row for what wasn't even a complete corpse was unheard of.

Being near it felt like being near the Stygian Tiger Seal. Wei Wuxian's skin had not stopped shivering since first feeling it over his body.

He almost ran away when one of the two boys launched a signal in the air to call for help. He had no desire to meet any familiar face and risk discovery, even if the cover of lunatic omega should be enough for most to look the other way. But seeing Lan Jingyi struggle so bravely against the creature held him back for reasons he preferred not to consider.

Kneeling by Mo Ziyuan's forgotten body felt only natural. He grabbed him by the collar, bringing his wrinkled ear close, and whispered: "Wake up, now."

The corpse gargled and groaned.

His order carried over to A-Tong and the Mo family head as well, to his surprise. The three woken corpses rose to their feet and gathered around him, their empty eyes staring somewhere near his chin, elbow, or hip.

He hadn't used such powers in thirteen years, yet it felt like yesterday. Resentful energy ran under his skin and dampened the painful glow of Mo Xuanyu's core in his chest, allowing him to breathe easy for the first time since coming back to life. Wei Wuxian let out a curt, joyless laugh.

"See that arm attached to your mother?" he murmured to Mo Ziyuan's dead body. "The three of you go shred it now. Don't touch the boys in white."

They ran with all the strength of newly-awakened soldiers.

Even so, they struggled. Lan Jingyi and his alpha companion marked a moment of surprise at the arrival of the three bodies, but seeing as they immediately threw themselves at Madam Mo and not either of them, both seemed to take it in stride and go back to the fight. Wei Wuxian stayed under the roof of the gallery that ran around the garden as he watched. He met the alpha boy's eyes once and put up what he hoped to be a sufficiently scared expression.

Being in the presence of such a battle without any means to stop it was more grating than he would have imagined. If he had Chenqing with him, this would be over in seconds; Wei Wuxian had never met a corpse who did not end up obeying him before, no matter how shaky his control became overtime. His body was healthy now, if a little bruised up. All the cuts on his arms had healed. The contract took Wei Wuxian's invention of the spirit lures as proof that he was responsible for the Mo family's death.

Were he armed now, even such a demonic being would not resist him.

He had nothing, however. Mo Xuanyu's cultivation tools had all been stolen by Mo Ziyuan before he even had time to see them, and he had no idea where the boy may have hidden them before being killed. He could do nothing but watch as the corpses he controlled were being torn to shreds and the two Lan juniors started slowing with fatigue.

He tore leaves out of a nearby oak before he could help it. In that moment the thought of being recognized evaded him—he couldn't let Lan Jingyi die, not after glimpsing so much hope within him without realizing for himself the full scope of changes that the last thirteen years had brought.

The night was dark around them, cloudy for the strength of miasma emerging from the cursed arm.
The shivers over Wei Wuxian's skin hurt almost more than the core in his chest did, and it was with nausea deep in his throat that he poured as much power as he could into the leaves without outright shredding them, hoping for anything to be called who could save the two boys before him.

A sharp note cut through the scene, stilling Madam Mo in her steps and chasing all the clouds away. Moonlight poured over the garden. Warmth made Wei Wuxian's goosebumps vanish.

"Hanguang-Jun!" the Lan boys called in evident relief.

Another note of the guqing rang. The arm fell from Madam Mo's shoulder and shriveled onto the ground.

Wei Wuxian looked up.

The man who stood above the roof of the house glowed almost like a spirit himself. His white robes swayed into the wind that the guqin's sound created, finer and more pristine than Wei Wuxian remembered. He thought he would have recognized him even if the night had remained dark and the garden swallowed up in smoke.

Lan Wangji flew down from the roof without a word, accepting his juniors' greetings with a simple nod of the head. He gave the alpha boy a sealing pouch to put the arm in and spoke, lowly, to Lan Jingyi.

Wei Wuxian sighed and let the torn leaves fall from his hands. With as light a step as he could manage, he slithered out of the garden and through the opening in the outer wall.

The smell of sandalwood seemed to warm the very air.

Chapter End Notes

I don't sleep, ever
Chapter 10

Wei Wuxian had not experienced fever in years.

He couldn't count those years he spent dead among them. What few fleeting impressions of afterlife had lingered upon resuscitation were long gone, wiped from his mind like dust swept from wood. Those memories were not his to preserve now that he was back to life; that peace was the dead's hard-earned reward, and who knew how far away he was now from earning it again.

If he earned it. The longer he spent in Mo Xuanyu's body, the more he felt his frustration dissipate in favor of pity, but the envy… this, he couldn't be rid of.

Heat caught up with him only two days out of Mo village. Wei Wuxian traveled on the back of the mean donkey he stole there, avoiding broader roads and any sign of towns or villages. He had no idea which way to go or even what to do, but he went. He had never been one to sit still and simmer; his one experience of building a home for himself had only made him feel more alienated and out of touch with his own body. It was on that same donkey's back that he first felt pain force his body to bend and his throat to constrict over moans, and he only had the presence of mind to lead the creature as deep into the forest as he could before it fully overtook him. He found a cave at the edge of a deep-set river, somewhere wind and water should work to mask his scent, and climbed down against the rocks till he could finally collapse.

For years before he died, Wei Wuxian had refused heat. Much of his research in Yiling had been spent in the company of Wen Qing, trying to figure out how to grow the white flowers that moonless tea were made of on a soil so sullied with death. It was for the sake of many, he told her; Wen Qing looked at him in silence and acquiesced, though he knew—she knew, oh, she knew—why he cared so much.

The seeds never took to Yiling's deadened earth. They had to compromise by growing them in the grotto that Wei Wuxian inhabited, in clay pots wide enough for grown men to sit in. Wei Wuxian had not experienced heat since Yunmeng had burned. He had promised himself, months after the end of the war, that he never would again.

More than the sharp pain that Mo Xuanyu's body experienced, more, even, than the discomfort of sweat and slickness he had so loathed as a child in that empty shack in Yunmeng, Wei Wuxian was overwhelmed by fear.

For three days he didn't sleep. He forced his body upright in the farthest corner of the damp cave, heedless of the river sometimes spilling in over smooth rock and licking at his cold feet. He kept watch over the entrance as the sun set and rose, clutching his stomach with one hand and a large stone with the other.

He wished he had a sword.

He lit no fire. He ate and drank nothing. Mo Xuanyu must have some sort of cultivation training, for his body was sturdy enough for two days of inedia. Wei Wuxian meditated during those as he
shivered and shook, eyes never leaving the arc-like opening of the cave, ready to attack whoever dared to look in.

No one did.

Mo Xuanyu's cycle was a short one. It was more intense than what Wei Wuxian remembered of his own—his had lingered in discomfort and silence for days, thick and drowsy, panic smoothing over his heart and limbs during the long hours of night—but when the third day died in pink light and cool wind, he stopped shivering. His hold relaxed on the black stone. He licked his parched lips amidst halted, hollow gasps, and crawled to the edge of the riverbed to finally quench his thirst.

He was surprised to find the stolen donkey grazing the grass above, completely unbothered. Wei Wuxian had not taken the time to tie it somewhere, not knowing how long he would be out of it and whether the creature would be able to feed itself, but it seemed this part of the forest was good enough. The animal barely reacted to seeing him climb back to ground level.

With somewhat weak hands, Wei Wuxian picked berries from low bushes to feed on. He had no bow on him to hunt for birds or deer. After he found moonless tea and some sort of scent-masking drug somewhere, acquiring one would be his first order of business.

He hated how shaken he was when he mounted the donkey again to go on his way, but he pushed through. He always did.

Keeping to wilder paths was enough to stay fed for the next few days. He found a house about a week after leaving Mo village, empty of its inhabitants though obviously not abandoned. He felt only minimal guilt upon breaking open the door and raiding part of their pantry. A few slices of dried meat to chew on, clean clothes, a kitchen knife. The worst of the three bows lined by the back door, and a handful of arrows. He hesitated when his nose picked up the faint trace of sweetscent; he found ink and paper on a table by the corner, and wrote a curt note of apology to whichever omega lived there.

The next day, he arrived at a bigger town right by the side of a tall mountain. The people of Dafan walked subduedly through the streets, murmuring to each other by the shadow of alleyways. Wei Wuxian had not meant to venture so close to them; but too many times did he cross paths with small-sect cultivators on his way through the forest, all of whom only gave him short glances of curiosity but not a word of scorn.

He had never been very good at resisting curiosity.

The Lan boys' words already seemed so far away from him. After days of traveling alone, it was easy to think himself back to his own time and be wary of any stranger who could stumble upon him—easy to forget what he had learned and disbelieved in Mo village, what he had seen in the person of Lan Jingyi.

But it was true. All of it was true.

Not just the relative peace he was left in, despite painting to all who looked the picture of a lone omega traveling unchaperoned. Not even the sight of several omega working at stalls or simply walking through the streets. But cultivators were gathered all around for a night hunt of some kind, small clan banners held high as they muttered among themselves, and though Wei Wuxian didn't catch scent of another of his kind among them, they hardly noticed him as well. Some threw dark looks his way, but that was all.

Looks.
He sold some of the game he had caught the day before to pay for a proper meal and bath at the nearest inn. Once more, the tenants only seemed mildly displeased to have to serve him; they even fetched a young omega girl to show him to a different part of the establishment, where a bathroom stood smothered in the sweet scent of others. Wei Wuxian washed the sweat and blood off of his skin and wondered, apprehension heavy in his chest, what could have possibly happened to make the world change so.

He opened the door of the room too harshly; the girl from earlier who stood on the other side let out a breath of surprise and clutched the fabric of her apron tightly.

"Sorry," he said blankly.

She shook her head. "No, young master, I'm sorry. I should have made my presence known."

He stared at her for a long while.

She was obviously omega, though her scent was so mild as to be almost forgotten. Cooler than it was sweet—closer to beta than her true status. He couldn't even point out what it was she smelled like with any exactitude.

"Um," she started again, visibly bothered by his scrutiny. "I have, um, medicine. If you wish."

Wei Wuxian stayed silent for another second before answering, "What sort of medicine?"

"You know," she blushed. "That—that sort of medicine. You, um, your scent is… I fear—well. It's not proper like this."

He had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

She seemed to understand it well enough. She touched his arm timidly—taking her hand back when he shook it off without thinking—and asked, "Were you… were you raised in a house?"

"You mean in an omega house," he said.

Her face turned even redder. With surprise, he understood that it was due to anger more than embarrassment. "Please follow me," she urged him in a low voice.

He agreed easily enough. It wasn't as though he had anything better to do.

The girl took him to another room neighboring the one where he bathed, ushering him inside with more deference than he felt was deserved and quickly lighting candles all around. It was a cold little place, clean to a fault and covered with shelves upon shelves of flasks and vials full of dried leaves and viscous, mud-like medicine.

"This is moonless tea," she told him uselessly—he would recognize the smell and appearance of all of these drugs in pure darkness. After all, he had prepared them himself often enough. "And this is to mask your scent."

"How do you have all this?" he couldn't help but ask.

There was misguided pity in her eyes when she answered. "Sometimes we get people like you who were still raised in houses. Lots of families disobey the law, young master—it's unfair," she added in sudden rage, "but I can help you mask your scent. Out here it is considered more polite to be… discreet."
Discretion had never been one of Wei Wuxian's strengths, but in this case, he supposed that it suited his goals.

The girl was obviously acting under the belief that he had spent his life in isolation and recently run away. He felt no need to dissuade her of the idea; instead he played the part to his best, asking questions here and there and trying his best not to show how world-shattering her answers were.

Ten years. For ten years now, she said, the greater cultivation sects had abolished omega houses and dealt harsh punishment onto those who were found to follow tradition.

How? Why?

He took the medicine from her without bothering to ask. He doubted she would know. But his mind ran amok with guesses all more unbelievable than the next as he drank the familiar tea and spread bitter paste over his tongue. It wasn't the kind that Wen Qing and Wen Ning had used to outright cheat their status, but rather something else, something that turned the smell of him as watery and faint as the girl's own.

Wei Wuxian had never used scent masking in his first life. It would have been useless to him even if the whole world hadn't known who and what he was; after all, after losing his core, he had smelled of nothing at all.

He still hadn't grown used the brightness and weight of Mo Xuanyu's undamaged spirituality. He feared the thought of ever using it—this untrained, untouched thing in his chest, small and shining and unbearably warm. Resentful energy was so much more familiar, so much easier to trust and reach for. He needn't spend years training from scratch again for it.

It seemed to him that he could hear the sound of Lan Wangji's voice belittling him all those years ago: The dark path damages the heart and spirit, Wei Ying.

He snorted faintly. The Lan sect heir had too often tried to meddle with his business in those years. He was glad to have escaped Mo village before having to face him—he doubted the man's opinion of him had grown any warmer after what had transpired in Nightless City.

His heart ached. Wei Wuxian chased the memory quickly.

Fewer looks were thrown his way when he left the inn a while later. What little money he had gathered from hunting was gone again, but he still had the stolen bow, and now enough reserves of medicine to last him for a while. Darkness crept over the sky as nighttime approached, and the streets were now almost full to bursting with cultivators. Some even held evil-targeting compasses like the ones he had once created.

The hypocrisy grated at him. It made him want to slap the devices out of their hands and break them before their eyes until they felt a third of the frustration that he did.

Wei Wuxian mounted the donkey again and headed for the mountain. He saw many more people that way, all obviously gathered to hunt for a big enough prize. The girl at the inn had mentioned to him the stories of people losing their souls since a landslide not long ago had unearthed tombs on the softer mountain grounds. He had no interest in any of it.

Or at least he did not, until he saw the silhouette of a man sitting on a wide root and looking emptily at the dirt road. He held a lamp in his hands, the glow of which shone only over his rich clothes. Not anywhere on the vegetation around or the ground under his feet.

The back of his skull was blown open.
"Hello," the ghost said to him.

"Good evening," Wei Wuxian answered, tugging on the donkey's reins to slow its pace. "Crowded tonight, isn't it?"

The ghost ignored his question. He looked at his bare fingers, rubbing them with his thumbs, and said, "I need my rings. I need to find my rings."

This one would be easy enough to exorcize and send back to the realm of the dead, Wei Wuxian thought, as long as one found the riches which must have been stolen from his tomb. He found himself hoping that someone would.

Ghost lights and spirit lures hung from many trees around. The forest was thick enough to mask most of the stars overhead, but still everything around glowed oddly. Wei Wuxian could see just fine in the darkness, as if night hadn't fallen at all. The soul-stealing monster they were all hunting must truly be worth a lot.

He didn't know where to go.

The thought simmered at the back of his mind as he slowly rode along the mountainside. He was alive, he was free of Mo Xuanyu's wishes, he was in the possession of a brand new body only a handful of years older than his had been when he died. *Now what*, he kept wondering. What did he do with it? Did he go somewhere no one knew him and settle down until his days were over once more? Did he forget his name and past and simply wait?

He had never learned any way to live that wasn't linked with cultivation, but he could not come back to it. Yearn as he did to return to Yunneng and fall asleep in the bed which had cradled his childhood, this dream was an impossible one. The perspective alone crushed his heart with misery.

He was thinking such thoughts when his path once more crossed that of a group of cultivators. They were three with compasses in hand, muttering among themselves, heedless of his coming. "Useless thing," the oldest of them said, shaking his compass. "The old ways are the only viable ones."

"This is the Yiling Patriarch's invention you are talking about," his companion replied. "When have they ever failed us?"

"Because it is the Yiling Patriarch's invention, we should never have started using it in the first place."

And so on and on they argued. Wei Wuxian watched them from atop the donkey's back, curious and flatly amused at once. That was thrice now that he heard of himself spoken about in such a way. Maybe he had been foolish in thinking that the world would soon forget about his existence.

The group dragged along the dirt path noisily. Wei Wuxian followed them from a distance. A minute later one of them cried out, and a bright flash of yellow light shrouded them all, forcing Wei Wuxian to put a hand over his eyes.

When he took it off, the cultivators were hanging from a tree branch, trapped inside a golden net.

"Help!" the youngest, a woman, cried out. She and her companions struggled, only managing to ensconce themselves further into net's powerful grip. She saw Wei Wuxian in the distance. "Help!" she called to him.

"This is a deity-binding net," he replied loudly to her. And indeed it was: the rich glow of the strings spoke of minutious knotting, helped by wielding spiritual energy directly through the strands. "I'm
sorry, I don't have any magical tools on me. You're on your own.” He kicked the side of the donkey to hurry it along. "The mountain is crawling with cultivators, I'm sure someone will find you soon," he added.

"You can't leave us behind! Young master, come back—"

The sound of hurried footsteps reached him then. The donkey's ear lifted to greet it, and Wei Wuxian dismounted quickly, hiding beneath the largest tree he could find.

He saw a young boy emerge from the bushes. He wore the golden-and-white peony of Lanlingjin, and on his pale forehead, the red dot reserved for members of the clan.

"Hah?" he let out in a still-youthful voice. "You're not spirits!"

"Of course we're not," the old cultivator in the net replied cuttingly. "Let us down now, boy."

But the boy in question looked highly disappointed. Wei Wuxian saw his hand relax its grip on the handle of the golden sword at his hip; he turned away from the trapped group and replied, "No way. I don't have time to lose with small fry like you. Just stay put until the hunt's over."

"You little—!"

The boy left without even answering.

How petulant.

It was easy enough to follow him. The Jin clan had always enjoyed its vibrant, rich clothing, so easy to discern among the more practical clothes worn by any other sect. Only Gusulan had ever come close in terms of flashiness—and their clothes remained practical despite their mournful coloring, meant for moving in as much as meditation or philosophy. Lanlingjin only ever cared about wealth.

It didn't surprise Wei Wuxian that this boy was the one to have set up such a pricey trap. No Jin clan cultivator enjoyed fair competition.

He watched the boy check up on a few more of those nets, which he had apparently set all over the mountain before the hunt even began. It made him laugh mockingly in the shadows of the trees; such a show of extravagance suited the clan much too well. Some things, it seemed, had not changed.

He quietly bit into one of the apples he had bought in town, pushing away the curious donkey's head when it tried to steal some for itself. The Jin boy was hard at work securing his nets, grunting with the effort of climbing trees or cutting up bothersome bushes. The bow strung around his back was painted with gold leaf. The sword, when he took it out, looked almost too long for him. It glowed familiarly.

Wei Wuxian's foot broke a twig in the silence—the boy jumped on his heels and shot an arrow his way, shouting, "Who's there?"

He avoided the blow easily enough; the boy had aimed in his general direction rather than directly at him, and the arrow pierced into the bark of an old pine tree harmlessly. However, Wei Wuxian stumbled out of his hiding spot, coughing around his mouthful of apple.

"Is that how you greet everyone you meet?" he asked a little breezily.

He expected the boy to reply in anger. Instead, his young face darkened with disgust as he said, "Oh, it's you."
Wei Wuxian observed him curiously. "Have we met?"

"What do you mean, have we met?" the boy snarled. "I wish I never had to meet you again. What are you even doing here? Do you think winning the hunt will place you back in the clan's favor? You're even more shameless than I thought, Mo Xuanyu."

This was too much animosity for them to be simple acquaintances.

Madam Mo had mentioned Lanling before she died. Wei Wuxian remember it in sudden clarity; she had said that Mo Xuanyu had come back from Lanling, had implied that he had done so in shame, even. And Mo Xuanyu's body knew inedia. It knew enough to procure the summoning ritual Wei Wuxian himself had created in Yiling and execute it flawlessly—a ritual which Lanlingjin could reasonably have taken as war gains once Wei Wuxian died in the Burial Mounds, considering the sect's standing after Qishanwen had fallen.

A no-name omega boy from a village far from any of the bigger clans, accepted as a disciple of Lanling. It could only make sense under one light. Hadn't Jin Guangshan made a point in the last months of Wei Wuxian's life to gather as many of his bastard children as he could?

Wei Wuxian felt nauseous again for entirely different reasons.

The boy in front of him looked even more impatient than before. "What's with you?" he spat. "Don't think Little Uncle will ever look at you again, even if you do win tonight."

Little Uncle? Wei Wuxian wondered. "I'm simply taking a stroll," he replied. "I don't care about any uncle of yours."

For some reason, the boy's face grew crimson with outrage. "How dare you!" he shouted. "After everything you did to him, you filthy omega—"

"Watch your tongue," Wei Wuxian cut off in a snap of irritation. "I've had enough of you, I believe. Have fun cheating your way into this hunt."

He had barely turned his back when he heard the all-too familiar sound of metal slicing the air.

Wei Wuxian sidestepped the boy's sword easily enough. The boy was still red in the face and sputtering with outrage; he swung again and again, lacking elegance and technique in his anger. Wei Wuxian danced around the tip of the blade with something like satisfaction, until the boy stumbled forward and he could kick him in the backside.

He hit the ground with a sharp cry. Wei Wuxian snapped a leaf out of the nearest tree and suffused it with energy, calling upon the remnants of dead bodies that the forest surely hid. They answered his appeal within seconds, and soon enough the leaf which he had thrown in the boy's direction became haunted with the weight of several spirits. The boy choked for a moment, now unable to rise.

"What are you doing, Mo Xuanyu?" he asked, watching Wei Wuxian with wide eyes. "This, this sort of technique—"

"You attacked me," Wei Wuxian replied lazily. "I should be allowed to defend myself, don't you think? I was unarmed."

He approached the boy, who now lay belly-first against the dirt. With a kick, he brought up the sword that had been dropped during the very short exchange.

"Don't touch that!"
Wei Wuxian ignored the pleading voice. It was a nice sword in more ways than one—not simply richly decorated and taken care of, but well-balanced, finely forged. He felt a thrum of spiritual energy on it which spoke more of its smith's qualities than of the boy at his feet's.

"Very nice," he muttered. He shook it till his hand rested fully around the handle, stabilizing his hold and letting him appreciate how light the weapon was, almost as light as Suibian once was. "I'll be keeping this," he told the boy.

"Don't you dare," the child replied, visibly panicked. "Don't, don't you dare, that's my sword, give it back—"

"See you around, young master Jin," Wei Wuxian declared as he turned his back.

"Mo Xuanyu!"

Fear seemed to enhance the faint river-like scent on him. It surprised Wei Wuxian long enough to make him glance over his shoulder one last time; the boy—a beta, against what he had expected—now looked much, much younger. Tears even shone in his eyes. It was almost enough to tempt Wei Wuxian into giving back the weapon.

Well, it wasn't as if he intended to keep it forever. Let the child stew a bit and learn a lesson in humility.

He left the small clearing in the direction of the first net. The donkey was where Wei Wuxian had left it, grazing dumbly, entirely unbothered by the noise and light around. Wei Wuxian grabbed its reins in one hand with a chuckle and led it back to where he had first dismounted.

The group was still hanging from the golden net. At the sight of him their staring turned to glares, at least until Wei Wuxian sent the sword flying and cut them free.

They fell to the ground all over each other, yelping in surprise.

He caught the sword as it flew back to him. He hadn't put any specific energy into it, but somehow, the weapon had obeyed him. Wei Wuxian ignored the grumbling thanks that the three cultivators addressed him in favor of frowning at the handle and blade. The more he looked and the more familiar it seemed, though he could not place where he could have possibly seen it before. He lifted it so that the ghost lights could shine better upon it, trying to jog his own memories.

"There's more nets," he told the three cultivators. "Be careful where you step."

The oldest man huffed. His alpha-scent tickled Wei Wuxian's nose disagreeably. "We didn't need your help," he said. "You better get lost before that monster shows up."

"Father," the woman scolded.

The man walked away with a purpose. The younger man by his side—a brother perhaps, for their faces looked faintly similar—ran after him quickly. Only the woman stayed a moment longer to bow at the shoulder in thanks, shooting Wei Wuxian a quick smile.

Now that this was done, Wei Wuxian should go back to the boy's side. The spirits trapped in the leaf should only hold him down for another few minutes.

He found him as he had left him: flat down on the dirt and swearing under his breath. This lack of manners was familiar as well, Wei Wuxian thought as he crouched next to him, though the only person he could think of with such foul temper was not, in fact, someone he wanted to think of.
Those memories of Yunmeng were better left buried.

"Did you have time to meditate on your flaws?" he asked the boy, planting the sword's blade into the ground and leaning his weight on its handle.

As expected, the sight of such mishandling made the boy's eyes widen with rage. "Let me go," he snapped.

"No can do, young master. I'd like an apology."

"You?" The boy laughed in a shaky and joyless way. "I'd never apologize to you."

Too bad, Wei Wuxian thought.

He hadn't expected mores to have shifted quite so thoroughly anyway. If even freed omega had to mask themselves to be considered worth talking to, then the world was not so different after all.

He snapped his fingers, dissipating the hold that the spirits had on the boy's body. He immediately jumped to his feet, trying to grab for the sword in Wei Wuxian's hand with no success. "Give it back!" he shouted.

"It's just a sword," Wei Wuxian replied, smiling. "I'm sure the Jin sect smiths can forge you many more. Just give it to me if you don't want to apologize."

"It's not just a sword! That's my father's—"

A frisson of cold, wily energy ran over Wei Wuxian's skin.

He tuned out the boy's angry words. Wind slithered through the forest canopy and made leaves rustle softly, not fully hiding the faraway sounds of cultivators roaming the woods in search of the soul-stealing monster. Wei Wuxian tried to listen more closely to those steps, hurried or slow, coming from all around them.

He couldn't hear any animals, he realized. No birds, no insects, no rodents running between low bushes with their catches of the evening.

"Be quiet," he told the boy.

He thought for a second that he would not obey; but the boy took a look at his face and seemed to realize something was wrong, for he fell silent, looking around and putting a hand over the arc of his bow.

It was then that they heard it: a deep, low moan echoing through the mountain, as if rocks had cracked open and let out the very breath of the world.

The boy by his side had gone very still. He wasn't as tall as the two Lan disciples Wei Wuxian had met the week previous, but he looked even smaller now, painfully child-like. "What was that?" he whispered.

"Probably the target of tonight's hunt," Wei Wuxian replied.

He thought for a long second.

His hold shifted on the handle of the sword. He let the blade drag backwards to make it easier to move without a sheath of any kind and said, "Come on, then. Let's see what all the fuss is about."
To his credit, the boy followed with a determined look in his eyes.

Wei Wuxian could blame his curiosity for many things. This was one of them. Since hearing of the soulless victims who had come down from the mountain out of the omega girl's mouth, he had harbored doubts about the nature of the creature they were all dealing with. Spirits did not deal in souls like this, and neither did any monster he knew of. Fierce corpses, obviously, only dealt physical damage as well.

The fact that his own evil-targeting compasses seemed to be lost in proximity with this target was a big clue. The ghost he had seen on his way was another. No, this was not any spirit or monster—this was something different. Something rarer.

"How do you know where to go?" the boy whispered at one point of their trek through the woods.

His earlier worry had dissipated the longer they walked. Now he glanced periodically at the sword still held in Wei Wuxian's hand, no doubt looking for an opportunity to steal it back. Wei Wuxian shook his head in answer, smiling to himself at the thought of the boy trying to jump him, but still focused on the threads of cold energy he felt over his skin. They were thin but immutable; like physical tendrils extending from one place to the next, only swayed slightly by wind.

With his free hand, he touched one of them. The tip of his finger turned as cold as ice. He trailed it along the length of the string-like energy, almost feeling it in more than spirit. He thought he could have grabbed it with his whole hand and tugged at it, if he tried.

The trail led them to the wide opening of a cave. At the sight of it, the boy's shoulders relaxed. "I've already looked here," he told Wei Wuxian angrily. "There nothing in it, just a stupid goddess statue."

"What goddess?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"How should I know? Apparently the statue naturally looked human, so they started worshipping it ages ago. Making wishes at it and such."

"Mmh," Wei Wuxian said.

The cave positively reeked with unsettled energy. It was a wonder anyone could walk past it and not feel their bones turn to ice.

He felt very little like actually walking inside. "Did you come here alone?" he asked the boy, leaning back against the side of the cave and once more planting the sword into the ground. "Or do you have someone you can call?"

"I don't need anyone's help," the boy replied, flustered.

"You do with this," Wei Wuxian replied. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

Not much exposure to demonic cultivation, then. Which obviously made sense considering how loudly the Jin sect had disapproved of Wei Wuxian's practices—of Wei Wuxian himself—but which was of no help when such a beacon of darkness loomed, invisible to all the cultivators currently looking for it. "Close your eyes," Wei Wuxian said.

"What?" the boy exclaimed.

"Just do as I say. I'll give you your sword back if you're good."
The boy flushed angrily. With another muttered insult, he obeyed, his eyelids twitching slightly and his hands tense by his side. "No what?" he barked.

"Calm down. Try to feel the wind on your skin, try to hear every noise around. Breathe deeply."

To his surprise, the boy relaxed very quickly. Wei Wuxian felt his energy reach outward in search of sensation, of information to feed him; he watched him jump when a branch cracked in the wind, shiver when leaves fell into a gust of air.

He had talent. Innate, raw talent, obviously not trained the way it ought to be.

Was it because he was beta? Jin Guangshan had always so prioritized his bloodline despite his many affairs; even when he had searched for his children all over the country, Wei Wuxian remembered hearing of him dismissing most beta. If this boy was one of his sons, perhaps he had been sidelined in favor of whomever was the new heir. But then, it didn't explain how such a boy could have the money to buy and waste so many deity-binding nets, or why he carried such beautifully-crafted weapons. Wei Wuxian stroked the handle of the sword once more. It truly felt almost as agreeable to him as Suibian did all those years ago.

He was deep in thought when the boy started to shiver. "Why is it so cold?" he asked, eyes still tightly shut.

"This is what you're supposed to feel," Wei Wuxian replied. "Keep looking. Focus on the cold."

It wasn't a minute before the boy's eyes opened and he stepped back in fear.

Wei Wuxian pushed his body off of the rock. "Now," he told the boy, "do you understand why it would be foolish to try and handle this on your own?"

"What is it?" the boy asked, chest heaving ever-so-slightly under its embroidered tunic. "What— what monster is this?"

"I don't think it's a monster at all," Wei Wuxian replied. "I think this soul-stealing business is the work of the goddess you mentioned."

"The statue? But—"

Wei Wuxian could imagine what arguments he was coming up with, now. It was a rare thing for worshipped icons to turn into actual spiritual beings, capable of granting wishes or causing harm. Yet it was the only explanation as to why the compasses would not work, and the only story that could fit the sight of that old ghost, wandering the forest in search of his stolen jewels.

"I never learned how to seal a god," the boy said worriedly.

"No need to panic," Wei Wuxian replied. "I don't think it's strong enough yet to leave the cave on its own. Most likely, the people who lost their souls came here to pray, and the goddess took their souls in exchange for granting their wishes. They all came down from the mountain like this—she didn't come to them."

The boy sighed in relief.

"But," Wei Wuxian added, "I don't think she's far from being able to move. One more wish should do it."

"We can't let anyone get in here, then," the boy said.
"Exactly. Now let me ask you again: did you come here with someone you can ask for help? A master from your sect, perhaps? Someone with the tools and experience needed for such an exorcism."

The boy blushed a bright red. The line of his lips thinned.

Wei Wuxian idly tapped the blade of the sword against rock. The sound that his knocking produced echoed darkly inside the wide mouth of the cave.

"Stop that!" the boy said with another shiver. "Fine, all right, I came with my Uncle. Happy now?"

"Is he strong?" Wei Wuxian asked.

The boy looked at him as if he had grown a second head. "Of course he's strong," he replied. "Mo Xuanyu, you're so different. It's like you've lost your reason. Did you hit your head and lose all your memories?"

"Something like that," Wei Wuxian muttered.

The boy huffed, irritated yet still, somehow, arrogant. "I'll go get him, then," he said. "You stay here and don't take my sword anywhere!"

Then he vanished into the dark of the forest.

Wei Wuxian walked slowly to the middle of the cave's entrance. The ground in it sloped gently into the darkness, and that darkness was not total: into the depth of the grotto, he could glimpse flecks of soft orange light. Candles must still be lit from the last time someone had come to pray.

"Right, then," Wei Wuxian said.

He held the weirdly-obedient sword forward and stepped into the cave.

He didn't have to walk long. Barely two minutes later did he emerge into a wide cavity dug deep into rock, where candles burned out softly and the smell of incense itched in his throat. Light flickered off the smooth walls and around the tall statue at the center of the room.

It did look oddly like a human being. Set on a rough stone pedestal, it extended its many limbs in some semblance of elegance. Naturally-carved pieces such a this could never achieve true likeness, but this one came closer than most: the proportions of head, shoulders and limbs were pleasing to the eye. With candlelight drawing shadows out of every ridge, the statue almost seemed to have a face.

Wei Wuxian could hear it breathe. In and out and again, deep and slow like the lungs of a giant beast. He walked around it twice, looking for hints of human tampering and finding none at all. If he had, it would have been the product of demonic cultivation. Easy enough for him to decipher and put a stop to as long as he could find a powerful enough tool.

But there was no sign at all of foul play. The statue had simply gained sentience over centuries of worshipping, and the landslide and releasing of ghosts days prior had probably allowed for that accumulated energy to finally come alive.

Wei Wuxian walked out of the cave with much on his mind. On his way he crossed paths with a couple more cultivators; he addressed them a sheepish smile and said, "Nothing there, I'm afraid," trying to look as helpless as possible.

Mo Xuanyu's fine-featured face could occasionally come in handy. The two women thanked him for
the tip and walked out alongside him. Once they all reached the opening, they went their separate way, and Wei Wuxian sat once again by the side, trailing fingers over the length of the sword.

He could definitely understand why the child was so attached to it. He would personally prefer it look less garishly expensive, but it was agreeable to the hand. It pulled at Mo Xuanyu's core almost gently.

It took at least another hour for the boy to return. In that time Wei Wuxian fended off some more curious cultivators and ate two of the apples he had bought, spitting their seeds out for birds to feed on the next day. The donkey had followed him for some reason, and now stood some steps away, munching on the cores he had thrown.

The boy emerged out of a different set of bushes than the one he had traversed. His eyes lit up at the sight of Wei Wuxian, and he said, "There you are."

"Did you think I'd leave?" Wei Wuxian asked, twirling the sword in his hand.

"Stop playing with it!" the boy snapped. He glared at Wei Wuxian for another second before calling over his shoulder: "Uncle, over here. That's the cave I told you about."

Wei Wuxian pushed himself upright, dusting his stolen clothes as he did, glad for the excuse not to be so still anymore. He threw another look in direction of the cave while the boy's uncle's footsteps approached. He could still see the orange glow at the far end of the tunnel, which was good; it would help them when they went back with the intent to seal this time—

He smelled earth and rain, powerful enough to make him waver on his feet, sharp and electric. Like a landslide, a lightning strike. Like the aftermath of a storm.

"Well," the newcomer said. The anger in it was so achingly familiar that Wei Wuxian felt it like a spike between his ribs; like an arrow in-between the shoulder blades. "Before we start, I'm going to have to ask you to hand back that sword."

Wei Wuxian turned his head.

Jiang Cheng was so much taller now than he used to be. It could simply be that Mo Xuanyu stood much shorter than Wei Wuxian ever had, he thought in horrified humor, but there was no mistaking the way the years had eroded his once-shidi's face. Gone was the softness which he had so abhorred during their teenage years; gone were the slouched back or anxious bursts of movement which Jiang Cheng had insisted Yu Ziyuan teach him how to master.

He stood in the same regalia that Wei Wuxian had last seen him wear. He stood in his clan colors, the twin braids over his ears knotted tightly at the back of his head, Sandu hanging from his waist.

He was the splitting image of his father.

Wei Wuxian forgot to breathe. He forgot all about the vile energy that had frozen his veins with the goddess's proximity. He clutched the sword in his hand and met Jiang Cheng's disconcerned eyes and thought, *Don't look at me.*

*Don't look at me,* he thought, over and over despite the hollowness of his heart and Jiang Cheng's angry words, angry movements, angry concern. Days and weeks of arguing until swords had to be drawn, until Wei Wuxian finally earned the right not to answer Jiang Cheng's questions, until Jiang Cheng looked in horror at him with Wei Wuxian's blood on his face. *Don't look at me.*

But Jiang Cheng was not angry or concerned now. He stepped closer to Wei Wuxian, who made no
move of his own. "Did you hear me?" he asked.

"Uncle," the boy said.

"Not now, Jin Ling. We'll talk when you learn not to let amateurs get the drop on you like this."

That name.

"Jin Ling," Wei Wuxian said blankly.

The boy turned his way with a frown and replied, "What?"

But it wasn't him Wei Wuxian was seeing anymore.

He was seeing the pass near Lanling where he had once walked with Wen Ning by his side. He was
smelling scorched ground and blood, he was hearing the cries of cultivators falling to the monster he
had created and failed for once to control.

He was seeing Jin Zixuan in front of him with dirt and blood on his face; his extended hand and lax
fingers, the desperate sincerity in his voice as he begged, "Please, let me help you."

The golden sword in his grip as he bowed for one last time with a hand over his heart.

Wei Wuxian's fingers opened as if burned. The sword clattered to the ground in a fracas of sound,
echoing in the cave behind him and making the boy—Jin Ling—jump in surprise, his familiar
features frowning in a way Wei Wuxian had seen, a very long time ago, on the face of a young boy
his age, in a rocky maze in Qishan.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a transition chapter again, sorry. Also I always forget to say this but come tawk to
me on Tumblr and Twitter... I'm izanyas on both. I hope you enjoyed, see you soon for
more.
and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 11

Jin Ling let out a sharp, satisfied sound upon seeing his sword free at last. He walked quickly to Wei Wuxian's side and crouched to retrieve it. The handle fit into his palm easily, habit and lineage guaranteeing that Suihua would obey him better than it would anyone else.

Even Wei Wuxian.

It was with his heart in his throat that Wei Wuxian looked at the boy's face. His hand shook with the warmth of the sword's spirituality, as if he were still holding it, unaware of the reason it was so keen to heed him. He was a fool. He should have realized sooner, he should never have touched that sword. He had no right to.

Jiang Cheng walked forward as well until he was by his nephew's side. "Don't let it get stolen again," he barked at the boy. "What would your mother say?"

Jin Ling blushed. "Don't tell her," he muttered.

"Hah? Why shouldn't I? She said to keep an eye on you."

"That doesn't mean you have to tell her everything!"

Wei Wuxian grabbed onto the bow strung across his shoulder for lack of a better thing to do. Its wood was poor and splintered. He squeezed it in his palm till the feel of the sword washed away.

He wanted to leave now, while the other two were busy arguing—mount the donkey and trot as far from Dafan as he could get the beast to go and never look back. But Jiang Cheng's keen eyes moved from Jin Ling to settle on him the moment he made to step away, and Wei Wuxian could only stand to meet them for a second before looking aside.

"You," Jiang Cheng said. "Tell me your name. What brings you here, and why did you steal my nephew's sword? You're not wearing any clan colors."

"That's just Mo Xuanyu," Jin Ling replied before Wei Wuxian could even think of an answer. "I told you about him. Little Uncle threw him out of the tower months ago."

"That's just Mo Xuanyu," Jin Ling replied before Wei Wuxian could even think of an answer. "I told you about him. Little Uncle threw him out of the tower months ago."

Jiang Cheng stared harder at Wei Wuxian, squinting to better catch his features in the dark. Wei Wuxian resisted the urge to hunch in on himself. "He does look a little like Lianfang-Zun," Jiang Cheng said with some reluctance.

Wei Wuxian had no idea who Lianfang-Zun was. All he wanted was for Jiang Cheng to stop looking at him.

Figuring that going on with the part of crazed omega reject was the better way of ensuring Jiang Cheng lost all interest in him, he said, "You shouldn't stare like this, you know. People might get ideas."
Jin Ling blushed to the roots of his hair. "M-Mo Xuanyu!" he stammered. "Do you not know who you're talking to?"

"Should I?"

The boy spluttered and reddened again. It would have been amusing under any other circumstance, but as it were, Wei Wuxian felt no reason for laughter. At least his words seemed to have worked; Jiang Cheng had raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked away.

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked the flustered Jin Ling, losing all interest in Wei Wuxian. "Surely it wasn't to introduce me to yet another uncle of yours."

That word, spoken in Jiang Cheng's voice, made Wei Wuxian want to bury himself in the ground.

"Like I'd want to show that stupid omega to anyone," Jin Ling replied with a sneer. And then —"Ow! What was that for?"

He was rubbing his head and glaring at Jiang Cheng, who was now taking back the hand with which he had struck him. "I told you not to speak like that," Jiang Cheng snapped. "What are those fools in Lanling teaching you? I'll have words with sister."

"Fine, fine, I get it!" Jin Ling stuck out his hand and pointed at the entrance of the cave, saying, "Mo Xuanyu said that noise earlier came from inside. Apparently it's not a spirit or monster, but a goddess taking the villagers' souls."

"A goddess?"

Jiang Cheng advanced toward the entrance and stood for a second in front of it, feeling the air. Energy sprung out of his body in a much finer way than it had out of Jin Ling's. Wei Wuxian grit his teeth and turned away, well intent on leaving this time.

Once more, Jiang Cheng's voice stopped him. "Hold on," he said in as cool a tone as he had when first walking into the clearing.

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. "Yes?" he replied, looking back over his shoulder.

"How did you find that place?"

Jiang Cheng's expression was dark. He must have felt what Wei Wuxian did without even the need for reaching earlier: the cold, earth-deep emanations of the statue inside, telling all who would lend an ear of its intention to cause harm.

"Luck, I suppose," Wei Wuxian replied.

"He said he felt it," Jin Ling interrupted, shaking his head. He still hadn't put Suihua back in its scabbard, as if he had missed the sword too much to let go of it now. "He showed me how to feel it too—I never would've guessed something so evil was hiding in plain sight."

"Did he," Jiang Cheng murmured coolly. "Are you such a good cultivator then, Mo Xuanyu, to be able to sense resentful energy before anyone else?"

"Of course not," Wei Wuxian said. "You heard Jin Ling. I was thrown out of the Tower."

He couldn't quite convince himself to add in an idiotic smile. He felt as if the charade would crumble with so much as a breeze—as though if Jiang Cheng were to become too inquisitive, too suspicious,
Wei Wuxian would shatter into pieces.

He needed to leave.

Unfortunately, Jiang Cheng had different intentions. "Come with me," he said, entering the mouth of the cave. "Both of you. If this is truly the work of a goddess, you might prove useful."

Jin Ling threw Wei Wuxian an annoyed glance as he followed into his uncle's steps. Wei Wuxian considered making a run for it, but a single glare from Jiang Cheng, even into the cave's darkness, dissuaded him. He couldn't outrun someone who flew as well as his former shidi.

The miasma inside the cave wasn't any more pleasant the second time around. The journey to the wide room inside seemed shorter too, and too soon was Wei Wuxian exposed to the full blast of the statue's creeping energy. He shuddered under his thin clothes.

Jiang Cheng told Jin Ling to stay back as he approached the statue. Sandu drew out of its sheath with nary a sound, its glow echoing onto the smooth cave walls, once more making Wei Wuxian's chest ache. The last time he had seen that sword, it had been stained with blood.

Sandu's blade tapped against various parts of the goddess statue. The rock did not move despite the disagreeable sound of metal on rock and the threat of such a fierce weapon, which confirmed Wei Wuxian's earlier suspicions: the goddess did not yet have the means to leave its home.

"Mo Xuanyu," Jiang Cheng said into the silence. Wei Wuxian looked at him from the corner of his eyes again, but the other man was staring at the statue in front of him, his face unreadable. "How do you figure we should go about stopping such a thing?"

"I wouldn't know," Wei Wuxian muttered.

"You don't look well."

He didn't feel well. With a golden core in his chest where for so long only emptiness had been, the cold energy on Wei Wuxian's skin almost burned.

"I fear this monster will steal my soul as well," he replied evenly. "Like it did with those poor villagers. It's enough to give anyone shivers."

"Mmh." Jiang Cheng, to Wei Wuxian's surprise, sheathed Sandu again. "Stealing souls," he said. "It sounds like a silly legend, doesn't it? I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen that poor girl for myself when I arrived. It sounds too much like all those things they used to say about the Yiling Patriarch."

Wei Wuxian could hardly breathe. He looked at Jin Ling standing back by the tunnel, whose face bore only the mildest disapproval as he stared up and down the statue. He threw a quick frown at his uncle when those last words left his mouth, but didn't otherwise react.

"The Yiling Patriarch will kidnap you if you don't behave," Jiang Cheng went on softly. He was walking around the statue again; the path he took brought him closer to Wei Wuxian, the sound of his footsteps echoing loudly in the cave. "Those who go mad had their souls stolen by him. It's foolish, isn't it? There is no human capable of stealing someone else's soul, no matter how deeply they research the dark arts."

"So this is not the work of a human," Wei Wuxian said.

He couldn't feel the beat of his own heart. He couldn't feel his skin, numb as it was because of the
goddess's spirit licking all over it. He absently rubbed a hand against his elbow, trying to find some warmth.

"Is that what you're saying?"

"Who knows," Jiang Cheng said. Wei Wuxian glanced at him in a panic, having not realized how close he had gotten; he looked away as soon as their eyes met. "Just because Wei Wuxian couldn't figure out how to do it doesn't mean it's impossible. He liked to act smarter and better than everyone else, but even he was only human. Even he died in the end."

"Uncle?" Jin Ling asked, looking at them in curiosity.

"Mo Xuanyu," Jiang Cheng said, booming. He stood now in front of Wei Wuxian, tall and broad as he had never been before; and in a brief, glacial instant, Wei Wuxian's mind was overcome with the ugliest, the basest of all fears, thickening in his limbs and making his mouth taste of grass and dirt. "How long have you been walking the demonic path?"

His outstretched hand moved as if to grip the front of Wei Wuxian's clothes.

Before it could, the sound came to them all of someone stepping into the cave. They looked toward the tunnel and found a man dressed all in grey, holding a candle in his hand and blinking into the darkness. "What are you all doing here?" he asked in the same dialect that the villagers used. "You're cultivators too, aren't you? They're all over the mountain."

"It's none of your business, old man," Jin Ling replied, turning his nose away.

"Rude child," the man grumbled.

He then walked toward the statue. Wei Wuxian watched him with increasing dread, but Jiang Cheng's presence and words made him too late in understanding why.

"Stop," he said, but the man was already kneeling by the pedestal with his eyes closed. His hand turned the end of the candle toward one of the lit flames around; Wei Wuxian took in a sharp breath and walked out of Jiang Cheng's space and reach, repeating, "Stop!"

The wick of the candle took fire, lighting the man's face from under in a soft orange glow.

Wei Wuxian felt the breath of the goddess around him, over his face and hands, at the hollow of his heart. He met its gaze when rock shifted around where its face should be, digging holes for eyes and a thin gash for a mouth.

It stepped off the stone pedestal with a great, thunder-like noise.

The man at its feet was now cowering in fear, his mouth wide open yet unable to scream. The statue took its time to look around and stare at each of them, and Wei Wuxian's dread grew again as he felt himself be examined and found lacking—as the goddess's eyes found Jin Ling and, at last, lingered.

"Get out!" Wei Wuxian shouted at him. "Get out, quick, don't let her touch you!"

The boy didn't move. His wide brown eyes stared at the statue in a mix of fear and hapless surprise, and Suihua rose in his grasp, the golden glare of its blade once more making him look like his father.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said.

He didn't know if the man heard him, but it didn't matter: Sandu flew over his head and pierced into
the goddess's breast, making stone crumble over the floor.

"Get out, Jin Ling!" Jiang Cheng howled from behind Wei Wuxian.

At last the boy seemed to break out of his trance. His knees shook for a second before he took off, mounting the flat of Suihua's blade and flying out through the tunnel.

The goddess statue moved slowly. It put a hand over where the glowing sword was still stabbed into her, but not quickly enough to keep it from returning to its master's hand. Jiang Cheng ran around Wei Wuxian and toward the statue, cutting as deeply into stone as he could, while the man from earlier wept and crawled his way toward the exit.

Wei Wuxian took hold of his stolen bow. There were only two arrows left in the quiver at his back; he took them both in one hand and set them against the string, inhaling deeply and calling far into himself for any energy at all.

It wasn't hard. The entire cave was ripe with resentment, and power sprung to Wei Wuxian's fingertips in under a second. The arrowheads glowed as red as melted iron.

When he released them, the bow broke in half.

At least their aim was true. They both flew above Jiang Cheng's head and into the statue's empty eyes, for it had turned in Wei Wuxian's direction at his call as well, curious to know where that kinship came from. It made a sound almost like the deep growl of an earthquake at it pawed futilely at its face, melted metal dripping from its eyesockets like tears.

Jiang Cheng cut off one of the statue's arms and, without another word, ran back to Wei Wuxian's side. He grabbed his arm and ran up the length of the tunnel, almost carrying him, his face set to the darkest of scowls.

It wasn't long before they reached the starlit clearing again. Jin Ling was waiting there with an anxious face; it brightened for a moment upon seeing them emerge unharmed, but then Jiang Cheng threw Wei Wuxian aside, and he once more seemed shocked into silence.

Wei Wuxian managed not to fall despite the violence of the gesture. He stumbled upright and threw Jiang Cheng something even close to a glare.

"I knew it," Jiang Cheng declared in fury. "I felt that resentful energy you called in there."

"What else was I supposed to do without any proper weapons?" Wei Wuxian snapped.

"You could have let me handle it—"

"It's coming," Jin Ling interrupted them both.

Indeed they could hear the sound of the statue's loud footsteps from inside the tunnel. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng both stilled, looking at it. "We need to find a way of sealing it," Jiang Cheng declared. "Jin Ling, you get away from here. It's picked you as a target."

"What?"

"The man inside made a wish," Wei Wuxian said. "That's the price. A wish in exchange for a soul. Now that it can move, it'll try to take it from you itself."

Jin Ling paled. "But we were all there!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't it simply take that old man's soul,
Why me?"

Because your soul is unharmed, Wei Wuxian thought, glancing at Jiang Cheng and then away.

Jiang Cheng had once lost his golden core, his entire family, his own self in his search for revenge. Wei Wuxian himself was forcefully called to inhabit a body not his own. Of course Jin Ling would seem like a more appetizing prize to the goddess than either of them, or the old man inside who had never cultivated his spirit for a day in his life. Jin Ling was whole.

Wei Wuxian stripped a branch from the closest tree and once more suffused it with all the spirits he could gather. He threw it over the top of the cave's entrance, and rock crumbled under the weight of the dead's accumulated grief, blocking anyone from going in or out.

It would only slow the statue down for a minute, he knew.

Jiang Cheng bared his teeth at him. His stormscent grew stronger around them, heightened by the use of his powers and, it seemed, his very anger. "Stop using such techniques," he barked at Wei Wuxian. "Didn't you hear a word I said earlier? Not even the Yiling Patriarch survived the demonic path."

"Maybe he was just weak," Wei Wuxian replied.

He didn't expect to find himself with a sword at his throat.

For a second he only looked at Sandu's gleaming blade. There was no power running through it now, but it was as sharp as ever, honed and grown with Jiang Cheng's own strength.

"Watch your words, Mo Xuanyu," Jiang Cheng said coldly. "Demonic cultivation is forbidden for a reason. If I should take your head now, no one would think of punishing me for it. Your omega status won't protect you."

"It never has," Wei Wuxian replied.

Jiang Cheng's expression darkened into sorrow for the briefest second.

Wei Wuxian raised his hands in surrender. He stepped away from Sandu's ever-sharp end. "I'll let you cultivators deal with the goddess, then," he said. "I had no desire to get involved in the first place."

Jiang Cheng's arm lowered. "You do that," he replied. "Take Jin Ling with you, we don't have much time."

Jin Ling protested immediately. "I don't need him to—"

"You'll obey me," Jiang Cheng growled, "or I will tell your mother about how you slipped up today."

The boy groaned, swearing under his breath but walking away. Wei Wuxian followed after him with one last glance in Jiang Cheng's direction.

They crossed paths with no one for the next several minutes. The night was deep around them, still cold with the liberated statue's influence, still devoid of animal life. The donkey that Wei Wuxian had left by the cave's entrance was gone, no doubt frightened away by the noise and rumble. Wei Wuxian walked behind Jin Ling and thought idly of how much he missed his bow already—weak and stolen as it was.
“Where did you learn to cultivate like this?” Jin Ling asked all of a sudden. He looked over his shoulder at Wei Wuxian, frowning. "My uncles destroyed all of the Yiling Patriarch’s research when he died."

Did they, now. Wei Wuxian thought mournfully of the years of hard work he had apparently spent in vain. "The Yiling Patriarch wasn't the only cultivator to be curious, I suppose," he replied.

"I don't like that. What he did... it's evil. You shouldn't try to imitate him, it'll kill you."

Wei Wuxian wondered which of his misdeeds he was referring to: his father's death, the massacre in Qishan, or everything else. Everything he refused to regret no matter what scorn people chose to show him.

"He killed my father," the boy said harshly, answering the unvoiced question. "That man. Wei Ying."

*Please, let me help you. I can help you.*

"I'm sorry to hear it," Wei Wuxian replied, closing his eyes briefly.

"Mother and Uncle don't speak about it. They say I shouldn't believe what everyone says, but—" his young voice rose with frustration. "How am I supposed to believe anything else?" he asked no one. "Everyone says he did it. Everyone. I wish they'd just *tell* me what happened. Mother once said Wei Ying had no reason to kill him, that my father would have never harmed him, that he was—"

"Jin Ling," Wei Wuxian cut in, "I think we should wait here."

He should never have approached Jin Ling, never have talked to him or put his hand on Suihua or decided to teach him a lesson. Even if he had not been Jin Ling—even if he had simply been a junior disciple of Lanlingjin like any other—Wei Wuxian should not have addressed a word to him.

He was no good with children. He never was and never would be.

The boy looked around with surprise. They had reached another break into the forest, not a clearing as such but a space within the trees, with thick roots sprouting from the ground and moss crawling over the damp ground. "Right," he replied, sitting onto one of the roots. "Uncle will deal with that goddess statue in no time, you'll see."

Wei Wuxian smiled emptily in answer.

They waited like this for a few minutes. No sound reached them but for the wind between tree leaves, their own quiet breathing, Jin Ling's occasional fidgeting. Wei Wuxian stared at the mossy ground and tried not to think of the past. Of what Jiang Yanli could have told her son about the past during those thirteen years.

They both raised their heads at the unmistakable growl of the goddess statue, coming in from the east. Jin Ling jumped to his feet with his hand gripping his sword; Wei Wuxian followed suit a little more calmly, feeling for the air around them both.

The thick, vile energy had diminished minutes ago. Now it had come back even stronger.

"Looks like your uncle failed," Wei Wuxian said.

"That's impossible," Jin Ling replied quietly. "Uncle is great with sealing. He's dealt with all sorts of divine beasts before."
"This is not a divine beast."

Shouts came their way. From below they heard the familiar sound of swords flying through the air as cultivators hurried to the source of the noise. Wei Wuxian saw Jin Ling prepare to hurry after them and had to grab one of his arms, loath as he was to have to touch him.

"Let me go!"

"Did you forget that this thing is looking for you?" Wei Wuxian snapped. "Do you want to lose your soul so badly?"

"I can't just stay here and do nothing!" Jin Ling retorted in a shout, shaking the arm that Wei Wuxian was holding. "I'm a cultivator too!"

"You're only a disciple."

"I'm a sect heir. If people learn that I ran away from danger, I'll be even more ridiculed than you!"

He managed to free himself, but not quickly enough; Wei Wuxian grabbed the back of his neck in a vice-like grip and dug his thumb and middle finger into the soft skin right under his jaw.

Jin Ling fell to the ground, unconscious, and would have hit his head to the side of a tree if Wei Wuxian hadn't caught him.

He laid him down between the thick roots of a very old oak, where he would be somewhat concealed from the eye. He took the outer robe off of his own shoulder to put it on top of him and hide the bright white-and-gold peony embroidered on his chest. He looked at Suihua gleaming softly in the shadow.

His hand hesitated. In the end, he took Jin Ling's golden bow and arrows instead.

Wei Wuxian ran after the tendrils of resentful energy as he set the quiver to his back. The night was much colder now that he was rid of a layer of clothing, but he worked himself into enough of a sweat to parry the temperature. A short while later he stumbled upon about a dozen cultivators from various sects and half as many dead bodies, the statue standing in their midst and looking more human by the minute. Its eyes which Wei Wuxian had shot were not empty anymore, but full and moving, the detail of iris and pupil visible even in the distance. Wei Wuxian set another two arrows to the golden bow and took aim.

These sank into the statue's side as if were made of butter. The goddess, however, hardly seemed to notice it.

"What did you do with Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian muttered, looking around and finding no trace of his former shidi.

If only Jiang Yanli had been here instead. Wei Wuxian wanted to see her even less than he did her brother, but Zidian would have come in handy to deal with such a creature.

He shot another few arrows at the goddess, none of which managed to stop it for more than a handful of seconds. Its many hands grabbed a couple more of the cultivators surrounding it and crushed their skulls. Blood and ground bones spilled from its fingers sickeningly

Wei Wuxian's eyes rested on the tall bamboos rising in-between the tree trunks. He made a decision.

Carving a flute out of unpolished wood was not easy, especially with no time to infuse it with power
of any kind or decorate it with talismans. He stuffed one end of the bamboo piece with cloth and dug holes into its length with the sharp head of an arrow, looking all the while at the struggling cultivators around. Many more had arrived. It made no difference at all to the goddess massacring them.

*It doesn't matter what I summon*, he thought, setting the flute under his lips, *as long as it is resentful enough.*

The sound that the flute made was unpleasant and harsh. The holes were uneven, some too misplaced for any kind of harmony to be possible, but Wei Wuxian played and called upon the dead of the forest, and he felt them answer.

The ground shook under his feet. The goddess statue stumbled. Men and women looked around for the source of the noise, and from inside the circle they formed, a deathly silhouette sprung from the earth with a grim rattle of chains.

Brown hair and grey skin and hands clawed like an animal's. The silhouette of him was as familiar as if it had only been days since they last walked together, talked together. Wei Wuxian's blood turned to ice.

"It's the Ghost General," one woman said with horror in her voice. "It's Wen Ning!"

Shouts rose from the crowd as all chose whether to fight or flee.

Wen Ning stood still in the middle of chaos. His eyes were turned to the ground, staring expressionlessly, his whole body unmoving. Even when the goddess statue grabbed his head in her wide fist, he didn't flinch.

Wei Wuxian realized that he would not move without further orders; he quickly brought the flute back to his chin and played.

They landed on Dafan Mountain to the clamor of voices, the sharp feeling of something wrong filling the nightly air. It was different than the cold miasma escaping from the sealing pouch in which the demonic arm was kept, and which Hanguang-Jun kept tightly tied to his waist; this seemed older, somehow. Deeper.

"Do you feel this?" Lan Jingyi asked, rubbing his own arms. They had yet to replace the outer robes which they had sacrificed a week ago.


The sound of flight reached them before he could finish speaking. Jiang Cheng emerged from atop the trees and landed beside them, bleeding from his shoulder.

"Sect leader Jiang!" Jingyi exclaimed.

Jiang Cheng only shot him a brief glance. "Lan Wangji," he spat. "Trouble does summon you. Or is it the other way around?"

"Jiang Wanyin," Hanguang-Jun replied quietly.

"Yes, yes." Jiang Cheng waved his uninjured arm into the air dismissively. "I'll lower myself to
asking you for assistance. We have something of a situation—sealing didn't work, and neither will fighting the thing physically, I wager. Will you help? If I don't bring my nephew back alive, my sister will have my head."

"Is Jin Ling here, sect leader Jiang?" Lan Jingyi asked with a deep bow.

"He is. Find him for me, will you? I don't trust that Mo Xuanyu as far as I can throw him."

"You know young master Mo, sect leader?" Lan Sizhui let out before he could help it.

For a week now, he had not managed to stop thinking of the odd omega with the cuts and bruises who had helped them seal the piece of haunted corpse.

Jingyi had already all but forgotten about the encounter, except for the parts which tended to remind him of things he didn't like to consider. But he had grown tired of hearing Sizhui talk about Mo Xuanyu; and, though Hanguang-Jun had been informed of the man's involvement, Mo Xuanyu had vanished from Mo village before they could introduce him. Lan Sizhui didn't want to bother his senior with idle curiosity.

To hear Mo Xuanyu's name spoken in such a place—and from the mouth of the Yunmengjiang sect leader—was a surprise.

Jiang Cheng replied without looking at him. "He's a cultivator of the dark path," he said to Lan Wangji with distaste on his voice. "He protected Jin Ling, so I let him go, but I'd much rather he be in the hands of Gusulan, if you don't mind."


"Yes," Jingyi replied at once. "I'll look for Jin Ling and send a signal when I find him, sect leader Jiang."

Jiang Cheng nodded at him, which made Lan Jingyi blush with pride. Lan Sizhui hid his smile behind his hand and watched him fly into the forest.

The Jiang sect leader explained the situation as they walked toward the source of the cold, frightening wind. "... a goddess worshipped by the villagers," he was saying. "She started taking their souls in exchange for granting their wishes. My best sealing talisman only lasted five minutes before she broke free. There was a landslide a while ago that disturbed a burying site on the mountain—she must have gathered all the resentment that came from it."

Hanguang-Jun nodded. His pace hurried.

They came to a circle of dead and wounded cultivators, all gathered onto a path of obvious destruction. Entire trees had fallen in the wake of the goddess. Her footsteps had dug deeply into the earth, crushing some of her own kills as if to make sure not even their corpses could rise.

"Sizhui," Hanguang-Jun said, "the wounded."

"Yes."

But Sizhui was not even close to the first of those moaning on the ground when his arm was seized, and the panicked man, who smelled of dead leaves and cool autumn mornings, cried out: "Never mind us, catch the Ghost General!"

Silence thickened between them all, suffocating.
"What did you say?" Jiang Cheng asked softly.

He walked toward where Sizhui had crouched. His scarred hand had come to rest above the pommel of his sword, and the white-hot glare with which he stared the wounded man down could have made lions cower.

The man shook but did not relent. "I saw him," he said. "I was there in Nightless City, I'd recognize him anywhere—it was Wen Ning. I swear by the heavens."

"The Ghost General is dead," Jiang Cheng spat. "Dead and burned to ashes years ago. What the devil are you saying now?"

"He summoned him—that man in black, he played the flute and summoned him. I saw it, we all saw it." The beta man looked around for others who had witnessed the scene he described, looking for support of any kind; they nodded, faint and distant, shock making them look as soulless as the statue's victims. "Can't you hear it?"

They could. Almost as if the man's words had opened a door somewhere beyond their senses, the screeching sound of a flute reached them, darker and more terrible somehow than anything thus far.

Jiang Cheng unsheathed his sword slowly. His face looked as stormy as his scent was. Sandu shone in the dark, turning the wet ground blue and phantom-like. "Whoever did this," he said. "They're not coming out of these woods alive."

"Jiang Wanyin," Lan Wangji called.

"Are you going to stop me? Are you going to oppose me again, Lan Wangji?"

Hanguang-Jun didn't reply. He looked more deeply upset than Lan Sizhui had ever seen him. Sizhui listened to the awful notes of the flutes in the distance and felt his back crawl with shivers—and yet, the sound of it made his heart ache in an odd way, as if he ought to remember something he could not.

The music stopped abruptly. They all stilled in their movement, Sizhui in the middle of checking if any of the bodies around still had a beating heart, Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng paralyzed face-to-face.

When it came again, the melody was vastly different. Much softer and warmer, although terribly out of tune.

Hanguang-Jun sucked in a breath so loud that it echoed around them. Lan Sizhui startled, looking at him and finding his face pale, stricken with what looked like grief and hope at once. Before he had time to open his mouth and speak, Bichen's glare blinded them all, and Hanguang-Jun took off above the forest canopy.

"Lan Wangji!" Jiang Cheng shouted, halfway mounting his sword himself.

"Wait!" Lan Sizhui called. "Wait, sect leader Jiang, I need help with the wounded—"

In that instant, light flowered above them in the shape of Gusulan's cloud. It grew over the trees more strongly than moonlight, washing the space around them of color.

"This must be Jingyi," Lan Sizhui breathed. "He found Jin Ling."

Jiang Cheng cursed loudly. For a moment he hesitated, looking between the direction Lan Wangji
had taken and the signal suspended westward. In the end his face settled into tense resignation, and he turned his back to where the music came from.

"You'll have to care for the wounded on your own, boy," he declared.

"I might not be able to save them on my own—"

"You're Lan Wangji's favorite disciple, are you not?"

Lan Sizhui fell silent. Almost as if he regretted his words, Jiang Cheng paused on his sword and looked properly at him for the first time. In the white light of the signal, even Sandu's glow looked pale and weakened. Lan Sizhui held the man's gaze with as much determination as he could.

Jiang Cheng's eyes thinned, his brow furrowed in thought. "You…” he said. His face turned into a mix of confusion and, to Sizhui's surprise, longing.

In the end, he left without another word.

---

Jin Ling woke up to the loud sound of a clan signal being fired into the air. His mouth was dry and his nape painful, and for a moment he wondered where he was, if perhaps the wet and soft earth he was laid on was his bed in Golden Carp Tower—if his mother would come to his room soon and drag him out of bed.

"Wha' happened?" he muttered.

His memories quickly aligned into place. Mo Xuanyu's oddly confident behavior when every time Jin Ling had met him before, he had been nothing but a cowering thing, mediocre in his studies and hanging from Little Uncle's every word; his uncle in the cave accusing that same Mo Xuanyu of demonic cultivation, of all things—

He felt lighter, he realized. A quick grab by his hip revealed that Suihua was still there but that his bow was long gone.

Then Jin Ling breathed in and smelled a very familiar berry-like sweetness.

"Lan Jingyi!" he cried out, sitting up too quickly. The world swam in shades of white and grey behind his eyelids before he managed to see again. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Lan Jingyi replied dryly. "You're welcome, by the way. If I hadn't found you, who knows what would have happened."

Jin Ling felt his face burn. He tried to meet the usual mocking eyes of the Lan disciple, but the sight of him alone was enough, as always, to make him feel very small and embarrassed. He had to look away before answering, "Nothing would have happened with my uncle around."

"He's the one who told me to find you, you know."

Damn you, uncle, Jin Ling thought. Why must you treat me like this?

"What happened to the statue?" he asked once he was rather sure that his voice would not shake. "Did they seal it?"
"Hanguang-Jun is after it now, so of course it will all be fine."

Jin Ling scowled. "You didn't tell me what you were doing here," he accused. "I thought you weren't allowed to leave the Cloud Recesses."

Lan Jingyi stuck his nose up proudly. "I was given permission," he said. "Sizhui's been traveling with me. There was an incident a week ago near Gusu, a fierce corpse like you've never seen before."

"I've seen many more fierce corpses than you," Jin Ling retorted.

"Not one like that."

Lan Jingyi stood on his feet, brushing dirt from his white uniform; under the glowing Gusu beacon, he looked to be made of silver, his face even finer for the lack of color on it.

Jin Ling stood as well, flustered. It was then that he noticed the black cloth laid over his body. "Oh," he said, catching it before it fell. "Damn Mo Xuanyu must've knocked me out. How dare he?"

"We met Mo Xuanyu last week," Lan Jingyi said, peering curiously at him. "He is an odd one, isn't he? How do you know him?"

"He's Little Uncle's brother," Jin Ling replied. "But he was thrown out of Lanling ages ago."

"Really? I never would've guessed he was part of your clan."

"He's just a stupid omega." Already Jin Ling's embarrassment was turning to anger; he balled the cloth in his fist and shook it in front of his face, barely noticing the faint honey-smell clinging to it. "He stole my bow!"

Lan Jingyi rolled his eyes at him. "You'll never get any omega to look at you if you keep talking like that, you know," he said.

Jin Ling choked on his reply. "I don't want any omega to look at me," he lied, struggling to even let the words out. His face was burning anew, and he knew with aching shame that he must be bright red. "I, you—just go away, Lan Jingyi! I'll take it from here!"

"What are you going on about now, Jin Ling?"

Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi startled at the new voice. It was only Jin Ling's uncle, however. He landed beside them looking mostly unharmed, though some dried blood made his left sleeve stick to his skin. He seemed to be favoring this side slightly as he walked.

"Where's Mo Xuanyu?" Jiang Cheng asked in a sharper tone than before.

"Who knows," Jin Ling spat out.

His uncle looked at him for a long second. "He stole your weapons again, I see," he said.

Jin Lin thought blood may never leave his face again.

"Something else came up," Jiang Cheng started. For some reason, he hesitated before continuing: "But it doesn't matter. Lan Wangji went to take care of it, so it should be settled now."
"Are you hurt anywhere, sect leader Jiang?" Lan Jingyi asked.  

Jiang Cheng huffed. "Not enough that I'd need to have you take care of it," he replied. "But I do wonder about one thing—Lan Jingyi, was it?"

"Yes."

"Your friend. The one who was with you earlier." He paused for another second, his frown digging deep lines into his forehead. Jin Ling squinted at him; darkness was once more crawling through the woods, now that Gusu's signal was vanishing from the sky. "What's his name?" Jiang Cheng asked at last.

"You're talking about Sizhui," Lan Jingyi said. "His birth name is Lan Yuan. He is my senior disciple."

"And he is part of the Lan clan?"

Jin Ling saw Lan Jingyi blink in surprise at the question. "Yes," he replied. "Although he is an orphan, and I do not know who his parents were. Why do you ask, sect leader?"

"No reason," Jiang Cheng replied. "Just… well, it doesn't matter."

From the look of him, it mattered very much.

Jin Ling had little interest in Lan Sizhui, however. A long time ago he had opposed the older boy in every way he could, but Sizhui's lack of response to his provoking soon tired him out.

In any case, it did not seem as if Lan Sizhui had any interest in what Jin Ling sought.

It was with those thoughts in mind that he mounted his sword. Jiang Cheng talked at them for a moment longer, but Jin Ling had long stopped listening. Instead he watched Lan Jingyi rise on his own silvery sword, his black hair swept by the night wind and his robes floating about him like a halo, with a smile on his thin lips that made Jin Ling's chest very warm.

It was a song lost to time and grief. A broken piece of music composed in the darkness, composed with four hands and two voices, honey sweetening the death stench of a fallen beast.

Lan Wangji had never played it before then. He had never played it after, either.

He need not use his senses to scout the mountain for the goddess's rueful spirit; it was the notes he followed, the harsh sound of the flute that guided Bichen eastward along the gentle slope. He need not search for noise, or scent, or voice.

Only that song.

There was someone standing by the defeated body of the statue. A familiar silhouette with heavy chains on its wrists and no life to its silver eyes—Wen Ning, the Ghost General, who should have burned in Lanling more than thirteen years ago.

And there was someone else with a flute as his lips; someone playing that song which only Lan Wangji and a dead man knew.
He landed silently behind him. There was nothing at all familiar to the back of that man. Not in stature or shape, and he was shorter too, his hair thinner and his hands more delicate as he blew into the roughly-carved bamboo. Lan Wangji smelled nothing as he approached him. The voice he heard was all wrong, calling as if to quiet a frightened animal: "Wen Ning. Oh, Wen Ning, what happened to you?"

Then Lan Wangji was standing behind him, and the voice said nothing at all.

He parried the blow as gently as he could when it came. The man had turned swiftly around on his feet to hit him, the touch of him only so quick as to move back and away, to put distance between them again. Lan Wangji did not try to shorten it. He watched the man's face under the dying glow of Gusulan's signal, finding it wrong again, younger and finer than it ought to be, and yet—

"You summoned him," he told the man.

The other's hesitation before replying was obvious. But though the voice was wrong and the mouth which voiced it different, the tone was the very same: "What will you do about it?"

Defiance. Defensiveness. A need to prove one's self-sufficiency and worth that ran so deep as to be unbreakable, no matter how many tried to break it.

They had broken it once, or so Lan Wangji had thought. Or so he had mourned. Kneeling under the blows of the discipline whip, kneeling in that dark cave and being told to leave, he had regretted and grieved and never since stopped.

*Is this what you want, Lan Wangji? Come on, then. Come take it.*

*I never did*, Lan Wangji thought, then and now. How he wished he had the strength to say it when it mattered. *I never wanted this*.

"I'll send him away," Wei Wuxian said, still as starkly suspicious, still so evidently himself despite his changed face and body. "So don't touch him."

"I won't," Lan Wangji replied.

He need not approach further to seek a trace of honeyscent, to make sure for himself that this was not simply an impostor, not simply the demonic cultivator which Jiang Wanyin had mentioned.

"I won't do anything you do not wish me to."

Chapter End Notes

I fucking... wounded myself writing this. I decided to defy fate by updating instead of taking one (1) day of rest and my laptop blasted my nose by falling on me. I bled for this chapter.
and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 12

"I won't do anything you do not wish me to."

Lan Wangji did not move one way or the other after saying those words. He stared at Wei Wuxian with clear eyes and a blank, beautiful face, dressed all in the white of his clan, his long hair swaying with the night wind. The air of him alone seemed to quiet these haunted woods; the glare of his sword Bichen cleansed the last of the goddess's dark will.

Wei Wuxian did not want to turn his back to him, even to control Wen Ning. He had learned not to let an alpha out of his line of sight whenever one was close. He stood in front of Lan Wangji and brought the quick-carved flute to his lips again, playing to make Wen Ning approach. His friend's steps dragged through the leaves and low bushes until he stood within reaching distance.

Wei Wuxian did reach for him. He was unsurprised to find his skin cold and bloodless, to smell no hint of the burned scent he had once used to hide himself, or of the natural one he must have underneath it.

Loquats, Wen Qing had once said. She had held her brother's corpse and looked at Wei Wuxian in hope and despair and told him: When he was small, he smelled of loquats.

He put his hand to the side of Wen Ning's face. The corpse did not react in any way to his touch, nor to the fingers which Wei Wuxian ran through his dirty hair in hope of eliciting life in his eyes. They stayed empty and dark and lowered to the forest ground.

"Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian said.

He could barely care that Lan Wangji was standing a few feet away and watching.

"Wen Ning, my friend… what happened to you?"

Wen Ning did not answer. He did not move. Wei Wuxian wished the scent of sandalwood would wash away from around him; he wished he could focus all of his will into looking for that loquat smell he had never gotten to know, or even that fake burned wood smell which would no doubt make him think of hollowness, of shame; of another forest on another mountain, years and years ago.

His hand fell to Wen Ning's unmoving shoulder. He gripped it tightly enough to hurt.

"Jiang Wanyin will be here soon," Lan Wangji's soft voice cut through the silence.

Wei Wuxian breathed in shakily. He gave no acknowledgment to the warning and instead played the flute again, his fingers lingering for a second too long before leaving Wen Ning's shoulder. He played as firmly as he could make the sound to be out of such a poor instrument; Wen Ning moved as if pulled by strings, expressionless, his dark body disappearing into the forest as far as Wei Wuxian could send him.

Stay hidden, he told him with the music. Be careful. I will call for you again soon.
Wei Wuxian lowered the flute once he was certain that Wen Ning was far enough from them. He looked sideways at Lan Wangji, who had not stopped staring at him.

"I suppose you want to capture me now," he told him. "Forgive me if I don't make it easy for you."

Lan Wangji stayed silent. His eyes went to the sword still shining in his hand; he sheathed it slowly, deliberately, twisting around with the movement, showing the guqin strapped to his back and wrapped in soft, grey cloth.

Wei Wuxian frowned. He was about to speak again when the sound of other arrivals reached him and made him look away.

Jiang Cheng jumped from Sandu's blade before it had reached half the height of the trees, landing harshly on the soft ground but not falling at all. Behind him stood Jin Ling and the Lan omega Wei Wuxian had met in Mo village, Lan Jingyi. He didn't seem surprised to see Wei Wuxian standing here, which meant that Jin Ling or Jiang Cheng must have warned him in advance. Wei Wuxian, however, could not quite stop himself from staring at him again.

There was an elegance to him that all Lan children must carry in blood, though he fidgeted and spoke unlike any Lan clan cultivator Wei Wuxian had met. As before, he looked entirely unbothered by his own status.

"Well?" Jiang Cheng called loudly.

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth, but a quick look in his former shidi's direction informed him that it was not he Jiang Cheng was addressing.

From behind him, Lan Wangji replied, "That man was lying. I found no trace of the Ghost General."

Wei Wuxian was not the only one to be surprised by those words; by Jiang Cheng's side, Jin Ling jumped out of his skin.

"The Ghost General?" he exclaimed loudly. "When? Where?"

If mentions of the Yiling Patriarch had not brought vengefulness out of him, then Wen Ning's title seemed to do the trick. Wei Wuxian watched Jin Ling's young face darken with such strong resentment that his very spiritual energy looked to be leaking out of him.

"Nowhere," Jiang Cheng replied after another long look in Lan Wangji's direction. "As I thought. People will say anything to claim that Wei Wuxian is back from the dead. Sect leader Jin should have withdrawn that bounty years ago."

With those words, he patted Jin Ling's head. The boy relaxed somewhat.

"What bounty?" Lan Jingyi asked curiously, saving Wei Wuxian the trouble of doing so.

"You didn't know?" Jin Ling replied. Though his eyes were still angry, his eagerness to answer the other boy made him look a little childish, a little arrogant. Lan Jingyi seemed used to it, judging by the huff he let out before Jin Ling was even done speaking. "Little Uncle still promises to pay whoever hands him the Yiling Patriarch handsomely."

"I thought the Yiling Patriarch was dead. Everyone saw him die, didn't they?"

"You can never know for sure, with such a demon."
"I thought all the clans running around Yiling and telling everyone he was made it pretty obvious—"

"Jingyi," Lan Wangji said.

There was no heat or anger to his voice at all, but the air seemed to turn colder and damper around them, as if swept by winter wind. Petrichor held no weight next to Lan Wangji's disapproval.

Lan Jingyi immediately looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Hanguang-Jun," he replied, bowing stiffly. "I will show better manners in the future."

"Not manners," Lan Wangji added lowly.

He did not precise what he meant by it.

Jiang Cheng seemed to have enough of discussing Wei Wuxian; which only made it all the more ironical when he turned to Wei Wuxian and said, "Mo Xuanyu. You'll be coming with me to Yunmeng."

I certainly won't, Wei Wuxian wanted to say; yet at this moment, Lan Wangji was the one who took a step forward with his hand poised on Bichen's handle.

All around looked at him with wide eyes.

"What is the problem with you tonight, Lan Wangji?" Jiang Cheng asked hotly.

"What reason do you have to detain this person?" Lan Wangji retorted in as even a voice as ever.

"He's a demonic cultivator. I told you that. He's already more than lucky that I'm willing to let him live."

"He is not part of your sect," Lan Wangji said.

"Neither is he part of yours," Jiang Cheng sneered back. "Would you rather I hand him over to Jin Guangyao? Jin Ling tells me Mo Xuanyu was already thrown out of Golden Carp Tower in the past. I doubt Lianfang-Zun will be happy to see him again."

Whoever this Lianfang-Zun was, their name alone was enough to halt Lan Wangji somewhat.

Then—"I won't let him be killed," he declared, and the first inch of Bichen's blade came out of its scabbard, shining blue in the darkness.

Jiang Cheng's face was only frozen with shock for a second. In the next he drew Sandu up, the shadows cast by its glare only seemed to deepen the rage writ all over him. "Know your place, Hanguang-Jun," he spat at the man in front of him. "Your title may shine to those who don't know you, but I haven't forgotten how far from grace you once fell."

"Uncle," Jin Ling said in shock.

Next to him, Lan Jingyi's face had turned very white.

"You make a grave mistake if you still think us equals," Jiang Cheng continued, unhindered. He swung Sandu from side to side, its light drawing bright lines into Wei Wuxian's eyesight that lingered wherever he chose to look. "It is not you I answer to, but your brother. If I want to take this omega to Yunmeng, what right do you have to stop me? Or will you make me believe that he should be safer with you?"
Jiang Cheng's voice bore then a grudge the likes of which Wei Wuxian had only ever heard in reference to the Wen sect.

"He will not be harmed," Lan Wangji replied.

Any who looked upon the scene could have told how gravely he had been insulted, if only because both junior cultivators seemed shell-shocked by Jiang Cheng's words. Yet there was no fury to his manners as he drew his sword as well, no indignation or self-centeredness. He only seemed quietly determined.

"I will not allow you to do as you please with him."

"Shouldn't I be the one to say this, murderer?"

Lan Wangji did not answer. He stood with Bichen in hand in one of Gusulan's many traditional defensive stances, his posture achingly perfect despite the guqin over his back and the sealing pouches at his hips, and in front of him, Jiang Cheng took the first step.

Wei Wuxian brought the bamboo flute to his lips and breathed into it the shrillest, most uncomfortable sound he could.

Lan Jingyi and Jin Ling yelped in tandem, covering their ears and glaring at him. Jiang Cheng halted in his walk forward. Lan Wangji shuddered as if cold breeze had just crawled in through the interstices of his clothes.

"This omega," Wei Wuxian said once silence had been established, "is not going anywhere with any of you. In fact, he is more than tired of all of your faces. Feel free to battle it out while he looks for somewhere warm to sleep, if you so desperately want to."

"Mo Xuanyu," Jin Ling exclaimed, "don't think you can just run away."

Wei Wuxian shrugged. He tied the flute to the rough belt he had stolen from the farmers' house days ago and replied, "I know I can't outrun you. But I have no intention of making it easy. Oh," he added, "right. I almost forgot."

With quick hands, he took the golden bow off his shoulder and threw it at its owner. Jin Ling almost dropped it in his surprise.

"Good night to all of you," he declared, and turned away.

He heard Jiang Cheng call Mo Xuanyu's name as he slipped in-between the trees.

From Lan Wangji, he heard nothing at all.

The inn where he had eaten and bathed during the day was crawling with cultivators. Some were the ones he had scared away with Wen Ning's unwitting help, some were those who had fruitlessly searched for the source of the soul-stealing creature of Dafan, and who now drowned their sorrows in liquor with their swords laid upon their laps.

A bright spot of white caught Wei Wuxian's eye. In the place where the wounded were gathered, he saw a familiar boy dressed in Lan clan garments, talking softly to the girl who had sold him the
moonless tea and scent-masking paste this very afternoon. Their hands were full of clean cloth, their sleeves stained with blood.

The girl bowed to Wei Wuxian when she caught sight of him. The Lan boy, whose name Wei Wuxian had either never caught or entirely forgotten, watched him approach with an oddly eager look on his face.

He tried to bow as well. Wei Wuxian remembered the sight of him doing so in Mo village, and it felt no better now than it had that day—he said, "Stop that," a little more harshly than necessary.

At least the boy obeyed. He rose again with a flush upon his cheeks.

"Young master Mo," he said enthusiastically. "It's good to see you well. Thank you again for your help last time."

Wei Wuxian walked past him and toward the wounded cultivators. Half of them were asleep, and the half who stayed awake had only caught glimpses of him in the dark, he knew. With the effects of scent-masking drawing away and with Mo Xuanyu's pretty face and slim body exposed to light, not one of them recognized him. Or rather, none could imagine that he was the one to have called the Ghost General with a badly-carved flute.

Wei Wuxian snorted. He took one of the jars from the cloth tied around his waist. With his thumb, he spread more of the paste on his tongue, heedless of the Lan boy's curious looks.

"What are you doing in Dafan?" that same boy asked once he was done.

"Running away from your sect and Yunmengjiang," Wei Wuxian replied. "Well, right now I just want to sleep. It has been a long day."

The Lan boy blinked in confusion.

In that moment, the front door of the inn opened, and another familiar voice cried: "Mo Xuanyu, there you are!"

The room filled with the new scents of Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi, as well as sandalwood and thick, stormy air. So Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng had put their differences aside and followed him down the mountain.

"Maiden," Wei Wuxian called to the girl. She answered him with a smile which he could not help but give back; her ideas about him may be entirely wrong, but those misconceptions seemed to come out of genuine care. "I would like a room for the night."

She bowed again apologetically. "All of our rooms are taken, young master," she replied.

"Then is there another inn in this village, or somewhere else I might sleep?"

"None, young master, nowhere."

He wanted to cuss out the cultivators around him. He had been the one to get rid of the goddess in the end, and he could not sleep off the fatigue? Surely one or two could room together and make way for him.

The young woman seemed to understand his frustration. "I will ask around, young master," she promised. "Please have a seat in the meantime."
Wei Wuxian avoided looking in Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji's direction as he followed her advice. Only one large table in the corner of the dining room still had room to sit, and that part of the bench was half-way occupied by a heavyset man armed to the teeth. He gave Wei Wuxian a long glare when he sat, which Wei Wuxian gave back in boredom.

He ate as he waited.

From afar, he saw the young woman make her way through the guests. A surprising number of them seemed not to be bothered by her status as she spoke with them, though a few dismissed her without so much as a word. She simply bowed and went on to the next when it happened. She spoke to Lan Wangji last.

Wei Wuxian felt tired. He ate the tepid soup put in front of him without much appetite. The chill of resentful energy had not stopped clinging to his skin; when he rubbed his forearms to create heat, he shivered.

He was not surprised to see the girl come back to his side a few moments later and say, "This master in white says he is willing to share with you."

"I haven't fallen so low as to room with strangers with no misgivings," he replied.

She blushed furiously. "Oh, no, not like this," she stuttered. "The places we have left have separate rooms—he said you could share one with the young omega he travels with!"

Wei Wuxian looked away from her, meeting Lan Wangji's eyes briefly. There was no expectation in them that he could read, only the usual impassibility which the Lan heir seemed to carry around like a badge of honor.

No, said a hint of memory in him, no, that is not quite true.

He had seen Lan Wangji wear emotion in his eyes and voice in the past. He had shared rooms with him before, though with no beds or even walls except for what natural stone had to offer, in the throes of his fever.

He had trusted Lan Wangji then. That he had no choice in the matter was of little importance; Lan Wangji had proved himself worthy of that trust, had not touched or looked at Wei Wuxian from the moment Wei Wuxian had asked him not to.

"Fine," Wei Wuxian found himself saying. "I will take the gentleman's offer, then."

The girl looked relieved to hear it. She walked back to Lan Wangji with a spring in her steps, simply happy for his trust in her judgment, and Wei Wuxian could not help but smile. The sight of her brought the same warmth to his heart that the Lan omega boy did.

He was silent as he walked up the stairs of the inn with Lan Jingyi by his side. The other boy walked ahead next to Lan Wangji, speaking in a low voice. Both youths looked tired from the day's events. Wei Wuxian had no doubt that they would be out like candles the moment they lay down.

After all, the Lan sect was very harsh on sleeping schedules, and it was already much closer to morning than eve.

The door she opened for them led to a small room with two beds. Another two doors stood at the end of it, one leading to another similar bedroom, one to an alcove where a tub waited to be filled with water. Wei Wuxian ignored it as he made his way to the adjoining room and took the outer robe off of his shoulders. He untied the bag from his waist and got rid of his muddied boots and, finally, let
his back rest upon something softer and warmer than the ground.

He realized as he did that it was the first time since opening his eyes to the omega house of Mo village that he slept in an actual bed.

He said nothing as Lan Jingyi took care of his own things by the second bed. The boy seemed just as unwilling to spend time on idle talk. No noise came at all from the other room where Lan Wangji and the alpha boy must be undressing for the night either.

It wasn't long before he succumbed to sleep, and not long before he woke either.

The sky outside was still only shy of true dawn. Though it paled frostily over the horizon, with light enough for anyone to see clearly and go about their daily activities, the sun had not risen yet. Wei Wuxian had not needed much sleep during the years he spent in Yiling—another effect of losing his core, Wen Qing had liked to theorize; a perk, Wei Wuxian had answered each time. He had spent those nights poured over ink and paper, drawing talismans of his own making and researching how to best harness the only kind of spirituality now available to him. He had felt no fatigue then, though his body sometimes ached as if to remind him that he was still human. He felt fatigue now, for Mo Xuanyu had neither his training nor his tolerance for hardship, and his golden core lay solid in Wei Wuxian's chest, pulsing like a heart.

He massaged his sternum absently. The white light from outside seemed to sharpen the edges of the small room, only softening on Lan Jingyi's sleeping body at the other side of it. The boy had turned his back to Wei Wuxian sometime during the past hours. If Wei Wuxian listened closely, he could hear his soft snores every few seconds. It dragged a tired smile out of him.

Now, to make his escape.

Even if Lan Wangji accepted to let him go without a word, which Wei Wuxian doubted based on their curt exchange the night before, Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling must have found room at the inn too. They must be sleeping not far, ready to jump on him the second he showed himself. Wei Wuxian's thoughts had not changed: he had no intention of ever returning to Yunmeng.

He was silent when he slid out of the bedcovers. Silent as he put his boots back on and spread scent-masking paste on his tongue and tied his few belongings to his waist. Quietly, he creeped to the door and opened it, making sure not to let wood creak with movement or weight. In the room beyond the air was thick with Lan Wangji's sandalwood scent and the alpha boy's own woodsy smell. Neither moved when the door closed and Wei Wuxian walked soundlessly across the floorboards; he snickered when he realized that they were sleeping in the exact same position, flat on their back with their arms crossed atop their stomach.

He halted by the exit door, looking once more in Lan Wangji's direction.

The man had rested Bichen upright against the small cabinet that neighbored his bed. Next to it lay his neatly-folded outer robes as well as his mudstained boots. His namesake guqin was set atop a chair a couple steps away. Wei Wuxian looked for a trace of Lan Wangji's other belongings; surely he must still be traveling with the haunted arm which they had fought a week ago, and surely he had money as well on him. The thought kept Wei Wuxian by the door for a moment.

He could use money. He did not enjoy stealing, but if he had no choice, he would prefer to steal out of a former comrade, someone who had fought by him and opposed him and who stood, in many ways, as an equal of sorts. Not from peasants' empty houses, not from that young omega girl who had sold him tea and drugs for a much too shallow price out of the goodness of her heart.
And, well, Lan Wangji was a sect leader. The Lan sect leader. While nowhere near as wealthy as Lanlingjin, Gusulan had never been in monetary need either. Even during the war, the most they had lost was ancient halls, which they had easily rebuilt.

Yunmeng had lost so much more.

Wei Wuxian approached the bed with those thoughts in mind. He quickly and needlessly checked the clothes folded on the cabinet for Lan Wangji's belongings—he knew the man would not have let them sit there so exposed, not when the whole inn crawled with cultivators from lesser clans who dreamed of wealth and recognition. It was only too bad for him that Wei Wuxian had no qualms about looking closer.

He only needed to shift the covers a bit from the man's sleeping body. There it was, tied to his waist, a row of sealing pouches which must contain many of his journey's catches. He ignored them in favor of the regular pouch tied next to them, shivering when his fingers brushed past fabric so soaked with resentful energy that their tips deadened upon contact.

The fierce haunted arm from Mo village, no doubt.

Wei Wuxian leaned closer above the bed. This room did not receive as much light from outside as the one where he had slept did, and it was difficult to see exactly what he was doing with the day still stuck pre-dawn. He deftly detached the money pouch from Lan Wangji's waist and opened it with a clear, brief sound of coins knocking together. He picked from inside it only a handful of gold coins, slipping his hand into the fabric at his own waist, bending down once more to reattach the pouch where it belonged one-handedly.

His eyes met Lan Wangji's. In the darkness, they seemed even paler.

"Good morning," Wei Wuxian murmured, for he had no idea what else to say.

Lan Wangji did not answer. Wei Wuxian felt his face flush with the thought of how long, exactly, the Lan heir had watched him steal from him. He let the pouch fall onto the bed; Lan Wangji made no move to retrieve it, simply continued to stare, ever-unreadable.

"You will want to see me punished for this, I'm sure," Wei Wuxian said in the same soft voice. It seemed that now only the sound of the alpha boy's quiet breathing shook the silence, that any noise louder than this would make the fragile morning light crumble around them, pierced either by darkness or bright spring sun.

Lan Wangji's hand brushed over the pouches attached to the belt of his inner robes. His hand did not shiver as Wei Wuxian's had when he touched the one where the demonic arm was kept. The whole time, he stared at Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian hesitated.

"I wonder what it'll take for you to let me go," he said.

At last, Lan Wangji replied: "I do not intend to trap you."

His voice was oddly rough, oddly soft at the same time. He looked beautiful like this, with morning light paling on his brow, with his black hair splayed over the white pillow. He looked made of ivory, or white jade; he looked like fine bone carved into the statue of a man, smoothed time and time again till the texture of his skin, the dip of his chin and lips, reached artistic perfection.

Wei Wuxian chuckled nervously, looking away. "It's you or that Jiang fellow, I suppose," he said.
"I will not let Jiang Wanyin trap you either."

"I could convince you to let me go."

Lan Wangji made as if to move—to sit up, perhaps, or to grab Wei Wuxian's arm. Wei Wuxian reacted without thought. He sat down onto the bed and pinned Lan Wangji's wrist to the sheets.

In his belly, age-old fear manifested once more, dragging up and up his throat till he all but tasted it on his tongue.

"I could convince you," he said again, pushing past all of it.

Mo Xuanyu must truly be a beauty by all standards. Wei Wuxian had only seen his caller's face reflected in moving water or covered in garish makeup, but his body was small and lean, his face round with deceptive youth in spite of his age. Nothing at all like the rough skin and hard muscles Wei Wuxian had once developed with training, or his height, almost comparable to that of the alpha under him. Even the ice-cold Lan Wangji seemed to lose some composure whilst in such close proximity, wide-eyed and quick-breathed, though Wei Wuxian reflected in panicked humor that perhaps this was simply the result of outrage, not desire.

He turned his fingers laxer around Lan Wangji's bony wrist. He drew the tip of his index across the veins there, so stark and blue under his pale skin, and tried not to think of why he felt so much more panicked now than when Lan Wangji had watched him rummage through his purse like a common thief.

Lan Wangji opened and closed his mouth, visibly flustered. Wei Wuxian combatted his nausea to put on a leaking smile and leaned in a little more. Every inch of distance gone between them made it harder to breathe.

I need to get away.

He felt Lan Wangji's wrist move in his grasp before he heard him speak: "Is this what you want?"

"What?" Wei Wuxian replied, dazed.

Lan Wangji was frowning now. His outrage must have dispersed and made way for simple disapproval. "Do you want this?" he asked again, and made no movement at all to escape the bruising grip that Wei Wuxian had on him.

"Do you?" Wei Wuxian asked back, and his mind ran around the possibility of Lan Wangji saying no, of Lan Wangji saying yes—

Neither option seemed fathomable. Neither lessened the bright, hot panic which had done away with his reason.

He was the one to pull away in the end. He was the one to let go of Lan Wangji, to step away from the bed and turn his back to Lan Wangji so that he may find his bearings in peace. Part of him wished Lan Wangji would insult him, berate, him, or even retaliate; part of him craved the opportunity for violence, for a breath into the body of the bamboo flute, for reason to stop remembering Lan Wangji's face bathed in the pale morning light and the shiver in his chest that resulted from it.

Lan Wangji called, "Wei Ying."

It wasn't until then that Wei Wuxian realized quite how shallowly he was breathing.
He sucked in some cold air. He forced it through his lungs and limbs, kept it in despite the wild beating of his heart. His voice was almost even when he replied, "Who?"

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji repeated, dreadfully sure of himself. "You are not trapped here."

The coins he had stolen were skin-warm, slick from his tight hold. Wei Wuxian shifted them in his grip till one ground against another in a disagreeable sound of metal rubbing metal.

In a way, this made everything simpler. Wei Wuxian found his heartbeat quieting; he found his back unknotted, his hand cooling again after the burning touch of Lan Wangji's skin.

"How did you know?" he asked, looking at Lan Wangji once more.

He had sat up in the bed. His inner robes were as white as the rest of his uniform, as white as his skin, which daylight still seemed to yearn to imitate.

Wei Wuxian's chest shivered, and he looked away.

"You can go," Lan Wangji said in lieu of an answer. "You can take this money."

"Why did you not say anything to Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Silence. Their voices were soft still, no louder than the alpha boy's sleeping breaths and occasional mumbles. He had not stirred from his position since Wei Wuxian entered the room.

"It doesn't matter," Wei Wuxian said. "I suppose I should thank you for not exposing me, then."

"There is no need."

Wei Wuxian chuckled. "You lied for me and sheltered me, and you would let me steal from you too," he said. "Lan Zhan, I fear the price of such kindness."

He had said those words before, although not to Lan Wangji.

"No price," Lan Wangji replied. "Only—"

*There it is*, Wei Wuxian thought, staring through the small window, watching the horizon grow cool and bright. *There it always is.*

But Lan Wangji did not name a price for his compliance. He asked: "Where will you go?" with a voice softened by worry.

"Not to Gusu," Wei Wuxian replied. "I have no wish to see your uncle or brother again."

"My brother?"

He had said too much.

Those memories, Wei Wuxian had kept delicately at bay since waking up in the world of the living again. They came unbridled in that sharp and silent second, making him want to claw into his own belly, to once more pluck the skin and eyes from a man's terrified face.

No, Wei Wuxian had no wish to meet Lan Xichen again.

"I won't come with you to the Cloud Recesses," he declared once he was certain that none of this rage would transpire. "Nor will I go where Jiang Cheng wants to take me."
Lan Wangji breathed out and said, "Then let me accompany you, wherever you wish to go."

"Why?"

Why would Lan Wangji want to be with him, to stay with him, if he knew who the soul in Mo Xuanyu's body belonged to?

There was something else that Lan Wangji wanted to stay. Wei Wuxian saw it in the curve of his brow, in the tense line of his shoulders. "The last time we spoke," the man said softly. "You…"

"The last time?" Wei Wuxian asked.

It wasn't hard to understand that he did not mean their meeting in Dafan Mountain.

It was difficult, however, to recall when exactly Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji had met as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, or where, or for what reason. Wei Wuxian could recall a handful of meetings after the Sunshot Campaign, all accidental, none longer than a few hours. He would be hard-pressed to recreate any of what they could have said then into the confines of his mind without better prompting. As far as he knew, Lan Wangji had contented himself with telling him to give up the demonic path, and then to offer him music to soothe his spirit.

"What did I do?" he asked. "When was it?"

Lan Wangji's frown turned deeper, creasing the smooth planes of his forehead, dislodging the white ribbon there which had kept tidy through his sleep.

Wei Wuxian almost jumped when the man swept away the cover and stood. His bare feet made no noise upon the wooden floor of the inn, and neither hand nor leg knocked into the furniture around as he dressed and strapped Bichen to his hip, Wangji to his back. "Jingyi and Sizhui told me about what you did in Mo village," he said.

"I didn't do much," Wei Wuxian replied, startled by the change in topic. He had never taken Lan Wangji for someone so easily distracted. "Your sect's disciples are very talented."

"That demonic arm is pointing in one direction. Always the same."

So not even the sealing pouch, not even the sound of Lan Wangji's guqin techniques, had quieted that corpse. It was quite impressive. "It is probably looking for the rest of its body," Wei Wuxian said. "Do you intend to collect it?"

Lan Wangji nodded. "Will you accompany me?" he asked.

Wei Wuxian stared at him, wordless.

Lan Wangji did not seem to mind. He stood, now entirely dressed, in the middle of the room, in the rising light of day. He looked too regal to be in a place such as this, to have slept on a wooden bed and with only thin sheets around his body. His ink-black hair was so long now that it reached past his waist and down his white-clad thighs, longer even than it had been when they were young, dirt and blood-smeared in the Xuanwu's cave, betting their lives for victory. For pride.

"I wish to accompany you," Lan Wangji said.

"I don't know where to go," Wei Wuxian replied.

"I know."
He hesitated. "Why?" he asked once more. "Why would you want to be in my company, Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji touched his hand to the strap of Wangji's cloth, which crossed diagonally over his chest. It was a little too close to his shoulder. A little off-center, some way away from his heart.

"You will remember," he said.

It was impossible to tell if his voice sounded resigned, or determined, or scared.

They left the inn as the sun rose without waking either of the Lan youngsters. Lan Wangji indicated in a few succinct words that Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui—as the alpha boy was apparently called—had no need of him to travel, and knew to return to Gusu as soon as the night-hunt in Dafan came to a close.

Lan Wangji did not speak outside of this. He said nothing at all when Wei Wuxian lingered in the dining room downstairs, asking for hot water to seep the moonless tea in and drinking it leisurely. There were still some wounded from the night before laid atop the benches and tables, and some who slept on the ground itself for lack of rooms to use. The young omega girl was nowhere to be seen.

Many surprises came to him that day. The first was the sight of the donkey he had all but abandoned to its fate the night previous, calmly grazing the grass at the end of the village, looking at them approach with clever eyes. Wei Wuxian could not help but laugh as he sauntered toward it and then mounted its back, affectionately patting its side.

Another surprise was the lack of pursuit sent their way. As the hours crawled by and they ventured out of forest paths and into broader, flatter roads, Wei Wuxian wondered that he could not see Sandu's glare hovering over them or hear Jiang Cheng's angry voice calling Mo Xuanyu's name.

"Perhaps a lone demonic cultivator rejected from Lanlingjin is not worth it," he said out loud. "Jiang Cheng must have bigger fish to catch."

Lan Wangji replied, "Perhaps."

Sandalwood wafted through the warm springly air, drowning even the scent of flowers.

Jin Ling was never very discreet about his emotions, Lan Sizhui reflected, sitting at one table and waiting for his broth to cool.

"What do you mean he's gone?" the Jin sect heir was all but howling at Lan Jingyi, who looked tired enough for two.

"I mean he is gone, Jin Ling. He must have left with Hanguang-Jun."

"Isn't Lan Wangji your superior? Why is he leaving you two alone?"
"Because unlike you," Lan Jingyi boasted, "we do not need supervision for every little night-hunt."

Lan Sizhui faintly thought of reprimanding Jingyi for arrogance. No doubt Lan Qiren would be scandalized if he could see them now, after the trust he had put in Sizhui by allowing Jingyi to accompany him out of Gusu. But Sizhui, although rested from the night's running around and with warm soup in front of him, felt too weary to.

"Hanguang-Jun definitely took young master Mo with him," he told Jiang Wanyin, who had sat opposite him and was nursing his own soup bowl. "You can rest assured that he won't allow any demonic cultivation to happen, sect leader Jiang."

"I'm not worried about that," Jiang Wanyin replied.

Sizhui wanted to ask what he meant; but Jiang Wanyin deliberately took his bowl to his mouth to avoid answering, and so the question died on his tongue.

Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi were still having a spat only a table away. Most of the room's other occupants were looking their way, though Sizhui expected, with a shudder, that it had less to do with the noise than with Lan Jingyi himself. Already he could see eyes linger where they should not, hear breaths be taken too loudly as if to scent out the source of sweetness in the room. He made sure to calmly glare at any stranger he found too attentive.

It was one thing for Jin Ling, who was only a year younger than Jingyi and had known him for a decade, to become flustered in his presence, and another for alpha and beta adults twice Jingyi's age to be prowling about with so little dignity.

"You're very protective."

Lan Sizhui looked back at the man sitting in front of him.

Jiang Wanyin had put down his bowl. He rubbed the rim of it now with his thumb, pensive. "Lan Sizhui," he said. "That is your name, right?"

"It is my courtesy name, yes," Sizhui replied with some surprise.

Jiang Wanyin frowned at him, staring with the intent of someone looking for something. Whether he found it or not, he looked away again, sighing. "You can't protect him forever," he said. "That omega boy of yours."

"He's not mine," Sizhui retorted.

There was a pause. "Right," Jiang Wanyin said. "You're right, he is not. I'm sure you'll tell me that he belongs to himself, or something of the kind."

He only looked sadder for it.

"Things are different now than when I was your age," he went on. "Even so, I don't know if it is a good or bad thing."

Sizhui tensed. "You speak of omega houses."

"I do."

His lips thinned. He remembered with such clarity the first time he had been explained those things, the outrage in his belly that had reduced him to tears, then but a child of seven or eight. To this day
He could never explain why the topic brought such rage out of him—only that it did.

He thought, once again, of Mo Xuanyu’s bruised and cut-up body, of his hateful family, of the way Jin Ling had spoken of him that very morning, crudely dismissive.

"You look at me with such anger," Jiang Wanyin said. Lan Sizhui startled, opening his mouth to deny it, but the Jiang sect leader raised a hand to interrupt him. "You must think I am one of those people who resent those changes." He chuckled darkly. "Well, it doesn't matter if I am. But you should know—you can't protect that boy. Not forever. In fact, I doubt you were able to protect him from as much as you think you did."

"I can try," Lan Sizhui replied hotly.

Part of him wanted to cower and ask for forgiveness, after showing such cheek to a sect leader when he was not even a full-fledged cultivator yet; but a greater and louder part of him wanted Jiang Wanyin to elaborate and tell him in which ways he had failed Lan Jingyi.

"There is no failsafe way of protecting someone from all the evils of the world," Jiang Wanyin said. "And one shouldn't rely on another for protection like this, either."

"Jingyi is like a brother to me," Sizhui said between his teeth.

Jiang Wanyin sighed again loudly. "Of course he is," he muttered. "But he is a cultivator, isn't he?"

He was watching Jingyi too now, off at the neighboring table and still talking loudly with Jin Ling, but his eyes were not the same as those men and women around.

"We don't see a lot of those," Jiang Wanyin said. "Omega cultivators. There are none in my sect, and none in the Jin sect either."

"It was Jingyi's wish," Sizhui explained.

"How oddly things turned out. Twenty years ago, if I had to bet on which clan would faster accept an omega cultivator in their midst, I would not have picked Gusulan."

Outrage made Sizhui snap, "The Cloud Recesses do not have an omega house."

"Not anymore," Jiang Wanyin retorted. "When I was your age and I came to Gusu to learn under Lan Qiren, there was an omega house there. Right at the top of the mountain."

Shock kept Sizhui silent. All of a sudden he felt his ears to be stuffed with silk or cotton, his mouth to have dried out.

"You don't believe me," Jiang Wanyin laughed. The sound of his voice came to Lan Sizhui muffled. "Well, no matter. You can ask Lan Wangji or your sect leader the next time you see them—in fact, you should ask Lan Wangji." His smile turned dark and resentful. "Ask your Hanguang-jun what he once thought of omega cultivators," he said. "See what he has to say for himself."

"Why are you telling me this?" Lan Sizhui asked softly.

Jiang Wanyin opened his mouth with that same sick, satisfied anger on his face; before he spoke, however, he met eyes with Lan Sizhui. Whatever he saw there made the satisfaction vanish and be replaced with—pity, Sizhui thought. Or perhaps sympathy.

In that moment, they felt very much alike.
"You should know," the man said. "If you're serious about protecting that boy, you need to know the sorts of things that those around you are capable of. Things are different now, but not so much. Not really."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't either. Not at your age."

Jiang Wanyin pushed his empty bowl away from himself. With his thumb and index, he patted the rim of the small cup of rice wine which a waiter had poured for him.

"How do you differentiate affection and duty," he said. "How do you break apart jealousy, hatred, and brotherhood? At the time I never did—I never even tried to. And I do not know if it would have changed anything, in the end, but I will spend the rest of my days wondering if perhaps, it could have. If only I reached out a little earlier."

"Are you talking about—"

Sizhui stopped himself before he could finish.

It was not common knowledge, not among his peers; but Sizhui remembered, suddenly, sitting in one of master Qiren's classes; he remembered when the topic of the Yiling Patriarch Wei Ying came up, when Lan Qiren paused in the midst of his lecture to frighten them with tales of Wei Ying sitting in that same classroom and defying him with his dark, terrible ideas.

"None of us knew then of the terrible things he would do," Lan Qiren had said in the silence, looking at each of them in turn. "Not I teaching him, nor Hanguang-Jun, nor Jiang Cheng of Yunmeng sitting right beside him."


Belatedly, he realized that the sound of Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi's arguing had dimmed. Though neither boy seemed to be paying them any mind, too busy glowering at each other as they ate their breakfast, Lan Sizhui felt some guilt, as if he were speaking behind their backs.

Perhaps he was, he thought, looking at Jin Ling. After all, the Yiling Patriarch Wei Ying was rumored to have killed Jin Ling's father.

"I don't know if anyone truly knew Wei Wuxian," Jiang Wanyin said. "Before or after he chose to become what he did."

It was the last he said on the topic.

Minutes later his voice came again, calling, "Lan Yuan."

Sizhui was not used to his birth name being called by someone not Lan Wangji. And it was not A-Yuan, not this childhood nickname tinted with affection and longing, as Sizhui sat in the lap of the man, in the most secluded pavilion of the Recesses, learning to pluck guqin strings one by one and then all together.

Though Jiang Wanyin's voice seemed to bear a different sort of longing as he said it: Lan Yuan.

As if he expected someone other than Sizhui to answer; as if he were testing it out, waiting for a mirage to fall, a ruse to be revealed. None of it happened however as Sizhui turned around to face him and answer: "Yes?"
Jin Ling was speaking with Lan Jingyi again a few steps ahead of them. Jiang Wanyin stared at Lan Sizhui oddly, as if the sips of rice wine earlier had been enough to cloud his judgment. "Be careful," he said.

Lan Sizhui nodded, confused.

He tried to smile. Jiang Wanyin's face seemed to break apart on sorrow at the mere sight of it.

He was still thinking of it hours later as he and Lan Jingyi flew back to Gusu. They were too far now to achieve the trip home in one go, he knew; and so he kept his eyes close to the ground far down in search of a village to stay the night, a house somewhere in the fields and forests, a cabin at the foot of a tall mountain. The cool wind slapped at every inch of his exposed skin. Lan Jingyi's sweet scent caught upon it and vanished just as quickly, born away on the breeze. Lan Sizhui breathed it in and thought of the words Jiang Wanyin had said to him.

"If only I reached out a little earlier."

"Jingyi," he called.

For a second he thought perhaps the other boy would not hear him against the backdrop of wind; but a moment later the answer came, friendly and kind—"What is it?"

"Are you afraid of anything?"

It was perhaps not the best way of asking it, but it was the only way Lan Sizhui could think of.

Lan Jingyi didn't think too long on his answer. He leveled his slim sword next to Lan Sizhui's, humming in thought for only a brief moment. "I'll tell you because it's you, Sizhui," he said. "I'm afraid of many things."

"What things?"

"Too many to count. Bats, spiders, master Qiren's wooden rulers. The Yiling Patriarch kidnapping me," he teased.

Lan Sizhui could only give back a half-hearted smile.

"There are other things too," Jingyi said. "But I don't know if I want to admit them to anyone."

He said it with a flushed face, high up in the sky where no one could reach him, and Lan Sizhui tried not to feel bereft. He tried not to be scared of those secrets which Jingyi held hidden from him.

He tried not to think of himself in twenty or thirty years, drinking wine in a shabby little inn, full of remorse for things he never dared to do or say.

"If one day you want to tell someone," Sizhui said, "then I'll listen to you."

He put a hand over his heart as he said it, though the gesture felt hollow.

Jingyi laughed brightly. "I know you will," he said. "You're such a worrywart, Sizhui. I bet your parents were very kind people too."

It wasn't the first time he said it, and like every time before, Sizhui let warmth unfurl in his chest. He let himself think of wide hands guiding his small fingers to the strings of a too-big instrument, of sandalwood in the tepid summer air, of that lonely little pavilion high up on the mountain where for years Lan Wangji had lived alone.
Yes, he thought. *They were.*

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone and sorry for the wait... I had a shit ton of work, some personal stuff to deal with, and then after all that I got sick. I love weeks like that.

Also!!! Some people drew some super cool things for this fic and it's high time I showed it to y'all....

Twitter user @defragmentise drew this art of WWX and LWJ in chapter 1 that I can't stop thinking about (cries) / @whywuxian drew this Lan Sizhui and Jin Ling who are SO CUTE!!! / @silverink58 just gifted me this gorgeous illustration of WWX realizing who Jin Ling is and thinking about Jin Zixuan! Beautiful!

It blows my mind whenever someone draws something I wrote, I'm really so happy, thank you so much to those three wonderful readers <3<3<3

See you all soon for future adventures!
Chapter 13

The handful of coins which Wei Wuxian stole from Lan Wangji soon became obsolete.

It was not such a problem for food. Game was aplenty at this time of the year, and soon enough Wei Wuxian had acquired a new bow to hunt with. When afternoon lingered over the mountains and the sun disappeared behind ensnowed summits, they both hunted together for their meal of the night, or the following day. The demonic arm Lan Wangji oft took out of its sealing pouch had no care for such things as roads or mountains; it pointed straightforwardly toward the rest of its body, forcing them to back away sometimes and take long, solitary detours through the wilderness. It was good to plan ahead for their meals.

There encountered very few villages. They saw only one bigger town, and chose not to stop in it for the night. Occasionally a farmer saw them pass before their house and offered them someplace warm to sleep in exchange for labor and company; more often than not, they took a closer look at Wei Wuxian and rescinded their offer.

Only once did they sleep inside someone else's house. Wei Wuxian was silent as he declined to help with food and offered to fix a wall of the garden shed instead; the old man who had invited them in shrugged his shoulders without word and sent him there, calling for his grandchild in a soft voice.

As he worked next to the girl who smelled of sweet liquor, Wei Wuxian finally relaxed. He slept for once without waking.

Sleeping together with Lan Wangji, outside in the cool nights of spring, soon became a habit. If Wei Wuxian had expected the Lan sect heir to put up a front of outrage at the thought of such impropriety, he was relieved to find that none of it came true. Lan Wangji never said a word to him as they settled for the night. Perhaps, like Wei Wuxian, he considered that sharing a cave during heat made such worries worthless.

On they went through the countryside, village after village and mountain after mountain. In the vast green valleys neighboring Lanling's territory, Wei Wuxian hunted rabbits for food. He cooked them over the fire and watched with something like humor as Lan Wangji refused them, sticking to rice and fruit and vegetable soups.

"If you had come to Yunmeng with me when we were young," he told him in jest, "I would have made you eat meat."

Lan Wangji's face betrayed no hatred for the idea, though his voice was deep and even. "I would have recognized the trick."

"You wouldn't have," Wei Wuxian laughed. "How lucky for you that I am a little wiser today. I know how terrible such a thing is—truly, there are days I look back and wish to slap myself across the face, Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji watched him then with peaceful-looking eyes. He seemed to enjoy when such nostalgia
struck Wei Wuxian; sometimes, he seemed to hate it too.

They didn't speak often. Not like this, not answering each other. Lan Wangji was a man of very few words, and those words were hard-earned, thought through, before ever leaving his mouth. He looked almost delicate in his efforts to be placating and follow Wei Wuxian's moods. Wei Wuxian himself could stand silence just fine after those years in Yiling—most of which he had spent inside the bloodpool cave in-between visits from Wen Ning and Wen Qing, barely hearing the sounds from the village outside settling for morning or night—but he found himself commenting on the people they met, on the landscapes they encountered. He spoke at length about a flower on the side of the path which he remembered Wen Qing using in her concoctions. He brightened at the sight of some birds, fat enough for a meal but too quick for his arrows. Those defeats, he took in good stride with Lan Wangji watching him.

Wei Wuxian realized after a week had passed that he looked forward to unclothing the haunted arm and seeing which way it pointed. He found that it was relief he felt upon knowing they were on the right track; he understood without saying so how Lan Wangji had saved him by offering to travel with him.

If he had been left to his own devices, dead-and-back and unknown to all, he had no idea what he would have done. He knew not where he should go.

The nights they spent in inns were perhaps the least enjoyable of the lot, he found. Though his back and behind were grateful for the relative softness of beds and pillows, and though waking up to warmth and a meal he didn't have to prepare himself was a relief, the presence of others was a hindrance more often than not.

The omega girl in Dafan had been something of a rarity, he realized the first time an innkeeper referred to him as Lan Wangji's omega.

"A room for you and yours?" she had asked, an alpha woman smelling of tilled earth, her brimstonescent husband standing not far behind and sending glares Wei Wuxian's way.

"Two rooms," Lan Wangji had replied.

Two rooms. The words echoed through the half-empty dining room as if carried by immense voice, and odd looks turned their way, inquisitive or even angry.

But Lan Wangji was a cultivator. His flowing robes seemed to repel dirt as they did dark energy, unlike Wei Wuxian's which were stained every way by the long days of travel. His very presence, his apparent wealth, his status all carried power. The scorned innkeepers dared not refuse his money—they dared not defy him.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said as they sat at a far table and waited for food to be brought to them. "Will you tell me what has changed?"

Lan Wangji was silent. Wei Wuxian could tell that it was not out of a need to refuse, however.

"I learned that omega houses were outlawed ten years ago," he continued. "But I don't know why."

Lan Wangji said, "Lianfang-Zun outlawed them."

"Lianfang-Zun?"

"Jin Guangyao."
Jin Guangyao. Wei Wuxian had heard that name spoken in Jiang Cheng's voice only days ago, he recalled. He remembered wondering about it then.

"I don't believe Jin Guangshan allowed this easily," Wei Wuxian declared with a shake of his head. "Not with how he opposed me for years. I'm assuming this Jin Guangyao is one of his children?"

"Jin Guangshan is dead. Lianfang-Zun has been the leader of Lanlingjin for ten years."

"Dead?" he exclaimed. "How?"

For some reason, Lan Wangji's face tensed at his question. He shook his head wordlessly, the tips of his ears turning bright red. Wei Wuxian was not otherwise interested in the old alpha's death, so he did not press on.

The last time he had seen Jin Guangshan in person was at the bottom of the Burial Mounds, with the man spitting vitriol to him, calling him thief and deranged. Wei Wuxian thought privately that the world was well-rid of him. The state of Mo Xuanyu's life and body only made his vengefulness stronger.

"Jin Guangyao," he said softly. "This Lianfang-Zun, I wonder the sort of person he is."

"He is my brother's sworn ally," Lan Wangji replied. "As was the former Nie sect leader."

Former… then Chifeng-Zun was dead, too.

Wei Wuxian was not so glad to hear that. Nie Mingjue had been straightforward, fair in his own way, though he had only trusted in Wei Wuxian's abilities, never in his character. Wei Wuxian's memories of that day in the Nightless City were steeped in mud, but he knew that Nie Mingjue had not been present among those who wished to kill him.

He supposed one could trust Lan Xichen to choose the right brothers-in-arm.

"I still can't believe the sects allowed it," he said, bracing one palm against his cup of wine and sending a quick prayer for Nie Mingjue's soul. "Is this Jin Guangyao so powerful?"

"Some refused," Lan Wangji said succinctly. "Those he could not convince, he brought war to."

Wei Wuxian tried to picture what such an alpha could look like.

Lan Wangji must have read the curiosity on his face, for he went on, "Things had changed. There were not as many fights about it as you think."

Wei Wuxian wondered what it said about him that his heart squeezed with resentment.

All along, then, any sect leader could have stepped up and put an end to it all. All it would have taken was a word from one of them to guarantee freedom to those whom Wei Wuxian had to keep safe at the price of his reputation and health. How many days had he spent guarding the entrance of the Burial Mounds after Jin Guangshan had left that time, keeping himself awake with Wen Qing's drugs, making sure to bar entrance to those who would claim human lives as property?

"What about Lan Qiren," Wei Wuxian said hollowly.

"My uncle," Lan Wangji replied in something like kindness, "changed his mind long before Lianfang-Zun's order was carried out."

Wei Wuxian drank from the cup in his hand. The wine spread on his tongue almost as bitterly as the
scent-masking paste.

That first night in an inn made them wary. They preferred the open night to civilization after that, keeping the path open before them as they followed the direction the arm gave them. They started using names for it so as not to make it struggle inside the pouch at Lan Wangji's waist. The arm seemed to feel when they spoke of it as of a corpse, a haunt; it jarred the spell on the pouch, tried to escape their hold when they took it out to make sure they were going the right way.

Night after night, Lan Wangji played Tranquility on his namesake guqin. Night after night Wei Wuxian took the bamboo flute and accompanied him, making his song softer and kinder despite the bluntness of the instrument. He tried many times to carve it into a better, more tunelike shape. He missed the smooth, black length of Chenqing, and the notes it could produce which never failed their task.

Traces of livinghood became sparser as the second week came to an end. The arm was taking them somewhere dangerously close to the Unclean Realms where Qinghenie dwelled—where Nie Huaisang lived, Wei Wuxian supposed, if no alpha heir was found to sweep the succession from him. This would also be something to see, he wondered. A beta sect leader.

Three nights later, the arm stopped pointing anywhere specific. It squirmed and fought and rolled in on itself, panicked or angered, driven to madness with proximity. Lan Wangji forced it back inside the sealing pouch without playing at all.

"So the rest of our dear friend is somewhere around here," Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Wangji gave a short hum in answer. He stopped at the entrance of the village they had reached, and Little Apple stopped by him without the need for orders.

It was a small thing, this village. A couple hundred inhabitants at most spread over less than forty houses, with an inn at its center which could host no more than ten guests if they chose to keep tight and squeezed together. Wei Wuxian was not surprised to find the same hatred in the eyes of those who looked at him there that he had known fifteen years ago. They welcomed Lan Wangji with wariness and watched Wei Wuxian with suspicion, as if scared that he would suddenly go feral and try to kill them all.

Those fears would not be so unfounded if only they knew who he was.

Still, money was money. The sight of Lan Wangji's purse was enough to convince the innkeepers to give them two rooms for the following nights, and with great weariness, Wei Wuxian allowed sleep to find him without eating dinner.

He woke up with all the smells and sounds of dawn.

"Let me sleep, Mo Xuanyu," he muttered with a twisted smile, rubbing his eyes against the too-bright light. "Of all the unfairness in your life, the greatest has to be that you woke so often before noon."

He washed himself clean of the previous days' dirt in the wide bucket set at the other side of the room. The nippy water finished waking him up, and he was wide awake by the time he made it out of the room and then out of the inn.

Lan Wangji was nowhere to be seen, but the smell of sandalwood clinged to the door next to his, indicating that he must still be inside. Wei Wuxian made his steps quieter so as not to warn him of his presence.
Down the stairs, a few guests were seated and talking over hot broth and warm liquor already. They watched Wei Wuxian walk toward the exit like hawks. Wei Wuxian tried not to pay attention to the aches that tension brought out of his back and shoulders. His hand stayed firmly clasped around the unnamed bamboo flute.

Once outside, he felt the same thing which he had when they arrived: some kind of energy absorbed by the soil and plants around, different than the resentment he could wield but not so far out of his reach. He had not told Lan Wangji of it yet, and had no idea if the Lan sect heir had felt it too when they arrived. He wanted to examine it on his own.

Wei Wuxian boiled water from the river to take the moonless tea. He sat near the bed of it as he swallowed down the disgusting beverage, wishing not for the first time that something could be made to turn the taste of it sweeter and trying to narrow down the location of the odd energy.

It felt a little like the goddess in Dafan had, and yet not at all similar.

A few minutes later, he could pinpoint it as coming from the woods which seemed to spread over a mile behind the village. Wei Wuxian put out the fire at his feet and washed the cup in the river.

He was unhurried as he walked toward the edge of the forest. Most of the village's inhabitants were now busy with their daily activities, some working the fields around and others mounting donkeys and horses to go wherever they needed to. Wei Wuxian had left Little Apple in the shed beside the inn. Judging by the animal's tenacious will to stay with him, he did not worry that he would flee.

How odd. Wei Wuxian had never been very liked by animals before, nor had he ever liked them very much.

He stood for a long time by the first trees of the forest once he had reached them. He was completely alone now, too far away from the small houses for anyone to bother with him, but it did not explain the silence of the place. Like in Dafan mountain after the goddess's first cry, it seemed all life had fled from the woods. Leaves fell into the wind without so much as a sound; he could hear no mice scurrying through the bushes, no deer or bears rustling the well-tread earth.

He brought the bamboo flute to his lips.

The music which he had used to calm Wen Ning in the mountain weeks ago came to him more easily this time. It filled him with quiet as he played, calling with kindness rather than urgency this time. He needn't turn around and watch for a sign of Wen Ning approaching; the ground did not shake, not this time, and Wen Ning's footsteps only rang with the softest rustle of chains.

Seeing him in daylight was different. Wei Wuxian doubted that many would have fled or cried out in fear at the sight of him, still and quiet like this, looking helplessly at his master.

The ache in his heart was familiar, too. "Wen Ning," he called. "Have you been following us?"

There was no answer. Wen Ning did not seem to have regained the consciousness which Wei Wuxian so painstakingly gifted him in the past, though his eyes were less empty. He almost looked as if he wished to speak.

Wei Wuxian stepped closer. Wen Ning gave no sign of danger or disquiet when he was touched, not even when Wei Wuxian turned his frail wrists this way and that to examine the thick metal chains locked around them.

"Who did this to you?" he asked without expecting a reply.
The chains were heavy, locked in place by sturdy bracelets made of the same iron. If Wen Ning had been alive, his skin would have chafed under them until it bled. As it was, Wei Wuxian could still see sign of wear on it, as layer upon layer of epiderma had peeled away.

He sighed and dropped Wen Ning's hands. "At least it looks like whatever spell was put on you is going away," he told him. "I hope it is gone the next time I call you, my friend. I have so much to ask you—so much to tell you."

The first would be, I'm sorry. But Wei Wuxian did not want those words to be spoken while Wen Ning was unable to hear them.

How he wished to speak with him. How he longed for the company of someone who had known him during those years in Yiling—of someone who would perhaps know what had become of the village there and its inhabitants.

"I wonder if you can feel it too?" Wei Wuxian asked out loud, taking a step closer in-between wide-trunked trees. "I haven't felt something like this in a long time. It reminds me of the Stygian Tiger Seal."

Not quite steeped in darkness but not quite wholesome either—that was the sort of energy that the Seal had suffused when not in use, the weight which Wei Wuxian had carried so long upon himself for fear of someone using his inattention to steal it.

Yes, the Stygian Tiger Seal should never have existed in this world. Wei Wuxian wondered with a shiver that he had ever created such a thing to be used, that he had ever been so foolish, so careless. So blind to the dangers of what he was doing.

These dangers seemed much less nebulous now.

He smelled sandalwood on the wind. "I will call for you again," he told Wen Ning. "Go, and keep following us, but stay hidden. Don't let anyone see you."

He briefly touched the side of Wen Ning's face. Mo Xuanyu was so much shorter than Wei Wuxian had been that the gesture made him feel like a child reaching helplessly for his parent.

With another trill of the flute, the Ghost General disappeared between the trees.

Wei Wuxian waited for Lan Wangji to join him patiently. It wasn't a minute before white robes appeared at the turn of the road; Lan Wangji was dressed as regally as ever, white and spotless against the bright sunlight, his black hair flowing behind his back gently.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian greeted. "I apologize for not waiting for you."

"No need," Lan Wangji replied succinctly.

How odd to see him so accommodating, so free of the confrontation which had plagued their younger years. After what had happened at the inn in Dafan, Wei Wuxian expected to find Lan Wangji loath to address him.

He laughed to chase away his embarrassment. The memory still made him queasy. "Can you feel this energy?" he asked. At Lan Wangji's nod, he added, "It seems to be coming from inside the woods. I wonder what we'll find."

"A haunted castle."
"A haunted castle?"

"A villager said."

Wei Wuxian stroked his chin. If these woods were haunted, then it was possible that the arm did come from here. But how had it traveled from here to Mo village on its own?

Unless someone had planted it there.

But why Mo village, Wei Wuxian thought as they walked into the woods, such a small place, without any political strongholds or greater sects in its vicinity? Gusu was too far—if the mastermind has wished to harm the Lan clan, they should have set the demonic corpse in Caiyi Town or even at the entrance of the Cloud Recesses.

"Will your clan be fine without you, Lan Zhan?" he asked in the deep silence.

Lan Zhan stared at him with some confusion on his face.

"Without you," Wei Wuxian pressed. "Won't they be in trouble without their sect leader?"

"My brother is there," Lan Wangji replied.

Wei Wuxian batted the air with one hand at the mention of Lan Xichen. "I am talking about you, Lan Zhan, not your brother."

"My brother is our sect leader."

Wei Wuxian paused in his steps.

What little sounds the forest emitted around them muffled even further. Lan Wangji paused as well next to him, his face devoid of any inflexion of frustration or shame.

"But you," Wei Wuxian stuttered.

Lan Wangji stayed silent.

Try as he might, Wei Wuxian could not form a coherent thought. He stared at Lan Wangji until he was certain that the other should start prickling, should turn away in annoyance as he once would have done, but Lan Wangji did not. He said nothing. He bore Wei Wuxian's rudeness as one would just punishment.

"You are the Jade of Lan," Wei Wuxian said at last. He tried to keep his voice even, but shock, he thought, must be painting his words inquisitive. "You are—you were always your uncle's favorite. The greatest talent your clan has ever known. Your brother is a beta."

He had made direct mention of status on purpose, but not even this breach of propriety broke Lan Wangji's composure. "My brother is a fair leader," Lan Wangji simply replied.

"You think me so gullible."

"I would not lie to you."

"You were a better marksman and cultivator than your brother before you reached maturity," Wei Wuxian said, grabbing onto anger so as not to linger on what those words evoked in him. "I can see no reason why you would be replaced in the heirline."
Lan Wangji's answer was long in coming. Eventually, he admitted: "I made a mistake."

Wei Wuxian remembered, then, the angry words which had come out of Jiang Cheng's mouth in Dafan. You make a grave mistake if you still think us equals.

"You fell from grace," he recited. "Jiang Cheng said that."

"Yes," Lan Wangji said. "But that was not the mistake I made."

Wei Wuxian almost asked him what he meant before thinking better of it.

There must be a reason Lan Wangji was not forthcoming with his answers. Shame perhaps, or perhaps this was a clan secret, not something he should be telling outsiders. Judging by the faces that those two Lan juniors had made and the title they used on him—Hanguang-Jun—they must not have known about it either.

Of course Jiang Cheng had seen no need for such propriety, Wei Wuxian thought dryly. And he should know better than to pry as well.

"Well," he said. "I suppose this is one problem we do not need to think about."

"Had I been sect leader," Lan Wangji started.

He paused. Wei Wuxian watched him frown at the ground and shift back and forth on his feet almost imperceptibly.

"Had I been sect leader," Lan Wangji said. "I would have made you the same offer."

He met Wei Wuxian's eyes after that, blinking his long and dark lashes slowly, before turning away.

They walked for hours without finding anything. The woods here spread over flatter land than in Dafan, and they were sparser too, less lush and tricky to navigate. The trees stood wide apart, their trunks thick and solid, their canopy spread thinly. Golden sunlight filtered in through the leaves and shifted onto the dry ground. These were woods that animals should be running through, Wei Wuxian thought, woods made for hunting and meditating, and yet there was no sign of life, human or otherwise. Only the two of them and that strange shiver of energy.

Lan Wangji was the one who figured it out. He pointed wordlessly to an oddly-shaped root in the ground which they had noticed already near midday; it looked somewhat like the back of a turtle, shelled and domed over the ground, as if ready to let the head and feet of the animal out.

"Yes," Wei Wuxian muttered. "We are going in circles."

"Not lost," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Wuxian nodded. "I would have noticed if we took a turn we already knew. This is the work of a barrier."

The sun would set soon. They decided to head back toward the village for the night.

The streets seemed strangely subdued when they made their way to the inn. Whatever few villagers still roamed the streets did so quietly, hunched in on themselves or conversing in low voices. Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji received more looks, if possible, than the night before.

They found the reason for what waiting for them inside the inn.
Nie Huaisang had not changed overly much in the years since Wei Wuxian had seen him. Even draped in softer silks than Wei Wuxian had ever seen Nie Mingjue wear, he still looked like the classmate he had met in Gusu during their understudies, down to the embroidered fan he hid his face behind and the very faint snowy scent clinging to him. At the sight of Lan Wangji stepping over the threshold, Nie Huaisang rose from the table where he had been served tea and bowed at the shoulders.

"Hanguang-Jun," he said with urgency. "Oh, I couldn't believe when I learned of you being here—if I may be so bold as to ask for a favor…"

His words died when he met eyes with Wei Wuxian.

Or rather, Wei Wuxian thought as he watched him try to inhale very subtly, as he looked for confirmation of what Mo Xuanyu's appearance inferred.

"So it is true," Nie Huaisang said. "I never thought… Well, I suppose it is only normal—Xichen-ge never said anything of you finding a, a—"

"He is not mine," Lan Wangji said.

His tone could almost be called frosty. What little irritation Wei Wuxian had mustered at the now-familiar misunderstanding vanished under dry humor.

Lan Wangji had not commented upon the situation thus far, but even he had to find offense in others suggesting that he was traveling with an unmated omega with this purpose in mind. Especially one who had made such improper advances upon him.

His stomach squirmed in remembrance.

"Yes," Nie Huaisang let out faintly. "Well, if—if I may ask you for something. Is there a room we can borrow to speak privately?" he asked the unkind tenant across the room.

With very bad grace, the man led them to a small parlor at the other end of the inn. The walls there were moist with rain, the wood eaten throughout. Wei Wuxian laid his fingers over a corner and thought he could break their structure apart with a shove of the shoulder.

"Lan Wangji," Nie Huaisang said nervously once they were alone. His gaze kept flickering toward Wei Wuxian, as if he expected him to excuse himself and leave any second. Wei Wuxian sat down in front of him and sent him an even smile. "Ah, I'm sure you have an idea of why I am here."

"It is about the barrier in the woods, isn't it?" Wei Wuxian asked.

Nie Huaisang did not hesitate long to answer. "Yes," he admitted. "I was about to write Xichen-ge for advice, since he knows about it already… It is somewhat of an embarrassment."

"A clan affair," Lan Wangji said.

"Indeed. I need to ask you… both of you, to be discreet."

Lan Wangji nodded silently. Wei Wuxian tapped his fingers atop the wooden table, eyeing the surprisingly firm grip Nie Huaisang had over his delicate fan.

"You have heard, I suppose, of the castle in the woods," Nie Huaisang said.

"Heard of, yes," Wei Wuxian replied. "But we were not able to approach it."
"In ordinary circumstances, I would order you to leave it at that. This place is sacred for Qinghenie—not somewhere anyone but the sect leader should know of," he pressed, almost imperious. "But now, not even I can access it."

Wei Wuxian frowned. "What sort of place is it?"

"A burial site. Somewhere reserved for the leaders of the clan."

Wei Wuxian stopped running his fingers against the table.

Nie Huaisang suffered their stare with only the lightest of blushes. "You know of my clan's saber techniques," he told Lan Wangji. "You know where they came from."

"Butchery."

"Yes. Yes, butchery."

The Nie sect was famous for two things.

One was the harsh environment in which they dwelled—harder, some said, than Qishanwen's desert city. The Unclean Realms were said to stand in the midst of endless marshlands, where travelers got caught in mud or bit by poisonous snakes if they strayed too far from broad roads. Wei Wuxian had never seen them in person. Looking at Nie Mingjue all those years ago, he had thought he could understand how such a man could grow out of fighting a constant battle against water and earth, but Nie Huaisang's delicate manners and frail character always made him believe that such stories were made up. After all, how could someone who grew under such conditions be scared of Lan Qiren?

The second and perhaps better-known thing was Qinghenie's saber techniques. Wei Wuxian had seen it in use when he and Nie Mingjue fought side by side one eventful day of the Sunshot Campaign. He had glimpsed Nie Huaisang's own saber when the Wen sect had forcefully gathered them all to indoctrinate and stolen their weapons.

It had been taken, like Suibian, by Wen Chao.

His fingers felt cold. He rubbed them against his mouth both to warm them up and chase the taste of dirt from his tongue, understanding a second too late that Nie Huaisang had started speaking again.

"... ancestor's sabers are great weapons, great weapons indeed," he was saying almost fearfully, "but their power comes at a cost. It is no secret now that most of my clan's leaders fall victim to qi deviation from handling them for too long."

Wei Wuxian wondered if such a thing had happened to Nie Mingjue. If the famous Chifeng-Zun had, like his ancestors, fallen victim to the gluttonous appetite of his weapon of choice. Nie Huaisang did not offer any further information on the topic.

"Those weapons cannot be destroyed," Nie Huaisang said. "You have to understand that what I am telling you is a secret of the utmost value—if others knew, many would try to come and steal those weapons." He took in a shaky breath. "They cannot be destroyed or sealed in the common way," he went on. "For centuries we have 'buried' them like we do our leaders. This burial site is the haunted castle you heard about."

"I suppose you do not simply mean that the sabers are left underground," Wei Wuxian said.

Nie Huaisang shook his head. "Indeed, young master…?"
"Mo Xuanyu."

"Young master Mo. Indeed, they are not buried. These weapons are as alive as fierce spirits, and once forged and used by masters with enough strength, they cannot be sated. They need to keep feeding."

Wei Wuxian had an idea what sort of food Nie Huaisang was speaking of.

"Please do not think that we treat this tradition lightly or murder innocents for the sake of it," Nie Huaisang urged, confirming his thoughts. "The corpses we bury we there belong to criminals who would have been hanged or beheaded anyway. It is better for everyone to let the sabers feed on their resentful energy than to let them come alive and attack the living. The barrier keeps people from wandering inside the burial grounds."

"And now," Wei Wuxian said, "you cannot get in either."

Nie Huaisang nodded, pathetically desperate.

So this was the kind of sect leader Nie Huaisang had become, Wei Wuxian thought, watching him bargain one-sidedly for Lan Wangji's help. Helpless to fix his own clan's problems, hanging as always onto someone else's robes and begging for help. He had been like this as a student with Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian had no doubt that he was like this with Lan Xichen, whom he still addressed as an older brother.

He was never made for the role, after all; he was weak of character even if he had not been born beta, and any way his older brother should have stayed alive much longer. Nie Huaisang should never have worn the mantle of sect leader. It was a shame Nie Mingjue had not left behind a more worthy heir.

Still, Wei Wuxian had never disliked Nie Huaisang. He still remembered the day the boy had watched him spar with Jiang Cheng in the Cloud Recesses and shyly offered to be his opponent for a turn.

No one else back then had wanted to speak with him, let alone risk the shame of harming or touching him. No one except Nie Mingjue's cowardly brother and Lan Wangji himself, who had never sought combat with Wei Wuxian, only suffered his insistence to disrupt peace and retaliated.

"We will help, sect leader Nie," he declared.

Nie Huaisang looked at him incredulously. To Wei Wuxian's surprise, he did not seek Lan Wangji's approval and simply replied, "Thank you!"

It was not long afterward that Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian stood outside the inn, watching Nie Huaisang climb onto the greenish blade of his saber and elevate into the nightly air. Soon the glare of his weapon was lost amidst stars and moonlight, and he vanished entirely.

"He couldn't even stay to make sure we finished the job," Wei Wuxian commented airily. "Oh well, Huaisang was never very brave."

"You do not disapprove."

"I don't. I've always liked Nie Huaisang. Call it sentimentality, if you wish, but I do want to help him. And our dear friend must want us to go to these graves anyway."

Lan Wangji did not reply with words. Instead he nodded his head in understanding and stepped into
Wei Wuxian was struck that night with the thought that Lan Wangji had never offered to have them travel by sword. Surely following the arm's directions would be easier when one could fly over mountains and ravines or cut through dense forest, and they could have in two weeks assembled the body instead of simply reached a piece which might not make it whole, but Lan Wangji had never offered. The thought did not even seem to have crossed his mind.

It could be that his propriety would suffer from such close contact. Wei Wuxian himself knew not how he would have reacted to it; the cold from earlier had not vanished from his hands and instead crawled up the length of his elbows and arms till it reached his shoulders, till it rested at his throat. For the first time in many years, the face which haunted his dreams was not skinned and eyeless, but whole. Haughty and arrogant and smelling of firesmoke.

He slept fitfully. Dawn came upon him with the chill of sweat on skin and the knots left behind by nightmares. His stomach rolled emptily through threats of nausea. His mouth tasted of dirt and dew-wet grass.

Lan Wangji and himself walked back into the forest after a bout of breakfast which Wei Wuxian barely touched. The heightened energy in the air seemed to make the day colder, as if this were fall and not spring, and humidity from the river clinged to Wei Wuxian's clothes, making them stick to his skin like sweat. During the first hours of day he tried his best to cut through the barrier, playing with Lan Wangji to push it away, to make it traversable. None of their spells worked. Soon, Wei Wuxian was shivering, his teeth clacking with the cold.

Lan Wangji frowned at him as they took a break, midday brightening overhead. "We should go back," he said.

"This is too frustrating," Wei Wuxian answered. "I will figure it out."

But then he could not think at all, for the loud sound of a dog barking reached them.

Wei Wuxian could have felt shame over his own reaction, he supposed, if he had not been too busy hiding behind Lan Wangji's back and chasing away memories of being run after and bitten by mutts for scraps of food. Lan Wangji himself seemed not to mind that Wei Wuxian stood behind him just shy of actual touch. His scent mixed with the sound of childhood memories, with the endless cold through Wei Wuxian's body, with the very taste of the air around, weighed down by water and sunlight.

It was a childish reaction to a very inconsequential fear, something Wei Wuxian ought to have been rid of as cleanly as he had been rid of regret the moment he first fell into Yiling, coreless and abandoned. He watched Jin Ling call for his beast with his heart in his throat and shook Mo Xuanyu's body with all the strength of that painful, unmarred golden core, until he was certain that no fear showed upon his face. He clenched his hands into fists so that they would stop trembling.

"Mo Xuanyu!" Jin Ling exclaimed at the sight of them, his dog now grabbed by the collar and panting excitedly by his feet. "What are you doing here?"

*I could ask you the same thing,* Wei Wuxian thought.

He had no time to voice it before someone else called, "Did you find him, A-Ling?"

Another figure emerged from the wide gaps between the trees.

Short and slender and barely different than the last time Wei Wuxian had seen her; though she was
not grieved now, though her face and robes were free of the blood which had drenched the starved soil of Qishan's Nightless City; her hair bearing the same twin braids that Jiang Cheng had taken to wearing after Jiang Fengmian died.

Jin Ling was almost taller than her. The hand she put on his shoulder was bare but for Zidian glinting on her index finger.

"Of course I found him," Jin Ling mumbled.

Jiang Yanli smiled at him. She pinched his cheek; he spluttered and reddened and threw Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji panicked, embarrassed looks. "Hanguang-Jun," she called after freeing her son. She bowed and added, cold as ice, "My brother told me he had the displeasure of meeting you recently. I did not think our paths would cross."

Lan Wangji nodded stiffly towards her.

Wei Wuxian wanted to steel himself for her attention, but the second she looked at him, he knew any effort he could spend would be fruitless.

"Mo Xuanyu," she said. "It is good to see you well."

A-Xian, he heard as an echo, a memory moving before his eyes of lotuses and hot summers, of her arm knocking against his as they walked side by side.

"Madam Jin," Wei Wuxian replied.

For the first time since waking up in that shed after Mo Xuanyu's sacrifice, he bowed.

She was still staring at him when he straightened his back. The dog, which has yelped affectionately at her when she appeared, now emitted another bark of excitement. Wei Wuxian did not think he managed to conceal his shiver as much as he wanted to.

Jiang Yanli's fingers curled around the animal's collar. "A-Ling heard of odd sightings in the area," she said. "Is this the reason for your presence, Hanguang-Jun?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji replied.

"I see. Then we shall leave you to it."

"Mother—"

"They arrived first, A-Ling," Jiang Yanli reprimanded. Her eyes had not left Wei Wuxian. "I doubt master Lan will share his findings with us, and I know better than to compete against such a talented cultivator."

Wei Wuxian looked at Lan Wangji. To his surprise, Lan Wangji looked back and said, "I won't share."

Jiang Yanli nodded as if she had expected it. She whistled at the dog to order it to follow and turned around, Zidian catching light on her hand like a gem. "Come now," she called to her son. "We'll sleep in the village."

"It's not fair!"

"If your uncle heard you speak like this, he would scold you, you know. Do not think I won't just because Lianfang-Zun likes to spoil you rotten."
Jin Ling moaned and grumbled loudly enough to awaken all the dead in those woods. He followed her with dragging feet, the peony sewn at the back of his uniform flickering under lights and shadows.

Only when they were gone did Wei Wuxian relax. Only then did he allow himself a short, empty laugh, rubbing a clammy hand over his face.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said.

"I'm fine." The words ached as they pushed past his lips, but they were not a lie. Not fully. "I was surprised, that's all. I never thought we would meet so many acquaintances in one day."

He smiled for good measure, letting his hand drop again. Lan Wangji said nothing more.

He stayed closer to his side as they searched through the afternoon again. His knee brushed Wei Wuxian's when they sat to play against the barrier, the pace of his music unhurried and yet a little shakier than before. When the sky darkened with the promise of night and they decided to head back, he walked right by Wei Wuxian's side.

The arrival of more strangers had done nothing to quiet the villagers. Once again they suffered looks and even the odd comment or two, little as they cared about those. Not even the weight of Lan Wangji's purse could stop the innkeeper from glaring at them this time.

It made sense, Wei Wuxian supposed. He had hesitated upon entering the inn, wary of seeing Jiang Yanli again—wary of hearing Jin Ling's voice—but they must have both gone up to their rooms already. In the small dining room, he and Lan Wangji were the only guests.

Wei Wuxian was not surprised to find sleep evading him for endless hours.

He did not linger on the memories and thoughts trying to plague his mind. There had been no time to in the short few days before he died, and he had no desire to allow Mo Xuanyu's core to sharpen them to clarity and make him relive them as he had stupidly let happen when meeting Jin Ling.

Those who had died then could not be brought back, not even by his hand. Not even if they had wanted to.

He felt morning approach before he saw it. He rose from the bed, still-dressed and entirely sleepless, crouching by the water tub to wash his face and hands. He was of half a mind, he found, to call Wen Ning again. To call him and walk with him to the barrier in the woods and have his only friend—his only weapon—once more fight his battles for him.

The latter was out of the question. Checking on Wen Ning's condition, however, was not a bad idea. Wei Wuxian closed the door to his room silently and made his way down the stairs of the inn. No one was around any more this early before sunrise. He boiled water for moonless tea and drank it as scalding as he could.

Outside, the air was colder. The weight of the haunted sabers' spirits seemed to want to push the soil down till it crumbled underfoot, seemed to want them all to fall into an abyss and break apart, buried and forgotten as they were. Wei Wuxian wound his cloak more tightly around himself and walked into the shed by the side of the inn. The door of it opened with a small, creaking noise, and inside he saw Little Apple's head rise alertly.

"Hello," he called to the donkey, chuckling.

Little Apple was a quiet animal. Wei Wuxian had not heard him bray or seen him panic since he had
stolen him in Mo village. He acted for all intents and purposes as if Wei Wuxian had always been his master. Now he bowed his head to let Wei Wuxian pat it and scratch between his long ears.

"I'll be making some noise in a moment," he said. "Don't be scared of my guest, now."

The donkey looked at him with deep and soulful eyes.

Before Wei Wuxian could grab the bamboo flute from his waist and put it to his lips, loud barking echoed through the village.

He froze. It must be Jin Ling's dog, he thought in a panic, for he had not seen or heard any other dogs here and the sound of it was similar to earlier during the day. Uselessly, he looked around to defend himself, stumbling on a pile of wood and making it crash loudly against the ground.

Immediately, the barking came closer to the shed. Wei Wuxian realized with horror that he had not closed the door behind himself. No sooner had he noticed that the dog itself barged in, running toward him and barking loudly.

"No no no," he cried out, backing away as quickly as he could and making more things fall in the penumbra, "go away, back off—"

The dog bit at the hem of his pants and pulled, making Wei Wuxian trip and his heart leap up his chest. That same chest became heavier with the dog's front paws; Wei Wuxian smelled its breath in his face, felt the cold tip of its nose brush his chin and heard its barking as if they were drums inside his ears—piercing, deafening, pounding like a headache.

His eyesight whitened in sheer, irrational fear. He stopped breathing altogether.

Then the dog's weight was pulled off of him. He heard through the dizzying rush of his own blood the sound of a voice scolding it, was even aware enough to place its familiarity, but his shaking was such that he could not find footing enough to rise. When he managed to gasp in enough breaths to chase the fog from his mind, a great, acute ache had spread through his entire torso.

Jiang Yanli stood at the entrance of the shed, dressed in warmer clothes than she had worn during the day and holding the mutt back by the collar around its neck. She struggled with it for a moment longer—the beast truly looked mad, barking and drooling and shaking every way—before she managed to throw it outside the shed and close the door behind it firmly.

She sighed, wiping her trembling hands. Wei Wuxian pressed a fist over his chest in hope of containing his panic.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. They breathed and breathed until at last the dog outside quieted.

Then Jiang Yanli asked, "Are you well?"

Wei Wuxian nodded. Realizing how dark the shed had become after she closed the door, and that she probably could not see him, he said: "Yes."

"Good, that's... that's good."

It was a different kind of dread he felt upon hearing her move his way.

Her steps did not drag. She had always been more elegant than either he or Jiang Cheng cared to be—Jiang Cheng because he had no obligation to, Wei Wuxian because he did—and so her feet were
light upon the dirt floor, almost inaudible. Her clothes brushed against the enclosure where Little Apple was kept.

She stopped when her boots brushed the tips of his own. Even in the darkness, her gaze weighed on him as heavily as a mountain.

"You're not Mo Xuanyu," she said.

Wei Wuxian could not look at her. Not her face, not the rest of her body either, as he found his eyes avoiding the length of purple robes covering her legs and falling to the floor instead.

"I met Mo Xuanyu," Jiang Yanli went on. Her voice was shaking. "Madam Jin often called for his company before he… before he left Golden Carp Tower."

"I hope she is well," Wei Wuxian answered.

Jiang Yanli laughed. It sounded hollow. "I had my doubts when A-Cheng brought A-Ling back to Lanling and told me what happened," she went on. "I don't think he realized. He was so angry at letting a demonic cultivator go, and he had never heard of Mo Xuanyu, but I did. I knew—what he said—Mo Xuanyu could not have done that."

Wei Wuxian thought of the bloody array in which he had woken. He thought, not for the first time, that despair could push anyone into doing anything.

"You didn't do anything to convince him otherwise either, did you."

"Madam Jin," Wei Wuxian said, "I think you are mistaken."

"Don't call me that." Her voice moaned over the words, pleading. "You never called me that, even after I married Zixuan."

She hadn't wanted him to.

She kneeled slowly by his side, one of her legs pressed to his own. "I had doubts," she said, putting a hand at his shoulder. "It's why I insisted on accompanying A-Ling here, after I heard that Lan Wangji had been sighted, even though I knew it was a fool's dream. But now, I am certain."

Her hand squeezed Wei Wuxian's shoulder and then pressed closer to his neck, sliding behind him entirely to tangle in his hair. It was warm and soft as he remembered, despite the calluses that swordwielding had raised across her palm.

"I think," she said shakily, "that I should be apologizing to Lan Wangji on my knees."

"Shijie—"

"A-Xian."

She crushed his body against her and buried her face in his neck, wetting it with her tears and her deep, shaking inhales. "You smell like before," she cried. "It is you, it is you, oh, A-Xian."

Wei Wuxian could count the number of times he had been hugged since his parents' death on the fingers of one hand. Most of those had been from Jiang Yanli; once had been Jiang Cheng; the last and only time he had been hugged by someone not family, it was in Qishanwen's omega house, with Wen Yueying's small arms locked so tightly around his hips that he had feared she would break them.
None of those embraces came close to making him feel how this one did.

"A-Xian," Jiang Yanli cried again and again into his neck, shaking so violently that he thought she would fall and make him follow her down. She wept even harder when he wrapped his arms around her too—when he squeezed her against his front until there was not an inch of room between them anywhere, until he felt every breath she took as if they were his own.

The dog outside barked loudly again, making him tense in a spasm. Jiang Yanli hiccuped softly and patted his hair, saying, "It's okay, I'm here, I'm here—"

He was nine years old again in the circle of her arms, fallen from the very tree he had climbed, deathly afraid of displeasing the people who had taken in him and fed and clothed him.

"Shijie," he said, unsurprised to find his own eyes wet. He crushed the tears against the top of her hair.

There were so many things he wanted to say to her, needed to say to her. There was nothing he deserved less than to be held in her arms after he brought her nothing but ruin, nothing but grief, in his carelessness and arrogance. He had harmed her, he thought, feeling with his fingers the deep scar atop her right shoulder which climbed up the side of her neck under the cover of her hair. He had abandoned her, abandoned Jiang Cheng and his own clan. He had stolen her only dream from her and then crushed it down to dust—he had orphaned her son and made her a widow.

He should be asking her for mercy. He should be offering her his head. He should be bowing as Jin Zixuan had before his last breath left him.

Instead he held her and said nothing at all, allowing her to hold and touch him as he never allowed anyone, breathing in her river-like scent, crushing her sobs against him. Darkness lightened around them with the coming of dawn and they sat, pressed together, into the dirt and dust, amidst broken straw and heavy animal scents.

There was nowhere else Wei Wuxian wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

hug me too Yanli please
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Gore/horror warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 14

Jiang Yanli had tears running down her face when Wei Wuxian broke out of her embrace. Her hands lingered for a second longer around his neck and shoulders, not shaking anymore but gripping tight and afraid. He had to grab her wrists and pull them away himself, and then again she resisted, her anger visible in the tense line of her mouth.

"A-Xian," she said again.

It was as if his name was the only word she knew how to say anymore.

Wei Wuxian bowed his head. He dragged his legs away from hers and pushed himself to his feet in silence, dusting his black robes, looking vaguely at Little Apple on the side who hadn't made a sound since the dog had been thrown out.

Jiang Yanli rose slowly. She didn't pretend to fix her appearance. "A-Xian," she said again.

"Did you tell Jiang Cheng?" he asked.

"No." He heard her shake her head; felt her put a hand over his elbow, had to resist shaking her off out of habit. This was Jiang Yanli, not someone to protect himself from. If she did try to hurt him, he would just have to allow her. "I wanted to be sure," she said. "Otherwise he would have come running."

"Don't tell him," Wei Wuxian said.

Her silence was worth a thousand words.

"He doesn't need to know. I know I have no right to ask you anything, but please, don't tell anyone."

"You're right," she replied curtly. "You have no right to ask me anything."

Wei Wuxian exhaled shakily. His skin seemed to sting at the touch of air alone; where Jiang Yanli's hand was holding him, it burned.

"A-Cheng will have to know eventually," she murmured.

"Why?" Wei Wuxian asked.

He turned around to face her. Her hand slid from his arm at last, and he was once more shaken by how close in height they were now. He had grown used to looking at her from above, even on that day in the Nightless City, when she had been injured and lay on the blood-soaked earth like one
more corpse on the battlefield. Now their eyes were almost level.

Staring at her was as hard now as it had been then.

"If Lan Wangji and I recognized you, A-Cheng will too," Jiang Yanli said urgently. "You can't escape him forever."

"I don't see any reason why. He had no clue who I was when we met in Dafan, and I can avoid him. If you don't say anything, he will never know."

"You're so stubborn!" she cried out at him. Her face looked fraught in the darkness, and Wei Wuxian had never more wished that he could not see. "Why do you always—"

Her words were interrupted by loud, distressed barking.

Wei Wuxian had all but forgotten about the dog. It seemed to have fallen silent while they were embracing, as if it and the rest of the world meant to pay respect to their reunion, but now its yapping came more loudly than ever. Even with the solid wall of the shed separating them from it, Wei Wuxian shuddered.

"Fairy," Jiang Yanli murmured. "Oh, something must have happened to A-Ling."

This caught his attention. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"He was gone from the room when I woke up earlier. I was going outside to look for him." She sighed a little fondly and added, "I think he did not take too well to me telling him to let you and Hanguang-Jun handle this night-hunt. He may be trying to steal the glory from you."

She looked fond and worried at once. Parenthood suited Jiang Yanli as it did few other cultivators; Wei Wuxian remembered her on the seventh day after Jin Ling's birth, laid out in embroidered sheets and holding the babe in her arms with such a glow to her young face that the rest of the room seemed to lighten with it. Jin Zixuan had not taken his eyes off of her even once, that day.

She didn't know what Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji did about the burial grounds hidden in the forest.

"I shall look for him," he said lightly.

"I'll come with you."

"Shijie—"

"I'll come with you," she repeated. Her eyes were as steel. "He is my son."

The one and only thing Wei Wuxian had not stolen from her.

She soothed the dog outside after they opened the door. The beast's panic was more obvious now than when it had smothered Wei Wuxian under its weight, and Wei Wuxian kept as far away from it as he could while still within reaching distance of Jiang Yanli. Fairy, for that was the dog's name—no doubt another fancy of Jiang Cheng—tugged and yelped at Jiang Yanli in fury, foaming at the mouth, almost crazed with worry for its master. Jiang Yanli looked more trouble as time went by and they ventured closer to the forest. Wei Wuxian wisely kept what he knew of Qinghenie's buried sabers to himself.

He was anxious too. A knot of tension seemed to grip him by the throat at the proximity of her, at the
knowledge that she had recognized him so easily, at everything left unsaid still that he knew she would not let slide away. That he owed it to her did nothing to alleviate this pain.

They crossed through the darkened woods with only the glare of Yanli's sword to guide their feet. Wei Wuxian saw the turtle-shaped root which he and Lan Wangji had run into during the day. With shadows shifting over the dome of its shell, it looked ready to spring alive any second and take the rest of its tree with it.

For a second he was back in Qishan in the cave of the tortoise. Rot in his nostrils and heat crawling upon his back and Lan Wangji kneeling face to a wall, playing music on bowstrings with his fingers bleeding open.

_I never thanked him_, he thought.

The barrier laid around the burial grounds did not work on animals. Though he and Jiang Yanli could see nothing in the direction Fairy pulled them, the dog was insistent, louder and louder as they approached the place where he must have lost his master. Wei Wuxian stepped over a thick, raised root; he bowed to avoid the lower branches of an oak so tall it seemed to reach the sky.

A shiver of dark, crawling energy swept over his skin. When he opened his eyes, they were standing before a black-stoned burial home. Jiang Yanli took a step backwards in surprise, and her boot dug into the fine bones of a dead bird, cracking loudly in the silence.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Let's just find Jin Ling, quickly," Wei Wuxian replied.

He knew not if he managed to hide his fear from her. Either way Jiang Yanli looked at him for a long second before acquiescing.

She had always been like this, Wei Wuxian reflected as they approached the edifice. Fairy's barks turned to pained and terrified whines. He refused to enter with them, sticking close to the front steps without putting so much as a paw on it, and Jiang Yanli scratched the top of his head with a hand before going inside, her head held high. She had always remained so dignified in her fear and loss; be it half-starved and broken-boned in that cave in Qishan or flying all the way to Lanling on her own, after separating him and Jiang Cheng from what could have been a bloody fight.

Now, with her son missing and the unmistakable trace of death and curses on the night air, she stood as strong as a tree herself.

Wei Wuxian bowed his head and followed her inside. The dog whined but made no move to enter.

Whatever Nie Huaisang had said about those burial grounds, the mounds of which rounded under the trees behind the funeral home, people from his sect obviously came often. A layer of dust had gathered, no older than a few weeks. Torches rested upon the door frame, ready to be carried around.

Jiang Yanli lit one with a talisman. She made as if to offer one to Wei Wuxian too, but he shook his head. He feared what contact with fire could bring out of him when energy thickened the air so, almost begging to be used.

The hallway at the end of the empty house forked three different ways. "Which way did he go?" Jiang Yanli asked to no one. She shone light upon each of the three dark corridors, hoping perhaps to find trace of Jin Ling. "A-Xian, can you feel anything?"

Wei Wuxian had no wish to share what he was feeling. "Jin Ling is a straightforward boy," he
declared, stepping into the middle road.

Her laughter was brittle.

They arrived, as expected, into one of the dirt domes they had glimpsed from outside. Several small coffins lay in rows at the center of it, shivering in the flame light. They looked like children’s tombs.

He all but felt Jiang Yanli shiver. Wei Wuxian approached the closest of them and lifted the lid of it with a creak of rotted wood. A rusted saber came to light, weakly calling to him. The satin cushion it was laid on had darkened with the ages.

He closed the lid again. "It's only weapons," he told Jiang Yanli, who stood where he had left her as if frozen to the bone. "Shijie, I don't think any of these holds a corpse."

"Are you sure?" The torch in her hand shook. "It looks like—"

"You can check yourself if you want. I promise you won't find your son in any of them."

She looked at him for a long time. Finally, her trembling jaw settled, and she nodded curtly. "Where is he, then?"

Wei Wuxian had an idea about that, but he was certain that she would not like it.

The walls here were not made of stone at all. Though the funeral home that made the entrance of the place was familiar enough to look unobtrusive, the inside of the mounds were made of dirt as well as their outside. It was with Nie Huaisang's words in mind that Wei Wuxian took the bamboo flute from his hip and put it under his mouth.

Before the first note could even leave him, answers came from all around him. He lowered it again.

"I think Jin Ling is inside those walls," he said.

Jiang Yanli dropped the torch. It rolled upon the ground till it hit one of the small coffins, its light flickering wildly over her ashen face. "The walls," she repeated.

He thought for a second that this would finally be too much for her to handle. She once again surprised him by taking her sword in hand and immediately slashing at the dirt around them.

"Shijie!"

"He can't breathe in there," she said.

She sounded winded. Though her grip was sure and her face set and determined, Wei Wuxian could see just how panicked she was, just how scared she must be of losing her most precious person again.

"Shijie, there's no need," he said, crossing the distance between them in a step and grabbing her wrist firmly. Shock made her halt for a second—Wei Wuxian had not touched her like this since before Yunmeng had burned. "I have a much quicker way of doing this."

He braced himself for a second before bringing the flute to his lips again.

The corpses which had earlier answered him so readily did so again. This time, Wei Wuxian called for them to free themselves.

Dirt started crumbling from the walls. Their surface shook as dead bodies in various states of decay emerged, some merely bone, some draped in strands of rotted flesh and muscle. All squirmed their
way out of decades and centuries of dry and then wet earth, snapping their empty, dislocated jaws, breaking in their attempts to flee. One woman dug her way up the ground between Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli and looked at them with empty eye sockets.

Jiang Yanli had seen Wei Wuxian control corpses several times, during the Sunshot Campaign and during the hunt on Phoenix Mountain and then at the Nightless City. She was not squeamish by any means, having worked a lot at healing the wounded during the war and having gone through very harsh childbirth herself, but she gasped. She put her free hand over her mouth to fend off the terrible smell suddenly filling the cave, and she swayed on her own feet.

Corpses emerging from the walls was not all that Wei Wuxian aimed for. Those who were caught on the outside of the mounds he could feel struggling, fossilized in place and breaking themselves apart trying to answer his call, but he doubted that Jin Ling had been buried so far in. A pan of wall shattered before them, freeing three mostly-intact men with rope burns around their blue necks, and behind them a silhouette fell that was not controlled by him at all.

Wei Wuxian shifted his orders and his music; the corpses crawled back into the ground and walls.

"A-Ling!" Jiang Yanli cried out.

She rushed to her fallen son's side, heedless of what she stepped into, and pulled the boy into her lap so she could check on his breathing and health. Wei Wuxian was not worried; if he had not obeyed him, then he was still alive. A few seconds later, a sob of relief echoed through the destroyed hall.

"He's alive," Jiang Yanli said haltingly, "but I can't wake him up."

Wei Wuxian finally turned toward them.

Jin Ling was very pale. The dirt smeared over his face made his skin appear white in contrast, almost as much as the corpses now fusing again with the mud walls around them. So much resentful energy wafted through the air that Wei Wuxian felt he could choke on it as he approached them and crouched by his nephew's other side, but he shook it off, putting a hand against the boy's forehead and feeling for a trace of life.

Jin Ling's breaths were slow and shallow. They didn't rise in his chest at all or make his thin throat shiver. Wei Wuxian's hand flew over the length of his body without quite touching him. He frowned, halting his movement, when he reached the boy's right leg.

"Is he okay?" Jiang Yanli asked.

Her voice was very soft. Wei Wuxian met her eyes for a second and replied, "Yes. He'll wake up in a while, I believe."

It wasn't a lie.

Jiang Yanli did not ask him to carry her son for her. Though Mo Xuanyu was much shorter and thinner than Wei Wuxian had been, his physical strength still surpassed hers, yet she was the one who rose up with her son in her arms and hoisted him up on her back.

They hurried out of the burial site. Ghostly hands seemed to touch every inch of Wei Wuxian's skin, pulling backwards, whispering that he should stay. As if he were already part of the décor here, as much as he had been part of Yiling's Burial Mounds. Jiang Yanli did not seem to notice just how slow and heavy his steps were behind hers, so hasty was she to return somewhere safe. They found Fairy waiting where they had left him, and not even the dog's loud barking managed to shake Wei Wuxian out of the stupor that this place had put him in.
The forest had not seemed so thick and maze-like in daylight. Wei Wuxian started breathing easier only when they reached the edges of it, where the trees were fewer and farther-between. They made their way toward the village with quicker steps than they had come, Jiang Yanli not once complaining about her son's heavy weight.

Though dawn would soon be upon them, they saw no one as they crossed the wide central street. The sky had turned grey over their heads when they reached the front steps of the inn, but the dining room beyond the door was empty, and no sound came from the creaking floor above.

Wei Wuxian wanted nothing more than to go back to his own room and sleep, but he could not. Not yet. He accompanied his shijie to the room she had bought for the night and watched her lay her son down over one of the two beds there. She lit a candle on the cabinet between them; gold gleamed around Suihia's handle, unmoving as it was at Jin Ling's hip.

It was a good thing he had not lost it when the graveyard trapped him. Wei Wuxian did not wish to bear witness to this boy losing more of his father's memorabilia.

Jiang Yanli sat on the mattress. She put a hand on Jin Ling's knee and watched him in silence for a long moment. Wei Wuxian shifted on his own feet by the door, unwilling to go but unwilling to explain why, and wondered how to get her to leave the room. He only needed a minute.

"A-Xian," she said.

He felt as though the name ought to echo around them, as though the silence was too thick to allow it. He looked away from her.

She repeated it in the same way she did when he was small and unruly, when Yu Ziyuan had gone after spearing him with her words and Jiang Yanli had to come and soothe him. "A-Xian," she said, "I can't forgive you if you won't tell me why you did it."

"You'll have to be more specific," Wei Wuxian replied.

Jiang Yanli's hand left Jin Ling's leg. She rested it atop the sheets instead, digging her nails into it almost to the point of tearing. "Tell me why you killed him."

"Tell me why you killed him."

"I can't," he replied.

He could give her no answer that would satisfy her.

"A-Xian," she breathed.

"I can't," he cut her off harshly. "Shijie, it wouldn't matter even if I told you.

"You're wrong—"

"What is it you want to hear?"
Her shock was understandable, in a distant way; he had never yelled at her before. The guilt of doing so now when she should be the one screaming made him lower his voice, made him swallow down the knot of anger, of shame, that those memories would always bring out of him.

"Shijie," he murmured. "If I told you I murdered him in cold blood, you would not find peace. If I said I was defending myself, you would hurt. If I told you it was an accident, you would try to forgive me and live forever in sorrow. I don't—" he clenched his teeth. Released them slowly. "I don't want that for you," he went on. "You can hurt me if you want. You can kill me. But I won't answer you."

He would not add to her grief any more.

Jiang Yanli's eyes shone. The brightening sky outside and the candlelight beside her glimmered within them and rolled down the swell of her cheek alongside the first tear. "When did you become like this, I wonder?" she asked in such a thin voice that it was barely more than a whisper. "When did you decide that you could not trust me?"

He didn't answer her.

"You used to talk to me," she said.

Wei Wuxian saw the shape of her rise from the bed and approach him with slow steps. He wanted nothing more than to leave now, to shut the door in her face and lock himself in his own room, to drink the bitter moonless tea and find comfort in the safety it brought him, even so late after he truly needed it.

She took his hand in hers. "I never believed that you told me everything in your heart," she said, "but you could talk to me, once. You could tell me things you could not tell anyone else."

He had once sat with her at the Pier, with their feet in the water, and spoken of forlorn dreams.

"What happened to you?" Her fingers were cold upon his cheek, soft but unstoppable. She turned his head sideways until their eyes met. "What did we do that drove you away from us like this?"

He almost wanted to laugh. "You didn't do anything," he replied.

"I don't believe you."

He could feel her searching his eyes for deceit. Her own widened with disbelief when she found none, as he had known they would. Wei Wuxian pushed her hand off of his face and repeated, "You have nothing to blame yourself for. You and Jiang Cheng."

"All those years I thought…"

She struggled with her words. Wei Wuxian let go of her wrist and took his own hands back, stepping away so that a more appropriate distance stood between them. On the small bed in the corner, Jin Ling stayed as still as the dead.

He didn't have much time.

"I remember the awful things that A-Cheng said to you when our parents died," Jiang Yanli said shakily. "All this time, I thought this was the reason you distanced yourself from him."

"I don't remember him saying anything," Wei Wuxian lied.
"Then what happened, A-Xian? Why won't you tell me what happened to you, if you won't tell me what happened to Zixuan?"

Because he could never let them know the truth. Wei Wuxian would rather die a second time being thought of as nothing more than a murderer.

There was too little time for such thoughts now. Jin Ling’s skin had not grown any warmer in the minutes they had wasted talking, the cold energy seeping under the skin of his leg now spreading faster and faster. If Wei Wuxian did not act soon, the boy would surely become one more of the Nie burial site’s meals.

He stepped toward the bed briskly. "Shijie, I will need Lan Wangji to wake Jin Ling up," he declared.

"You said—"

"He will wake up, but it should be easier with Lan Zhan's help. Please, can you fetch him for me?"

Jiang Yanli would never put anything above her son's safety. Wei Wuxian needed not stare at her to picture how she looked as she made her decision, and her words of assent were lost to him. The door open and closed behind him with the same harsh sound of old wood that any movement of the inn brought.

He bent over the bed and quickly took off Jin Ling's muddied boot. His ankle already bore the black mark of the curse Wei Wuxian had felt inside the mound earlier; it crawled up the length of his calf and knee, stopping short of his thigh, but Wei Wuxian could almost see it squirm and spread under his very eyes.

Foolish boy.

Sitting down would be easier for the transfer. Wei Wuxian did so without grace, preferring the chair to the bed itself as he worked the dark energy from Jin Ling’s leg to his own. The feeling would no doubt wake the boy up, and he only had a moment before Jiang Yanli returned in Lan Wangji's company.

There was no pain when the mark grew on his skin, but pain would have been preferrable, he thought with a wince. It was as though ice was pressing in from under his skin and numbing his whole leg down. Soon enough all movement from his knee was restrained the way that the phantom touch of the sabers' will had tried to pull him back earlier. The curse looked even blacker on Mo Xuanyu's pale skin; it did not stop at his knee but rose instead higher, fueled by the power used for transfer, crawling around Wei Wuxian's thigh.

Jin Ling stirred with a groan. Wei Wuxian shoved the boy's clothes down over his leg again and, as he opened his eyes, tried to look as inconspicuous as possible.

"Mo Xuanyu?" Jin Ling said raspily.

His weary face immediately twisted into suspicion, but it probably had more to do with the boy's usual animosity against his would-be uncle than anything Wei Wuxian had done.

"Welcome back to the living," Wei Wuxian said.

"Where am I—"

The door opened again before he could finish speaking. Jiang Yanli came in, followed by the ever-
proper Lan Wangji, almost fully dressed and with not a hair out of place. His eyes found Wei Wuxian's immediately. The line of his brow eased.

"A-Ling!"

"Mother? What—"

Wei Wuxian pushed himself off of the chair as Jiang Yanli rushed to her son again. His first step on the cursed leg was faltering, but the limb managed to hold his weight with nothing more than a slight limp.

"What happened?" Lan Wangji asked softly once they were side by side.

"I'll tell you while we eat, Lan Zhan. I'm famished."

He threw one last look behind his shoulder.

Jin Ling had sat up on the bed and looked more confused than ever in his mother's embrace. Jiang Yanli was not crying now, though she spoke fastly of his recklessness and promised many more punishments when they were home than Wei Wuxian cared to listen to. He saw her hand splay in the boy's dirty hair shakily. He watched her hold him close in such obvious relief that it lightened his heart empathetically.

"Come on, Lan Zhan," he said. Tearing his eyes away from the both of them ached more than it ought to.

Lan Wangji followed in his steps without a word. His presence felt a little like comfort.

The room downstairs had started filling up since they came back to the inn. Early risers, most of them peasants, were eating and drinking and conversing in low voices on the benches near the door. The innkeeper's wife was busy serving them and exchanging local news, her sharp and snowy scent tickling Wei Wuxian's nose. He sat with Lan Wangji at the other side of the room and allowed the other man to order for them both.

He filled him in as they waited and ate about the barrier and the funeral home, about Jin Ling's escapade and his own attempt at a nightly walk. He did not talk of the curse on his leg or his and Jiang Yanli's earlier conversation. He said nothing of his own intent to summon Wen Ning in the donkey's shed.

If Lan Wangji noticed the omitted parts of his story, he said nothing of it. He ate and drank in silence, apparently content to listen to the sound of Wei Wuxian's voice. He frowned when Wei Wuxian smiled and sighed when the flow of his words ran out, his long and white fingers cradled around a cup of tea, rubbing its rim again and again.

With midday high over them all, there was nothing to hide the red around Jiang Yanli's eyes. She had washed herself of the fatigue and grime of their late night excursion, but Wei Wuxian knew as well as her that some things simply did not come off the skin.

It was with those red eyes that she looked at him now in front of the inn, one hand over her sword and the other on her son's shoulder. Zidian caught to sunlight every way she moved, sending
blinding spots of white in Wei Wuxian's way that he had to blink at.

"Thank you for helping my son," she said very properly, bowing at the shoulders.

The odd part was just how stiff Lan Wangji was in nodding back to her. Though his face was as impassible as ever, Wei Wuxian thought he could read tension on him.

"Lan Wangji," Jiang Yanli said suddenly. She had not risen out of her bow yet. "The next time we meet, I would like to speak with you. My brother as well."

Lan Wangji glanced briefly at Wei Wuxian. "No need," he replied.

"On the contrary. I think it is very much needed."

Jin Ling had long stopped bowing himself. He was staring at his mother and Lan Wangji in suspicion, his young face scrunched as if looking hard enough would reveal to him what they were alluding to.

"You'll become all wrinkled if you keep doing that," Wei Wuxian commented.

"I will not," Jin Ling replied angrily, but his face did smooth over.

Wei Wuxian had hoped to distract them from the solemn atmosphere. But although Jiang Yanli's mouth thinned into a smile, her eyes were full of sorrow. They came to rest on Wei Wuxian wearing the same longing that he felt deep within his heart.

"Mo Xuanyu," she said. He saw her hesitate over the name and wet her lips quickly. "Be well," she added with too much emotion. "Take... take care of yourself."

He knew not if voicing an answer would be possible. Instead, he bowed.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said as soon as the glare of their swords was too far to be seen with the naked eye. "Let's investigate the barrier again now and make sure it is fixed."

Lan Wangji looked at him and replied, "No."

"No? Why not?"

"You're hurt."

Wei Wuxian had a reply ready for this. He hadn't thought he could fool Lan Wangji's piercing eyes, but this job took precedence over the curse mark roped around his leg. His protest died when Lan Wangji met his gaze evenly.

He sighed. "All right, then."

Lan Wangji stepped beside him again as they walked up to their rooms. He did not hesitate upon entering Wei Wuxian's despite what propriety would dictate out of him, and Wei Wuxian hid a smile at that. He too wondered what had happened to Lan Wangji, to make him so bold now.

"It's only a curse," he told the man as he sat upon his bed and tugged off his boot. "A small one. Jin Ling did not stay trapped long enough to be truly endangered, it should go away on its own once we leave this place."

"It will get worse if we go back now," Lan Wangji replied.
Wei Wuxian could not deny this.

The cold was still as bright under his skin as ever. It was odd to tug back the leg of his clothing and touch his own blackened skin; his fingers met with human warmth where his limb felt like a block of ice. He knocked against it with his knuckles, expecting it to sound like wood or rock.

"Lan Zhan," he asked without thinking, "does my leg feel weird to you?"

He realized what he had said in the next second.

Lan Wangji had been in the middle of setting his sword and guqin down against the bedside cabinet. He paused in his movement as if touched by a curse of his own.

This would be the moment for shame, for panic. And panic there was underneath Wei Wuxian's bravado, even as he met Lan Wangji's eyes and did not go back on his words, even as he searched for a reason why he would say such a thing, why he would make such an offer. He remembered cloudily what he had thought eons ago as he visited Qishanwen and called on Lan Wangji for a comment on another: *He is too proper not to rile up once in a while.*

Lan Wangji was still as proper now as he had been when they were teenagers. His body leaned and honed from training, his mind sharpened by meditation. The years had been nothing but kind to the lines of his face and hands, turning handsomeness to beauty, making him look at all times like a stone statue of a man. He stood now in the dusty light of the room with his eyes fixed on Wei Wuxian, and Wei Wuxian realized that while he had once wanted to rile him up, now he felt nothing of the kind.

Now he felt nothing at all that he could recognize.

Lan Wangji approached the bed slowly. He kneeled beside it in one graceful motion, right beside where Wei Wuxian's bare foot knocked against the floor. He put his hand against the roof of Wei Wuxian's foot, and Wei Wuxian felt his fear distill into something much, much different.

The touch of him went unfelt on the patches of skin covered in the curse marks. Lan Wangji's fingers traced up his ankle and leg slowly, at times entirely numb and at times unbearably present. Numbness vanished out of Wei Wuxian's conscious as he suddenly felt his whole sense of touch narrow to the contact of Lan Wangji's fingertips, as goosebumps erupted on his skin and almost made him want to hurl. It felt good and terrifying at once, this touch, this press of fingers to skin that was nothing like Jiang Yanli's embrace or Jiang Cheng's hand on his shoulder. Nothing like grass and dirt into his mouth on a mountain in Yiling.

Lan Wangji's hand stopped just below his knee. He slid it under Wei Wuxian's leg and lifted it with his palm there, his index caught into the crease and his thumb splayed against the outside of his thigh.

"Not weird," he said simply.

Wei Wuxian breathed in and met his eyes again.

He had once been the one to touch Lan Wangji's leg like this. He had healed him to the best of his abilities while they were trapped in that cave, using herbs to clean his wounds and praying to escape in time to avoid death or infection. Lan Wangji had protested then, offended to share so much as a touch with him. He had turned his back and obeyed Wei Wuxian's wishes when his fever struck him, refusing so much as a glance without thought for his own comfort. Wei Wuxian had only cared for his own dignity then. Now, suddenly, gratitude swelled within his chest that he knew not how to repay.

And yet something else tugged at his memories. The sight of Lan Wangji on his knees before him
and in much dimmer light; hollowness through his heart and belly and lungs, anger and sorrow on his tongue like so many knives; fear like a sword through the belly as he shouted things out with as much cruelty as he could muster. They swarmed and floated like smoke slipping through his fingers, just out of reach of his knowledge, erased by the timelessness of death.

Wei Wuxian tugged his cursed leg out of Lan Wangji's hold. The man's hand fell away at once, resting gently over his own lap. He did not look away.

"Thank you," Wei Wuxian said.

He meant it from the bottom of his heart: *Thank you for not looking at me back then. Thank you for being here today.*

And though he could not remember why, though he could not bring himself to say it: *I'm sorry.*

The curse vanished with the sound of Lan Wangji's guqin.

They walked into the forest that afternoon with lighter steps than the day before, greeting the turtle-like root as an old friend, traversing the barrier easily. The odd events that followed—a man with a visage like smoke, a corpse with stitched-up limbs—happened to Wei Wuxian as if through a haze, as if he were an outsider looking in. He still felt upon his skin the touch of Lan Wangji’s callused fingers, there-and-not-there between patches of cursed skin.

They left behind the village and its hostile inhabitants, traveling south where all four limbs of their dear friend's corpse pointed. Wei Wuxian returned to the familiar quiet of nights spent out in the warming weather, lying prone on the soft grass and watching starlight prick the sky, Lan Wangji's sandalwood scent never too far from him. He found as the days went by that he did not mind it; that on the rare occasion they ventured far from each other, he would even miss it.

The farther south they went, the more villages they saw. Yueyang was less averse to them than Qinghe’s border had been, and they could sleep there in inns that looked like the one in Dafan, with separate rooms and spaces for people of all statuses. Lan Wangji still drew looks wherever he went with his pristine white robes, and Wei Wuxian did for Mo Xuanyu's stature and face, but few people bothered to do more than stare and then go on their way.

They stopped in such a village five days after leaving Qinghe. Before that, their steps took them across the entrance of what looked to be a wide and abandoned mansion, the soil of which was stained with old blood.

Wei Wuxian paused before it. Cold slithered up his wide sleeves as the resentful energy there felt the presence of something akin to it; he shivered.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji called.

"Something bad happened here, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian replied. He stepped across the threshold of the derelict house, little as he wished to. "Can't you feel it?"

Lan Wangji closed his eyes for a second before nodding. Like Wei Wuxian, he entered the wide hall. There were still cabinets and vases around, as if its inhabitants had not had time to pack any before tragedy struck them.
"Really bad," Wei Wuxian murmured. "We should see what our dear friend has to say."

The haunted left arm of the corpse was not pointing anywhere anymore. It struggled inside Lan Wangji's hold as it had when they approached the Nie sabers' burial grounds. Another piece of the puzzle was close to where they stood.

They left for the village soon after. Wei Wuxian felt a weight at his nape the entire time they walked, but look as he might through the trees around them, he could see no human or ghost following in their steps.

"I will investigate," Lan Wangji declared after paying for their stay at the biggest inn around. As Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to protest, he cut in: "You are tired."

Wei Wuxian smiled helplessly. "Nothing gets past you, Lan Zhan."

"The house earlier…"

"Yes, yes. It sapped my energy. Truly, I want nothing more than to eat and sleep."

Lan Wangji nodded as if to say, Then do. Wei Wuxian walked past him and to the farthest free table he could find, brushing their elbows together on the way.

He was served quickly enough considering his status. The beta boy who took care of the various guests' orders looked as tired as Wei Wuxian felt, which could explain why he did not want to waste time on berating him for walking unchaperoned.

Unfortunately, the guests themselves felt so such reserve.

"Are you alone?" asked an old woman sitting at the table behind his, disapproval evident on her thin voice.

She did not greet him or offer her name when Wei Wuxian looked at her. Her hair was striped with white and grey, and her face cracked open with wrinkles so deep that they casted shadows onto her eyes and lips. She looked at Wei Wuxian in distaste, sniffing loudly for a trace of his scent. She must have caught it, for Wei Wuxian had not used the paste since morning; her anger turned even more palpable.

"I asked you if you are alone," she repeated harshly at his lack of answer.

"I am," Wei Wuxian lied.

"Shameful."

He was struck with the crystal-clear memory of Lan Qiren looking at him in distaste from the high dais of his classroom.

"Aren't you alone too?" he asked, toying with his untouched cup of wine. He had to twist around on his bench to face her.

"Who raised you to be so inquisitive, omega?" the old woman replied loudly. The noise of the room around covered her words but to the closest of guests, who glanced their way and shook their heads.

Wei Wuxian wondered what she would say if he replied with Jiang Fengmian's name. He wondered if she would even know it.

"These things would have never been allowed in my time," the woman complained, loud again.
"The Chang clan would have your fingers for this if Chang Cian was still alive."

"The Chang clan?"

There was a cane next to her, leaning against the side of the table. She grabbed it with both hands and tapped its end against the wooden floor. "A great cultivation clan used to live here, boy," she rasped. "You travelers think us a haunted town, but if you had come here a few years ago, you would speak differently."

That was interesting. "A haunted town," Wei Wuxian replied. "So there is something haunting you."

"Of course there is, with the way Yueyangchang was massacred. Foolish boy."

"I am not from around here."

She kicked his leg with the cane. "I could tell," she said. "None of you lot would come if you knew about those terrible corpses in Yi City." She leaned in closer to him despite her earlier disgust, fake-whispering almost loudly enough to be heard over the room's chatter. "Three boys came yesterday to hunt for those spirits, and I told them, they're all in Yi City. All the spirits of the Chang clan, hungry for revenge."

"What happened to the Chang clan?" Wei Wuxian asked in the same tone as her.

She put a wrinkled hand over her heart quickly. "All killed, they were," she answered. "Chang Cian all those years ago with his alpha brothers and sisters, and his son Chang Ping later by lingchi alongside the rest of the clan. Now we are haunted, brought a little more to ruin year after year."

Lingchi was terrible enough torture to make even Wei Wuxian wince. "Someone must have hated them very, very much," he told the old lady.

She leaned even closer. "It was that Xiao Xingchen," she whispered. "It was that damned monk from the mountain, coming in and pretending to be a sage—"

Her cane flew out of her grip and clattered on the floor the next table over. The woman gasped in surprise and fear, holding her hand close to her belly; the metal pommel of the cane had cut the inside of her thumb and made her bleed.

Wei Wuxian looked up.

The man who had kicked the cane away lowered his foot slowly, deliberately. He must not be much taller than Mo Xuanyu and not much older either, though he held in one hand a jar of clear wine and in the other two porcelain bowls. He dropped them onto the woman's table and ordered, "Move."

The old lady shriveled in on herself, still holding her bleeding hand. "Omega scum," she grumbled him plaintively. "All of you ought to be locked up—"

She cried out when the young man put a foot atop her fragile knee. "I said move, alpha," he repeated. He bent down, putting more of his weight onto her and making her sob out with pain. "Move before I make you move."

Stubborn and alpha she may be, but the man attacking her was stronger in every way. Wei Wuxian suffered her accusatory looks in silence—he had no wish to help any alpha on a good day, let alone one who had insulted him out of nowhere—until at last she began to move away. She squirmed out from under the man's foot, bending low to get her cane from the floor. The man sat where she had sat, watching her limp away with an empty smile.
His hair was in disarray, his clothes holed and stitched up too many times to count. Black bruises darkened the skin under his eyes, as if he had not slept in days. The scent coming off of him was almost peach-like; Wei Wuxian recognized it as the fragrance of guihua flowers.

"She's still as annoying as when I was a kid," the man said to Wei Wuxian, pouring liquor down both of the bowls. "Never managed to shut her mouth for a second and never will."

"I take it you are from around here," Wei Wuxian replied, accepting the bowl that the stranger gave him.

He waited until the other had taken a sip before risking one of his own. The wine in it was surprisingly sweet.

He put the bowl down once he was done. The other man had not once stopped looking at him. He smiled then, exposing sharp teeth to the light of day, and said: "You are a cultivator."

"What makes you say that?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Your conversation earlier for one. But I also saw you enter the village with that alpha in white." His nose twitched childishly at mentioning Lan Wangji. "A couple of those white-clad cultivators came around here yesterday, it made quite the ruckus."

"And you were not interested in talking to those cultivators."

The man grinned and replied, "No. But I am interested in you, omega cultivator."

He had barely touched his own wine, but he bent over the space between their respective benches to pour more for Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian was quite confident in his tolerance for liquor, but he would rather not risk inebriation here.

Still, he took the offered drink with a nod of thanks. "You interrupted quite the story there," he said. "The lady was telling me all about the one who massacred the local cultivation clan."

The man humphed. "You could get that story out of anyone here. No need to listen to her kind."

"Then could I get it from you?"

His only answer was silence.

Wei Wuxian leaned back against the table, crossing one leg atop the other, and asked: "Will you tell me about this Xiao Xingchen?"

"Don't you want to know about the ghosts in Yi City? Aren't you here to banish them?"

"I've seen enough ghosts and corpses to last me several lifetimes." Wei Wuxian almost laughed at his own words, so true were they; what surprised him was the quick, avid smile that the boyish man in front of him gave at them. "That woman said he was a monk. That he came from the mountain. What mountain was that?"

The man said, "The one where the immortal Baoshan Sanren lives."

Noise fluttered out of Wei Wuxian's hearing. The voices of the men and women around dimmed until they were whispers, until all he heard and saw was the omega man in front of him, his sugary scent and mean-spirited smiles—until all he tasted on his tongue was the tang of that oversweet wine.

"Does that interest you?" the man murmured silkily.
"It does," Wei Wuxian answered.

Here and now, he had no room for anything but honesty.

The man laughed. He bent backwards over his table until he all but lay on it, one hand around his wine and the other, gloved in black, squeezing the side of his bench. He raised it as he straightened up, putting his elbow on his knee and his chin over the bend of his wrist.

His pinky was cut short at the second knuckle.

"Fine then, cultivator," he said.

Something like glee, like bloodlust, was etched into his face as deeply as the bruise-like circles. Wei Wuxian felt for a second that this person before him was a thread away from breaking apart on his own cutting edges.

"Let me tell you about Xiao Xingchen."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait! School, internships, personal stuff, you know how it goes. I'm also taking this occasion to warn you all that March will be very busy for me and that updates might be sparse then. Please be patient and do not hound me for them... I'm doing all I can.
Chapter 15

His first tangible memory of life was of an ever-closed door. A strong, oakwood door, several inches thick, polished till the red color of it shone under the glare of every candle. He would never forget its odor for as long as he lived; in that confined little house where all sound and light was muffled, that door was the only thing that did not smell of sweetness.

As the years went by, the bright polish on it blackened with soot. The windows were sealed, trapped shut and dark; candlesmoke had nowhere to go but a small interstice above them wherein air filtered, and that expense of red and polished wood which slowly darkened with it. They took turns cleaning, all three of them, till the oldest of them went away and it was just the two—him and Bo Chengyue—but they never managed to take it all out. A few days before his would-be seventeen birthday, he learned that the door had been installed a mere week before he arrived at the house. That was why he remembered it so red and so shiny.

Of his life in the omega house, he kept the memory of hours of idleness, of a boredom so deep and soul-consuming that he often thought he would go mad with it. He recalled the few hours he spent every week in the company of an old man whose airy scent felt so cleansing after so much stifling sweetness. He came by to teach them about life and responsibility. He spoke mostly to him, for Bo Chengyue who sat stiff and silent beside him was too tall and too ugly.

He looked at her sometimes when the light-scented man had gone away with his silent escort. He studied her sharp and somber profile in the muted light. He found an empty sort of vanity in comparing himself to her for the better.

He wondered how she would fare once his turn came to be married and she would be alone in the silence and in the dark. If she would miss his words, few as they were, or the sight of him sharing dinner with her.

"Finish it, Xue Chengmei," she would sometimes order him when he pushed his food around aimlessly. "You are thin enough."

She was older than him, and she had taken care of him since he was an infant, so he did not dare oppose her.

The abolition of omega houses came in the springtime of his nineteenth year.

Just as he would never forget the heavy warmth of that draped and low-lit cage, so would the memory of leaving it be forever imbued in him. It was the early hours of morning, when the sun was still low enough over the horizon that its light pierced through cracks of the ceiling in criss-crossing golden rays. The birdnest in the encoche at the high of the roof was alive with movement and noise.
The heavy oakwood door creaked and trembled and slowly opened inward. He and Bo Chengyue looked at each other in surprise, for today was not a day their old beta teacher was supposed to come, and it was far still from the time that their meal should be brought.

But the one who stepped into the room with sunlight framing him was neither their teacher nor any servant they knew; it was Chang Cian, tall and heavy-smelling, his beady eyes moving between the both of them quickly.

They fell into a bow at once, he and Bo Chengyue. He had only met Chang Cian once, though he knew all about him, the day after his first fever ended.

"Rise," the Chang sect leader ordered curtly.

He sounded angry.

The petrichor scent of him was so unfamiliar here, so odd among Bo Chengyue's own and the added smell of the candles and wood, that Xue Chengmei's nose tickled. He almost sneezed.

"A decree has come," Chang Cian told them in distaste—not looking at them but rather at the room around—"from Lanling. Lianfang-Zun has ordered all omega houses to be opened."

Of course, Xue Chengmei knew who Lianfang-Zun was. Their old teacher had told them all the news of the war as it unfolded until the day Qishanwen fell; they knew that Jin Guangyao, Jin Guangshan's illegitimate son, had been the one to cut Wen Ruohan's head.

They knew that when the omega thief, the Yiling Patriarch, had been killed by Lan Wangji, Jin Guangyao was the first to claim the spoils.

"Jin Guangshan died last week," Chang Cian said without looking at them, "and the new sect leader of Lanlingjin wants us all to free the omega."

At the time he heard those words, Xue Chengmei did not fully grasp their meaning. He thought of being allowed to walk outside in that sunlight he so craved and gave almost a smile; he saw Bo Chengyue's face pale and then pinken with hope, and he did not understand.

He still did not understand when he took his first steps out of the house.

He took in the planes and greenery around, the distant houses of a village he had only ever heard of but knew he belonged to. He felt wind upon his face. He shivered under his silken clothes, and oh, what a pleasant shiver it was. How odd and almost frightening to stand now in the middle of so much space, when any time he moved before, five steps were enough for a wall to stand in his way.

Chang Cian's angry expression did not vanish. He left with as little fanfare as he had come, followed close by a beta servant whose unwelcome role of chaperone would no doubt cost her dearly.

Xue Chengmei understood only when Bo Chengyue, whose graceless face seldom expressed something other than resignation, fell to her knees and wept.

He did not weep. Perhaps if he had spent as long as she had inside that smothering little home, he would have; but instead he felt embarrassment at seeing her so uncomposed, and he left her to her tears and walked around the yellow fields. He walked till his untrained legs tired at the edges of a wood. He touched the bark of every tree, stung his fingers on every plant, every wandering bee. His skin prickled with the feeling of open air, of sunlight; his eyes wetted and winked under the harsh glow of the sun.
It was night when he came back to the house. Xue Chengmei discovered the difference between watching moonlight stripe the wooden ceiling of the house and feeling it on his sunburned face and hands. He did not mind the pain and discomfort at all.

Bo Chengyue was waiting inside the omega house. The heavy oakwood door was still as wide open as it had been when Chang Cian had left, and Xue Chengmei stopped by it for a long time before entering, stroking his hand down the other side of the panel, feeling under his fingertips the ways in which time had worn it.

"I am leaving," Bo Chengyue told him that night.

No one had brought them food. Xue Chengmei gnawed on a leftover apple from the previous night's dinner, drowsy with exhaustion.

"I am leaving. I am never coming back here."

"Where will you go?" he asked her.

Bo Chengyue remained silent for a long time. Then, she said: "To that village in Yiling."

He could not help but stare at her in disbelief. "Pariahs," he told her. "You're mad."

"Xue Chengmei," she sighed, and he spied for the first time the stretch of a smile on her wide lips. "You should come with me. You do not know what you speak of."

"I don't want to live with traitors," he spat at her.

Were it not for the events that would unfold years later—were it not for Xiao Xingchen smiling at him with blood on his lips and touching the side of his face with cold fingers—this would have remained his bitterest memory. Bo Chengyue and he in the penumbra of Yueyang's omega house for the last time; she offering to help him, he calling her a traitor.

He knew not, then, when he spoke of. To him that village in Yiling was the fabric of myths: a story the likes of which existed about everything the Yiling Patriarch Wei Ying had done during his evil life. A children's story. A cautionary tale. The traitor omega of Yiling, gathered together in a village of their own! It was enough to give anyone shivers.

Bo Chengyue slept until morning rose bright and cool over the open house; then she left with all of her meagre belongings. Her quiet movements were enough to wake him, but he stayed within the warm bed in the only other room of the house, watching between half-open eyes as she dressed. She paused by the door and whispered her goodbyes so as not to disturb his sleep.

He never saw her again.

On this day, his life changed in many ways. There were only fruits left of food for him on the dining table, for servants had not come to bring him anything new. His body ached and blistered from his long walk the previous day. He put on shoes all the same and went again, farther and longer than he had gone before, tasting fatigue and hunger long before coming back.

He found Chang Cian waiting within the house, alone, touching drapes and forlorn clothes with his very thin fingers.

"Alone now, are you?" he asked Xue Chengmei.

Xue Chengmei felt for the first time the absence of Bo Chengyue. She would be bowing by his side,
stiff and awkward in her knowledge that she would never be of worth to their sect leader.

"Where will you go?" Chang Cian asked.

He rose from the chair he had taken and which she had been sitting in the night before. He advanced toward Chengmei, who kept his stance despite the aches of his walk. Who blinked at the dusty floorboard with every oncoming step.

He felt hands pull his shoulders up until he stood in front of the alpha.

"People saw you wandering around," Chang Cian said, his fingers digging painfully into the line of Xue Chengmei's shoulders. "People have been talking, Xue Yang."

"I was only walking."

"Do you think it matters? We open a door for you, and you all flee and debase yourselves. Already tales from all over are coming of omega disgracing themselves in public. This is why you are locked," he said, bending down, his white teeth clenched tightly. He shook Xue Chengmei and spat, "This is why those houses were built in the first place. To protect you from your own nature."

He meant: to possess you, to keep you so tightly wrapped that many of you take yourselves to death.

Xue Chengmei took it to mean: because we are scared of you.

"If you wish to remain here," Chang Cian whispered in a slick, inviting tone, "I can only think of one use for you."

Xue Chengmei—Xue Yang—lost two things that night.

The first was a finger, taken as he failed to comply, as he struggled. The pain of the cut numbed him to the rest; he watched his bleeding stump and lost himself to the rhythm of blood pumping through his veins, through the wound. He left red-and-then-brown trails over the heavy door he had so often stared at.

The second was not anything he could name or understand, yet it hurt more, somehow, than that bleeding piece of flesh. It gaped within his soul.

So was it that he left the house he had spent his life in: bleeding and hungry and angry. He walked into the night after Chang Cian had gone, his hand wrapped in a silk scarf, his heart beating slowly. He crawled all the way to the woods he had visited for two days. He smelled all around him the scent of varnished oak.

He set fire to the yellow fields. He watched them burn from the cover of the woods, upwind so as not to choke on the smoke. Men and women screamed and hurried from within their cool houses to try and stifle the flames. They did not manage to until the morning sky goldened.

A few days later, Xue Yang tied a rope around Chang Cian's neck.

As history would relate, Chang Cian's murder was only the first of many. Xue Yang killed the man's alpha brothers and sisters in the nights that followed; he killed many more, and for many reasons, for several more years.
What history could not relate was this: the struggles of those first months out of captivity, the immensity of the world and its people, the many ways in which Xue Yang was ignorant or naïve. Chang Cian was not the last to try and take from Xue Yang what he did not wish to give, though he was the only one to succeed. Those affairs, he learned, were not rare; and it took several weeks for more decrees to come from Lanlingjin or other renowned sects—forbidding and punishing, frightening enough for most to recoil and bend the neck. For alpha and beta alike to watch Xue Yang walk around with resentful eyes but nothing more.

Xue Yang learned very quickly to relish in cruelty. At first he stayed in Yueyang, happy enough to lord his new freedom over its inhabitants, to sabotage and steal from the Chang clan's house. It was thus that he learned cultivation: bent over old books in the fading light of a candle, for months and months after the omega house had opened and his indulgent heart had closed.

Then he traveled.

He learned that he was more powerful than most educated cultivators he met. He learned to recognize the cold breeze of resentful energy on his skin, to grasp it with his hands and mind till corpses rose to his call. He learned with the avidity of empty-hearted folk, sucking in knowledge like dry earth soaked in rain, moved forth by a thirst he knew he could not quench.

On a bright day not unlike the one he had exited the home of his childhood, his feet took him to Lanling. After a series of events—unfortunate for some; fortunate, he thought, for himself—he met Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao: a peaceful, saddened young face; a quiet voice over running water; the homely scent of weathered wood.

A man who took one look at Xue Yang and offered him the world.

In the cave under the farthest and oldest building of the Tower, there lay a room full of dusty volumes. Xue Yang walked slowly through its alleys and shelves until he reached what Jin Guangyao wanted him to look at; and there his fingers shook before readying themselves to touch.

"This was recovered in the cave where Wei Wuxian died," Jin Guangyao said softly.

Xue Yang needed not ask what it was. A thin opening through the rock wall let in some measure of sunlight; he lifted the broken Stygian Tiger Seal until it shone, until the specks of dust around vanished under its glow.

"I heard that it was destroyed by Lan Wangji," he replied when he found his voice again.

Jin Guangyao chuckled in that sorrowful way of his. "Many rumors were birthed that day."

"Were you there?" Xue Yang asked.

He lowered his hand, clenching the Seal in his grip till he felt its broken edges cut into his palm. The ache only served to make his heart beat faster. He looked at Jin Guangyao who stood in the darkness, shivers running over his skin, saliva flooding his dry mouth.

"Were you there when the Yiling Patriarch was murdered, Jin Guangyao?"

"What would you like to hear?" Jin Guangyao replied. "That I participated in killing him? What would you do, then?"

Xue Yang smiled. "I would have to kill you," he replied.
As he made that promise, he was thinking of Bo Chengyue leaving with a bag over her broad shoulders, blind with the hope of a different life. He thought of Wei Wuxian walking these very halls with his head held high, years ago, as the entire cultivation world shunned and despised him.

But Jin Guangyao said, "I only met Wei Wuxian a few times during his life. When I arrived at the place where he had fled, Lan Wangji's work was long finished."

"Then I suppose I shall have to murder him and not you."

"I would prefer if you did not," Jin Guangyao retorted, "as I am a sworn brother of Lan Xichen's."

For the first time, his voice was not empty of threat.

Xue Yang looked again at the half-seal. He weighed it with his palm, thumbed the ragged edge where it had broken off. "What do you want me to do with this?" he asked.

The answer was very simple.

"Fix it."

As the Jin clan was often at war with smaller sects, it was not hard for Jin Guangyao to find corpses for Xue Yang to experiment on. Nor was it any trouble to find living humans to serve the same purpose, though there came a condition.

"Alpha," Xue Yang said, pouring over Wei Wuxian's handwriting and stroking the half-seal with one loving finger. "If you bring them to me alive, they must be alpha."

He expected the beta Jin Guangyao to balk at this order, to try and threaten him perhaps; but the Jin sect leader never said a word of dissent to him and never shied from his ruthless demands. He provided him with alpha men and women, live and screaming, their eyes full of hatred.

Most insulted him. Some tried to threaten or compel him into obedience. A few, sometimes, looked at him with the same eyes as Chang Cian. Xue Yang always gave those the most gruesome fate.

Though none at Lanling knew what his work was about, they came to fear him. They knew his position to be above theirs despite his outsider status, and they avoided him. Xue Yang sometimes heard whispers of his name and status on the wind. Even the one other omega cultivator of Lanling, the cowardly Mo Xuanyu who was Jin Guangyao's brother, fled in his presence.

When Mo Xuanyu was accused of licentiousness and thrown out of the Tower, Xue Yang laughed. This, he thought, was an omega who was not worthy of the Yiling Patriarch's accomplishments; this was one who should have stayed locked and smothered until the day he died.

So the months and years went as he lived in Lanling, studying the writings left behind by Wei Wuxian, rebuilding the Stygian Tiger Seal out of its broken half. Feeding himself on cruelty and the idea that he alone should succeed where Wei Wuxian had been thwarted.

Two visitors came one day as he lazed into sunlight, his fingers stained with ink and a piece of hard candy slowly melting in his mouth.

Xue Yang watched them from a high balcony. A tall man dressed in black with all the bearings of
alphahood, whose spice-like scent made Xue Yang's nose twitch and his stomach curl with disgust. A shorter man dressed in white, bowing to Jin Guangyao, who bowed in return.

Xue Yang climbed down the stairs leading to the garden. He walked until he stood by Jin Guangyao's side, eyeing the two strangers, sucking on the candy in a loud and rude manner.

Jin Guangyao gave him a sideways glance that was as exasperated as it was meaningless. "And this is one of our guest cultivators," he said, "Xue Yang of Kuizhou."

"Pleasure," Xue Yang said. He didn't bow. "Who are you?"

"These are Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen. They will be our guests for the next few days."

The alpha Song Lan watched Xue Yang with his brow creased and unfriendly, but the monk Xiao Xingchen, whose name Xue Yang knew, bowed and smiled. He was taller than Jin Guangyao, though not by much. His hands were wide and thin, his eyes as clear as gleaming lakes.

He smelled of snow.

"Xiao Xingchen Daozhang," Xue Yang said.

The candy broke under his teeth into sharp little pieces, sweet and tangy on his tongue. Xiao Xingchen met his eyes evenly under the bright sunlight.

"I've heard so much about you."

In all his mortal life, Xue Yang never made such bitter enemies as Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen.

Their first meeting in Lanling ended in hatred, in promises of revenge. Song Lan's distaste was expected and well-met, but it was Xiao Xingchen whose disapproval Xue Yang fed himself on and encouraged; the monk from the mountain, Baoshan Sanren's apprentice who had fled her teachings to rejoin the mortal realm and fashion himself a savior, a man of charity. Xue Yang watched him try to remain composed and fail. He encouraged each downturn of his lips, each of his harsher words.

This mutual hatred lasted a long year. The two men traveled through the region in that time, showing themselves as helpers of the poor and downtrodden, and Xue Yang made it his goal to hinder them every way he could. He murdered and stole in their wake; he left messages written in blood and ill will, making it so they would know him but not have the proof to convict him.

He took very few precautions to keep Jin Guangyao in the dark about his secondary activities. The Jin sect leader spent less time with him, watching him from afar with thin lips but not doing anything to stop him. It excited Xue Yang to know that they shared this secret. It riled him to make fear bloom into the hearts of the Jin cultivators, to have Madam Jin look at him so ruefully, she who had prized the presence of sweet Mo Xuanyu. To have Jiang Yanli hold her son's hand tightly whenever she saw him.

Seasons passed in bloodshed, and Xue Yang had never felt as alive as he did then, smiling from afar at Xiao Xingchen and knowing the holy man unable to stop him.

On the day he finished building a second half to the Stygian Tiger Seal, Xue Yang traveled to
Kuizhou. He flew to the village where he was born, to the rebuilt mansion where Chang Cian's son, Chang Ping, lived.

He dressed himself all in white. He spread bitter scent-masking paste over his tongue. He destroyed all of the mansion's protective arrays and let loose an army of corpses. He sat on the roof of the derelict omega house and listened to the screams of cultivators being torn limb from limb. When silence fell over the frightened village, he told all those who would listen: I am the monk Xiao Xingchen.

Song Lan and Xiao Xingchen caught him on his way back to Lanling. Their battle was fierce and more hateful than ever before, and Xue Yang escaped with his life only because he managed to blind Song Lan with the sharper edge of his sword. He was laughing as the alpha fell with both hands over his bleeding face, laughing as Xiao Xingchen speared him on his white sword and then ran to his friend's fallen form. He was laughing still when he was brought back to Golden Carp Tower with his hands and feet chained.

He wanted to ask them, What do you think Jin Guangyao will do? Do you think he will renounce my power for the sake of justice?

He was only partly right, for indeed Jin Guangyao did not execute him; but he was thrown into jail and fed only plain rice and water even when heat struck him blind with sickness.

Xue Yang discovered, in that time, just how unbearable prison was after one had tasted freedom.

He did not believe in miracles, or at least, he did not think he would ever be graced with any. But on the day Jin Guangyao visited his cell with the repaired Seal in one hand and his golden sword in the other, Xue Yang did not die.

"You will teach me how to use it," Jin Guangyao ordered, colder and paler-faced than Xue Yang had ever seen him.

Xue Yang chuckled. "Did you come to kill me like you killed Wei Wuxian?"

"I did not kill Wei Wuxian."

His voice was oddly mournful.

"Do you think he would have approved of you, Xue Chengmei?" Jin Guangyao asked. He raised his sword till its edge rested on Xue Yang's throat. "Wei Wuxian spent all of the Sunshot Campaign opening omega houses, freeing your kind, protecting them. He spit in Jin Guangshan's face and duelled his own clan brother in order to keep his kind free. Do you think he would approve of your deeds?"

"You don't know him like I do," Xue Yang said.

All of the people whispering absurd tales of Wei Wuxian, of his accomplishments, painting him in the colors of a bloodthirsty maniac; none of them had spent as long as Xue Yang had poured over his writings and studying his moods. None had seen the drawings in the margins of his works. None had seen the places where madness had made the great man's hand tremble and forget his own words.

This version of Wei Wuxian, this selfless martyr that Jin Guangyao spoke of, was not the truth either.

"I always thought you opened the omega houses out of guilt for killing him," Xue Yang said. "But if he truly was murdered by Lan Wangji, then why did you do it?"
Jin Guangyao's face remained as sorrowful as ever, as if he were carrying a burden too great for words. "Wei Wuxian was a victim of his time," he replied, "and nothing more. If you will not teach me how to use the Seal, then I have no more use for you."

But Xue Yang did not die.

He fled from Lanling with a deep cut into his side, feeling very much like that time in Yueyang, though Jin Guangyao was only ever after his life. The Stygian Tiger Seal had never seemed so heavy in his hands; the anger in his heart had never felt so cold.

Betrayal, he realized. How odd for him of all people to experience such a thing.

He went to the only place he had ever called home. He flew and walked through Kuizhou trying his best to keep his wound from killing him, until he stopped by the edges of Yi City, exhausted and frightened, his feet ensnowed to the calves. They could bear his weight no longer.

He knew not how long he stayed lying by the side of the road. The cold numbed him and made his sight hazy. He thought he felt after hours something move, a voice through his head and shoulders. A hand around his wrist.

He could only smell snow.

Xue Yang woke up inside a coffin.

For a moment his mind ran wild, picturing Jin Guangyao's hands closing a lid above his head, burying him alive. He thought he would die starved and alone several feet underground and only remember those sorrowful eyes. But his breathing quieted after a while longer, and he was able to grasp the rim of the wooden box with both hands and pull himself into a sitting position.

He was in a funeral home. The wide room around him bore several more coffin, all open and empty. A hearth as wide as he was tall was built into the far-off wall, blazing bright with fire. Xue Yang could feel its warmth from his side of the room, and it was very welcome.

There was someone there. The small silhouette of a child bent over pieces of wood, her hair in disarray and her clothing stitched-up too many times to count. She whipped her head toward him when he climbed out of the coffin; he was surprised to find her eyes milk-white and unseeing.

"He's awake!" she cried before he could say anything.

Her blindness did not seem to hinder her at all. As she ran in front of him, calling again and again for the person who must have brought him here, he smelled on her the immature scent of charred wood, almost indistinguishable from the fire. She was alpha.

She was alpha, loud and unkempt, and she brought back with her the one person he never wished to see again.

"How do you feel?" said the monk Xiao Xingchen with a smile that Xue Yang had never seen directed at himself.

He could not answer. He stood frozen in the hall, naked but for undergarments and the clean cloth
wound around his chest to stopper his bleeding, and Xiao Xingchen—it was him, it was Xiao Xingchen, Xue Yang would recognize that voice anywhere—stood just the same, greeting him as a friend.

If Xue Yang had a weapon on him then, he would have driven it into the man's heart.

Xiao Xingchen took another step forward. His face came into the light of the fire, and Xue Yang saw that his once-bright eyes were covered in cloth.

He was blind too.

"Are you mute?" Xiao Xingchen asked; the girl led him by the hand toward where she had sat earlier, insisting that he sit, which he did in good grace. "If so, you are welcome to stay with us. I believe the locals think I like to collect broken things."

"I," Xue Yang said, "am not broken."

Xiao Xingchen let silence unfold over the crackling fire. "I see that you are not," he replied a while later. "You are welcome to stay either way. I took the liberty of looking at your wound," he smiled ruefully, as if laughing at his own joke, "and I dare say you should not be moving around too much. That is quite the cut."

Xue Yang could hardly care that this man had undressed and touched him. Were it under any other circumstance, he would not have stood there silently, but he was too busy feeling relieved that his voice had not been recognized.

Relieved and offended.

"And who are you?" he asked with as little ceremony as he could. This was his enemy, after all; the man he had so enjoyed tormenting, the one person he believed would recognize him under any disguise. "A beggar? A mortician?"

"I suppose you could call me a beggar, though I prefer to work than beg."

"A beggar dressed like a monk?"

Another smile stretched Xiao Xingchen's lips. Xue Yang's fingernails dug into his palms until they slickened with blood.

He wanted to scream his own name to this man. He wanted to make that smile disappear.

"A monk," Xiao Xingchen said. "Yes. I used to be a monk."

He moved atop his seat; it was a short wooden bench, Xue Yang saw, with enough room for three. The blind girl was on the floor in front of him, playing with little animals carved out of wood as well. Xiao Xingchen patted the spot he had freed next to him.

"Come sit," he invited, the picture of friendliness. "There is soup over the fire, and you must be starving."

I starve, Xue Yang thought, for the sight of your body bleeding out in the snow.

But his stomached ached with hunger, and his wound ached with it. He crossed the hall in slow steps, unsure yet of whether or not Xiao Xingchen was deceiving him; of whether or not what awaited him by the fire was a warm meal or the cold blade of a sword.
The little girl moved her legs silently when he reached her. He bent down and put a hand over the bench to support his own weight, grunting when the cut in his side gave a jolt of awful pain.

Xiao Xingchen's hands were on his arm immediately.

He must have realized how improper he was being, for he took them back quickly; or perhaps he felt the way that Xue Yang tensed through his entire body, his pain replaced with fury, with fear.

"My apologies," he said once Xue Yang had managed to sit next to him.

These words, more than any previous, made Xue Yang want to slit his throat from ear to ear.

"You said there was soup," Xue Yang replied coldly.

"Ah, of course. A-Qing?"

The girl jumped to her feet. She moved to the wide pot above the fire as if she could truly see, filling three old bowls quickly and silently. She gave one to Xue Yang in so brisk a movement that some soup spilled over his dirty pants. He bit his lips to prevent himself from yelling at her.

"Will you tell me how you came to be in such a state?" Xiao Xingchen asked as he took his own bowl.

"Maybe," Xue Yang lied.

"Eat first, of course. You must regain your strength."

The soup was too hot and too tasteless. Xue Yang drank it in under a minute.

The whole time he spied Xiao Xingchen from the corner of his eyes, and he thought, I will kill you. I will regain my strength; and then I will kill you.

Xiao Xingchen worked odd jobs for the people of Yi City during the day. At night, he slept in one of the coffins of the funeral home. The villagers either did not mind or were too scared to say anything; after all, what sort of a man dressed like a monk and lived in haunted homes, accompanied by a blind girl and a man with the eyes of a killer?

Xue Yang recovered through the winter of that year in the silent company of A-Qing, whom he soon learned had no love or trust for him. He sometimes wished that she could see out of those white eyes of hers; that she could watch him look at her and cower before him, so that he could feel some satisfaction again.

Long gone was the time he could kill alpha men and women whenever he wanted.

Xiao Xingchen left in the morning and came back at night dirty and exhausted. He sometimes told them tales of what he had done that day—fed a stray dog, cured a sick child, warded a home against spiritual invasion. He sometimes sat in silence. His lips always bore that same smile Xue Yang had never seen before, as if to tell the world, *Everything is alright.*

Xue Yang wondered with pleasure and then irritation if this was the smile that had made Song Lan
so smitten with him, once upon a time. If Song Lan, wherever he was now, longed to see it again, not knowing that his enemy sat in its glow.

He pushed and pushed away the day he should kill Xiao Xingchen and leave. How amusing it was to live like this under the nose of his foe! He took to accompanying the man on his daily patrols once his pain became bearable, deceiving the former monk in ways big and small, watching him taint his hands with living blood.

"Forgive my bluntness," Xiao Xingchen said one night as they sat by a campfire.

Spring had lengthened and warmed the days, allowing them to breathe in the cool air without freezing to death. A-Qing was asleep on the soft ground, her head in Xiao Xingchen's lap. Flowers budded out of trees everywhere Xue Yang looked.

"Ask away, Daozhang," Xue Yang offered.

"Are you a runaway omega?"

As his question was met with silence, Xiao Xingchen gave an apologetic smile.

"Please do not believe that I am a reactionary sort of person," he said. "I was raised in such an odd way that when I first entered the world, I had no thought that things such as omega houses once existed."

"How is that possible?"

"My master once had a disciple, you see. An omega woman. I never met her, but my shidi and I grew under the praise that our master gave to her memory."

Xue Yang poked the ailing fire with the sharp end of a stick. It grew hot between his fingers; his eyelids blinked away the heat. "The only omega cultivator I know of who escaped being locked up," he said, "was the Yiling Patriarch."

"That woman was Wei Wuxian's mother."

Xue Yang said nothing. He knew, of course, about Cangse Sanren's fate.

"I suppose you must have been a man already when the houses were opened," Xiao Xingchen went on. "Believe me, I am only asking to know if I shall one day have to help you fend off a scorned spouse. If you are a runaway, you have nothing to fear from me."

It made Xue Yang laugh in a colder way than he should; but Xiao Xingchen smiled at the sound of it as if it were a gift.

"I am omega, and I am a runaway," Xue Yang said, "but I was never married, and I never will be."

"Not interested in settling down?"

Xue Yang thought of his bleeding hand against a heavy oakwood door. "No," he replied.

He said no other word for the rest of the evening.

The following day, he stepped behind Xiao Xingchen on his daily walk toward the village. He walked by his side onto the muddy ground, crushing flowers beneath his feet, kicking little stones away. Far off in front of them on the narrow dirt path, two silhouettes emerged: a burly man and his son with heavy axes in their hands, heading for their own day of work.
Xue Yang walked ahead of Xiao Xingchen. He greeted the two men. He cut off their tongues and choked out their screams.

"What is it?" Xiao Xingchen asked as he came back to his side.

"Fierce corpses," he replied, hoping that his voice conveyed enough worry.

He watched avidly as Xiao Xingchen hesitated. He felt suddenly like a man walking a tightrope, edging a precipice; but trust colored the skin of Xiao Xingchen's face as he asked, "Where?" and Xue Yang tasted a victory so sweet that he felt himself grow drunk with it.

"Right ahead," he breathed. "They're slow."

Sweetness, candy-like sweetness on his tongue, as he spied the righteous monk Xiao Xingchen cut off the heads of two innocent men on that small countryside path. Shivers over his skin as he saw the villagers that day steer clear of their path, their ashen faces turned to the blood marring Xiao Xingchen's white clothes.

That night he touched Xiao Xingchen's elbow as they ate. He sat pressed close to the man till all he smelled was snow, till even A-Qing's charred scent was gone, washed out by frostiness.

Seasons came and went. Xue Yang's second winter in Yi City was spent wrapped in thick clothes and thicker covers, scribbling cultivation formulæ onto old scrolls he found within the funeral home. He wrote over the names of the deceased and tried to recreate the spells and techniques that Wei Wuxian had come up with in his deadened land in Yiling. He sometimes felt the weight of A-Qing's eyes at his nape, though he knew she could not see; he rubbed with his fingers the uneven edges of the Stygian Tiger Seal always hidden in his pocket and thought of waking up a true corpse to finally be rid of her.

The longer he spent in her and Xiao Xingchen's company, the less she could stand him. On the days her master was gone, she sat still and sullen, spitting murmured words his way that she must think he could not hear. When Xiao Xingchen was with them, she nestled close to him and refused to allow Xue Yang close.

Xiao Xingchen had no clue that this was happening, of course. He left in the morning a sweet piece of candy in each of their beddings and came back at night with an exhausted smile.

Xue Yang could not tell anymore what he felt about it. The candy or the smile.

The people of Yi City grew warier of them. They found the corpses of their kin on the roads round the funeral home and spoke of ghosts, of vengeful monsters. When Xue Yang ventured outside on his own to spy on them, he heard them mutter of revenge. When some fools dared to try and attack them, he did what he had done to that alpha man and his son: he cut off their tongues to prevent their screaming, and allowed Xiao Xingchen to deal the killing blow.

In Xiao Xingchen, he discovered something he never thought he would find. Something dangerously far from enmity; something dangerously close to friendship.

He did not jump anymore when the man touched him. And Xiao Xingchen was fond of touch, he found, likely to leave a hand over Xue Yang's arm as they ate together or clasp his shoulder when he
laughed, soft and warm.

Xue Yang had never known anyone who would touch him like this. Bo Chengyue had never done more than squeeze close to him in bed during the colder nights of the omega house. Jin Guanyao, tied by propriety, had not so much as brushed him with a finger either. It would have been scandalous for him to touch an omega not his.

But there was no ownership in Xiao Xingchen's touch, no underlying desire, nothing. Only a touch.

"Daozhang," Xue Yang said one day after seeing Xiao Xingchen kill an old woman who had tried grabbing at his robes for pity.

He was warm with the sight of it still; all that gore over Xiao Xingchen's white sword. All those blood-drowned whimpers out of the old woman's throat.

"What happened to your eyes?"

It was another warm spring night that they both spent outside. A-Qing had long lost the fight for wakefulness, and Xue Yang had carried her to bed under Xiao Xingchen's order. He had even tucked her in, so content was he with his victory of the day.

Xiao Xingchen smiled as always at the dying fire. He said nothing of the feeling of Xue Yang sitting so close to him that their thighs touched above the softened ground. "I gave them away," he replied.

"To whom?"

"To a very dear friend of mine. He lost them in battle against an enemy of ours; so I carried him to my master and begged her to restore his sight." He sighed softly. "She could, but only at the price of someone else's. So I gave mine away."

"A foolish decision," Xue Yang declared.

Xiao Xingchen laughed, "Somehow, I knew you would say this. But I don't think it was foolish at all."

"How so? One of you still ended up blind."

Xiao Xingchen's hand found Xue Yang's wrist. He squeezes it with warm fingers, stroking the inside of it, looking for his pulse. Xue Yang felt his own heart beat in his ears loudly.

"This friend," Xiao Xingchen said, "had been with me for a very long time. He is my sworn brother. If I had left him to his fate when there was something I could do to help, I would never have been able to live with myself."

Xue Yang watched the red embers in front of their feet. He felt their heat burn his eyes.

"I could never be so selfless," he said. "It would not cross my mind to give away my sight for anyone. Not even you, Daozhang."

"I know. I would not want you to." Xiao Xingchen squeezed his wrist again. "Like you said, this would only end up in a foolish circle of sacrifice."

_I do not have it in me to sacrifice anything_, Xue Yang thought.

He could never be to Xiao Xingchen what Xiao Xingchen was to Song Lan.
"May I ask you something?"

"Why do you still need to say this? Just ask me."

"I was unsure," Xiao Xingchen said, "and I am certain that you will laugh at me, but... what is your name?"

In the year since they had lived together in Yi City, Xue Yang had forgotten to fear for this very question.

Xiao Xingchen's hand left his wrist with one last stroke of his fingers, but it did not go back to the man's own lap. Instead it rose in the red light of the fire, slowly so that Xue Yang could see it, and landed on the side of his face, right against his cold skin.

"May I?" Xiao Xingchen asked in nothing more than a whisper.

It did not matter anymore what he was asking. Xue Yang felt himself nod in utter silence. He felt his breath catch in his throat and never leave.

Xiao Xingchen's hands were wide and callused. His fingertips were not soft against Xue Yang's cheek, but hard and dry, almost painful. Yet Xue Yang did nothing to stop them as they traveled from cheek to nose, to brow, to temple. He allowed them to push his eyelids down. He felt them halt over his lips as Xiao Xingchen finished drawing a map of his face.

"What is your name?" Xiao Xingchen asked again.

Xue Yang opened his eyes and looked at him, sitting there eager and red-faced and so terribly deceived. His gentle hand braced over Xue Yang's mouth.

"Chengmei," he replied.

His lips moved against Xiao Xingchen's warm fingers. Xiao Xingchen did not draw them away.

"Just Chengmei?"

"Yes."

"Then may I kiss you, Chengmei?"

Xue Yang kissed him first.

He put one hand on Xiao Xingchen's shoulder and dug the other in the soil, feeling through the leather of his glove how cold still the earth was from the long winter months. The stump of his finger numbed with it. He pressed his lips to Xiao Xingchen's mouth and exhaled all at once, freeing his lungs of air and of a tension he had not wished to understand for months on end. He felt Xiao Xingchen's short nails drag through the hair behind his temple. He felt the man take hold of his chin and stroke it softly, gently, as he understood that this was his to have.

It did not matter that Xue Yang had never kissed anyone before: he poured into the contact a nauseated sort of affection, of attachment. His belly grew warm with want. His heart grew cold with fear.

He shuddered out a breath onto Xiao Xingchen's mouth as they separated, and Xiao Xingchen murmured, "See, I knew you would laugh at me."

Xue Yang could not tell him then that he was laughing at himself.
Nor could he tell him so as they kissed again near the dying fire, as his one hand grew bolder and touched Xiao Xingchen's soft neck, feeling his pulse and his warm blood, so close under his skin. He let Xiao Xingchen pull him closer; he let himself be laid under the glinting stars and bared of all his sins.

And under those roaming, careful hands, as his pleasure spread and crested against ever-warm skin, he realized he was the one to have been deceived all along.

Of course, the whole thing had to end one day

It came almost a year later, as Xue Yang had renounced all ideas of leaving the dark halls of the funeral home for a better place to live. As his sword stayed in its sheath for so long that dust had the time to gather and smear his fingertips. He did not dream anymore of taking it in hand as Xiao Xingchen slept and plunge it through the man's beating heart.

Yi City had become near-abandoned, though for months no new corpses were found bled out in the streets. A-Qing sprouted like a weed and outgrew all her clothes. She sometimes allowed Xue Yang to sit down next to her without insulting him; her alpha scent did not grate at him anymore.

Xue Yang, in that time, got used to the feeling and shape of Xiao Xingchen's hands. He spoke with him at night of unimportant things. He lay down next to him and warmed himself with him, hungry throughout the heart for his lips and his touch.

The end came in the shape of a man dressed in black, in the scent of spices wafting upwind to the hall; it came as Song Lan laid foot in Yi City, as his path took him to the narrow dirt road leading up the hill.

Xue Yang smelled him before he could see him. Then he spied him from afar, so austere and straight-backed, and felt the past two years crumble and make way for reality.

"Xue Yang!" Song Lan exclaimed, his hand grabbing his sword.

Xue Yang did not bother trying to explain himself. Not to this man.

"Who's this?" A-Qing asked, frightened.

He rose with his own sword in hand and replied, "Leave."

Time seemed slow as they exchanged blow after blow under the setting sun. The snow all around them shone red and pink, darkened only by their elongated shadows; birds flew away, scared off by the sound of metal on metal, on leather, on wood.

"What have you done to him," Song Lan seethed in all of his righteousness.

"You must have deceived him, you monster," Song Lan panted.

"I will not hesitate to kill you, omega," Song Lan threatened.

"Neither will I," Xue Yang replied.

And he grabbed his sword with both hands and shoved it forward in a forceful, piercing blow.
There came a cry in the distance. He did not hear it well through the blood pumping by his ears and clogging up his heart. He dragged his sword out of the wound it had cut into Song Lan's shoulder and swung it once more with the intent to kill.

This was what he was made for, after all; this was what his whole life had shaped out of him.

But it was not Song Lan's black uniform that the tip of his sword found. It was not Song Lan's somber face which paled with blood loss amidst the tainted snow. His blade dipped into a white-clad back, in-between the same long strands of hair he had tugged at only a few nights ago in the throes of pleasure.

"No," Song Lan said.

He dropped his sword and took hold of the body standing in front of him—standing between he and Xue Yang—but it was too late. Xiao Xingchen coughed the strangled, gargling cough of those whose blood had risen up the throat. He fell against his friend's chest and moved no more.

Xue Yang saw and heard nothing but that white-and-red body. He felt all of a sudden like the snow around him; frozen and dirt-smeared, waiting for sunlight to thaw him and make him vanish at last.

"I'll kill you," Song Lan roared, holding Xiao Xingchen's body and trembling from head to toe. Tears ran down his face and sorrow twisted his spiced scent, and still he looked the picture of purity, of bravery; he swore, "I will kill you, Xue Yang—"

Xue Yang picked up the black sword from where Song Lan had dropped it and plunged it through his vulnerable throat.

Silence fell over him.

On the day Xue Yang had knocked Chang Cian unconscious and strangled him with rope, he had felt exhilarated. He had felt each drop of his own blood coursing hotly through his veins; he had breathed in free air for the first time in his life. Through each of the murders he had enacted thereafter, he had sought that same feeling. He had looked for liveliness.

He looked for it as he approached the fallen form of Xiao Xingchen, as he drew his own sword out of the man's back. As he rolled him so that his front faced up again and he could see him properly.

His enemy.

Xiao Xingchen's blood was running down his open lips. It trickled down his lax cheeks and pooled pinkly over the pristine snow with every ragged breath he took.

"You're an idiot," Xue Yang said coldly.

"Chengmei," Xiao Xingchen breathed. And then, even more softly: "Xue Yang."

Xue Yang kneeled by his side.

"You're so trusting," he told his fallen foe; he touched his bleeding face and found it cold already. "You took me in, healed and fed me, your enemy. I could have killed you so many times, Daozhang. It would have been child's play."

Xiao Xingchen coughed. His lips stretched into a feeble, tortured smile. "I knew," he said.

Xue Yang's heart beat through his frozen chest in one last valiant effort.
"I knew all along—"

"Liar," Xue Yang growled, "not even you are so stupid."

"I knew," Xiao Xingchen said again; and he added, "I could never forget you."

Such a memory rose almost like a whisper into Xue Yang's mind: himself held back by men from Lanlingjin, watching Xiao Xingchen holding a bleeding Song Lan, whispering with all of his malice: Don't you dare forget me, Daozhang.

Xiao Xingchen grunted in pain in the snow. His arm rose, shaking, his hands as pale as his face. His fingers touched Xue Yang's cheek.

"Your voice," he said, smiling still. "Your face."

They trailed over Xue Yang's lips in a wind-like caress.

"Your scent."

His arm fell; Xue Yang caught it before it could hit the cold ground.

"I shall miss it," Xiao Xingchen laughed. "Guihua flowers... such a lovely scent for one as cruel as you, Xue Chengmei."

His head turned in the direction of Song Lan's body. The snow around the alpha's neck had turned a vivid red; he was long dead.

Whatever Xiao Xingchen's last words to his old friend were, he did not say them out loud.

Xue Yang could not have told how much time passed between the moment life left Xiao Xingchen's body and the moment he moved. Between that last pained breath and the sobbing gasp he heard through the shadowed and bare-branched trees. The lot of it felt like an overstretched instant, like a fragment of time lost to earthly measures.

He lifted his head and saw A-Qing between the trunks of trees. He saw her tall and gangly body shaken with sobs, her milky eyes fixed onto him with all the hatred in the world.

"You killed him," she gasped.

She looked at him, he realized. She saw him.

She did not run away as he moved. Nor did she move when he took his sword in hand once more and walked in her direction. He could see that she wanted nothing more than to reach Xiao Xingchen's side and hug his dead body to her chest, sobbing the night over until she fell down, exhausted, like all children whose emotions got the better of them.

"I killed him," Xue Yang told her once he was but a few feet away.

She hiccuped and trembled as if she had not truly believed it until then.

He could feel that trembling when his sword's edge touched the side of her bare neck. His own hand shook around the pommel of it in echo of her body's tremors. She wailed and wailed in the silent city, all alone on that dirt path. Behind her back lay the nightly shapes of abandoned houses. In front of her, the body of her mentor and protector.

Xue Yang watched her cry and felt his hand shake with her shaking; he stood with blood over his
damp clothes, alone in the world with this soon-to-die little girl he had always despised.

This was no ice that sunlight could thaw.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys... VERY sorry for the long wait, March was absolute hell and then April came around with no time for me to rest before I had to get started on my new internship. I hope everyone hasn't forgotten this story because I have not, I promise.

This chapter is dedicated to Hyde and all of his wonderful fics and was very inspired by this one especially... Please go give him some love he's an amazing author.

See you soon for more A/B/O nonsense.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Warnings: violence against children, Wei Wuxian's general trauma, Xue Yang's general trauma, me being incapable of writing something shorter than 10k words, ever.


See the end of the chapter for more notes

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 16

Wei Wuxian was not one to fear gaudy and abandoned places. The worst nests of resentful spirits and corpses he had seen through both his lives were oft not those that people pointed to: he had walked, once, through the bright and sunlit walls of a ruined brothel, where the century-old memory of a woman murdered men who failed to meet its standards. He had lived, once, on a ground poisoned with corpses. He had fed on vegetables grown out of deadened earth.

No one would think this place so lively, he could recall one man saying on the rare occasion Wei Wuxian graced the communal dinner with his presence.

It had been a warm day of fall, and the sky was still lit with the last rays of sunlight.

The man had drunk and delighted in the mellow liquor which Wei Wuxian brewed in the darkness of the bloodpool cave. He had never tasted liquor before that day. They were celebrating the opening of the first barrel, months after Wei Wuxian had first crossed the path through the mountains in company of the Wen refugees.

Such sweetness can be born out of a mass graveyard!

They had laughed around him, men and women gaunt with persecution, their hands shaking still from entrapment and abuse. Wei Wuxian had not known how to answer him. Wen Qing had sat beside him at the longest table and put a hand on his arm, as had become her habit since the day Lan Xichen had looked at him in horror. She had waited out the moment Wei Wuxian's face would twist into a smile and feel a little less cold.

The old woman they all called 'Grandmother', though she was not related to any of them, had shushed the crowd then and pointed to the biggest of the shacks. He sleeps, she said, her aged face softened with wine and company.

Wei Wuxian felt cold once more.

So Wei Wuxian was not squeamish or afraid as he followed the omega Xue Yang through the misty ruins of Yi City. He had seen worse things in his life than the slow and heavy-legged corpses standing still on the broad village street. He had smelled more rancid smells going in and out of the Burial Mounds than he did now, as an old man with his head cut open watched him with empty eyes.

He was not afraid either of Xue Yang's tale of woes; of the loss of his lover and the begging he did to have the man's soul restored with the help of a cultivator. Xiao Xingchen was framed, he said.
Xiao Xingchen was accused of the murders which the man called Song Lan committed.

Wei Wuxian had thought Xue Yang to be lying when he handed him the sealing pouch through which he felt but a faint echo of spirituality. He knew him to be lying, now, as he walked through the dead city with familiar shivers on his skin.

"Not far now, young master Mo," Xue Yang said.

His voice was hollow with greed.

"I had to keep him cold, I had to preserve him. But I know you'll be able to help."

"You seem very sure of yourself," Wei Wuxian replied. "I never said anything about being able to revive the dead."

Xue Yang looked at him. Exhaustion had reddened his eyes and given his left eyelid a twitch. "I feel like I've waited so long to meet you," he said, near-reverent. "Surely this is the work of fate."

The closer he got to his goal, the less he seemed to care about keeping up appearances.

Wei Wuxian followed him anyway. The sealing pouch in his hand weighed even less than a feather, and it felt as though a breeze would be enough to vaporize the hint of a soul trapped within. He barely dared to tighten his fingers around it.

He had come here with a purpose, after all. If Lan Wangji had been by his side then and taken the cursed arm out to point the way, Wei Wuxian had no doubt that the thing would have thrashed and struggle with proximity to its goal. Wei Wuxian may as well see what the liar Xue Yang wanted out of the Yiling Patriarch.

Plus, there was the issue of that very familiar aura.

Xue Yang stopped before the finest of the engraved coffins around the cold and unlit hall. This time he did not kick it open with his foot; instead he put down the elegant white sword he carried and bent to push the lid open inch by inch, his tired face spasming with effort and grief.

Xiao Xingchen lay within the oakwood box. A glance was enough to tell that his body had been tended to and washed, and the ribbon around his eyes changed. Were it not for how still and bloodless his skin was, one could easily have thought he was merely sleeping.

Wei Wuxian spent a second simply watching the man and taking in his features. He had not known him in life and never would, but looking at the faint traces of laugh lines around his mouth, at the kind curve of his brow, he thought he might have liked to.

It was not often he met someone with such close relation to his mother.

"Well?" Xue Yang said to him.

Impatience was ridding him of pretense. Wei Wuxian heard on his voice the same desperation with which he himself had begged, once, asking, What should I do?

What should he do?

"How did he die?" he asked.
Xue Yang hissed. "The murderer Song Lan killed him," he replied, batting a hand through the air. "Never mind this—can you restore his spirit?"

"I never said I could."

"I know you can. I can tell."

Pity, Wei Wuxian thought, was the appropriate thing to feel, watching Xue Yang shake and sway on his feet, his gloved hand resting on the edge of the carved coffin.

He looked away. "First," he said, "I'd like to know how long you've been in possession of the Stygian Tiger Seal."

Xue Yang's face froze and paled. A second later he laughed, and the source of Wei Wuxian's shiver—the source of the cold and dead aura weighing over Yi City—fell out of his sleeve.

The two halves of the Seal looked as smooth and whole as if Wei Wuxian had never destroyed them.

"That's the Yiling Patriarch for you," Xue Yang murmured, and the devotion in his eyes made Wei Wuxian's skin crawl. "I knew I couldn't fool you."

"You weren't hiding very well," Wei Wuxian replied.

"Neither were you. I've spent so long studying you, learning you. Those idiots in Lanling in Yunmeng—" Xue Yang spat the words out as if they were poison, "—they never knew you. Not like I do. I could tell at a glance who you were, and the moment I heard that Jiang Yanli and her son had been sighted in Qinghe in company of Lan Wangji and an omega cultivator..."

He took a step forward. His crazed eyes caught the setting light of day and glowed redly.

"I always knew you'd come back," Xue Yang whispered. "All those years. I saw that summoning array of yours in Lianfang-Zun's hidden chamber, and I knew you had created it so you could come back one day." He paused in thought and added, "Only, I never expected Mo Xuanyu of all people to do it. It seems I was mistaken about him."

"Omega cultivators are dime a dozen now," Wei Wuxian said carefully.

Part of him wanted to step back, worried for the insanity lodged so deeply within Xue Yang's eyes. Another refused to get away as long as he did not secure the Seal and destroy it again.

It should never have existed in the first place. This time, Wei Wuxian would make sure both halves were stripped of power and could never be made whole.

"What makes you think I am Wei Wuxian?"

Xue Yang laughed so loudly that nested birds took flight through the wooden beams of the hall.

"Who else could you be?" he near-yelled. "Which other omega would risk being in Lan Wangji's presence? I knew he couldn't have killed you. I knew they were all lying."

Wei Wuxian had no time at all to absorb this information and wonder at it—Xue Yang threw the Seal up and caught it again, and he said, "Now, back to our business. I want you to restore this man's spirit, senior Wei. I'm not afraid to force you to, no matter how much I owe you."

"I can't," Wei Wuxian replied.
Xue Yang's smile waned. "Don't lie to me now," he said. "I have spent enough time in the company of your Ghost General to know the truth."

Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian recalled then. He really should have thought to call Wen Ning before he got to the funeral home.

Instead of grabbing the bamboo flute, he lifted the pouch still held preciously within his hand. "There is barely any spirit left here," he declared. "Regardless of how Xiao Xingchen truly died—he had no wish to remain behind in any way. His life energy had left him before he gave his last breath."

"And Wen Ning did?!!" Xue Yang roared. His hand once again found the white sword which must belong to Xiao Xingchen; he drew it out of its sheath, pointed the sharp end of it at Wei Wuxian. "What does Wen Ning have to cling to that Xiao Xingchen does not?"

Wen Ning had a sister, a clan. He had the hope which Wei Wuxian had instilled in him and which had led to his death—the courage to stand up and protect others, the selflessness to do so. Right until the moment his injuries had killed him, Wen Ning had not despaired.

If Xiao Xingchen was Xue Yang's mate, if he was truly a man Baoshan Sanren had deemed worthy of her teachings, then it stood to reason that he felt no such attachment to life.

"Do your grieving, Xue Yang," Wei Wuxian said lowly. "There is no way to raise this man from the dead again."

Xue Yang's hand shook around the handle of the white sword.

He dropped it to the ground as he brought the two pieces of the Seal together, and Wei Wuxian's fingers grabbed the bamboo flute at the same time he felt the cold, resentful energy on his skin.

Lan Sizhui could not look at any of the children around him in the eye.

It was his fault, he knew, that they were trapped here. It was his fault they had to huddle together in the derelict shed of a village house, frightened and trapped, while the girl-spirit walked around them and shot her hateful words at them.

And most of all—most terrifying and terrible of all—it was his fault that Jingyi looked so pale on the ground, coughing and wheezing, the Ouyang boy in no better state next to him.

The other junior cultivators they had met with on the way, a group from Lanling headed by Jin Ling, had told him to get lost. But it was Lan Jingyi's first night-hunt after his coming-of-age ceremony; he had been so eager to go out after all the fuss and embarrassment of his first fever, eager to prove himself after a few of their clan's elders had let slip that he should be better left within the Cloud Recesses from now on…

Sizhui had not had the heart to refuse him despite the overwhelming competition. Even after they had set foot in the abandoned city, he had thought, naively, that he could handle it all. It had taken the falling of Ouyang Zizhen and his peers, and then of Jingyi himself, for Sizhui to realize how mistaken he had been.

Now Lan Jingyi and three other juniors from different sects were suffocating on the floor of a ruined
shed, and the milk-eyed fierce spirit of a girl yelled at them, over and over, to get out.

She screamed again right then. Lan Sizhui jumped as Jin Ling did, and heard the sect heir mutter about his dog Fairy and how quickly he could have dealt with this on his own, but he could not take those hateful words to heart. He knew fear just as well as any of them.

Lan Sizhui crouched on the floor next to Jingyi. "How do you feel?" he asked, frightened.

Lan Jingyi shook his head instead of answering with words. The painful rasps from deep in this throat and lungs seemed to have taken his voice.

Sizhui took his wrist in hand despite the shocked breath Jin Ling took in at the sight—there were better things to think of now than propriety. "Your pulse is steady for now," he told him, hoping to lend some strength to him. "Focus on your breathing, like master Qiren taught us."

"Easy to say," Jingyi rasped out.

Lan Sizhui gave him a shaky smile.

But Jingyi did try, at least. He calmed his pained and nervous breathing and closed his eyes, his fingers crossing as they always did when he struggled through meditation. Next to him, Ouyang Zizhen tried to breathe in tandem.

"What's wrong with him?" Jin Ling asked when Lan Sizhui stood again.

His voice was as muffled as the last three times he had asked the question. "I don't know," Lan Sizhui replied, with enough anger this time to shut him up.

Jin Ling bared his teeth at him and went back to looking at Jingyi in worry.

"Get out of here!" the ghost screamed from outside the shed. "Get out, get out, get out—"

There came a roar of a voice, like the howl of a monster in the distance; she shut up abruptly.

So did all of them. All of a sudden the murmur of two girls' voices in the back halted as they waited out that awful and lung-tearing howl. Lan Sizhui risked a glance in the interstice between two of the planks making up the walls of the shed: he saw only the girl-spirit's back, running away from them.

"What was that?" a Ouyang Zizhen asked fearfully. The group had been entirely silent for over a minute, fear and anticipation locking all of their tongues. "Oh, what was that, are we going to—"

The door of the shed opened violently.

Lan Sizhui did not think at all as he drew his sword and stepped over Jingyi's body to put himself between the intruder and him. He saw as through a trance Jin Ling do the same, Suihua's golden pommel shaking in his grasp, and together they leveled their blades to the man in black robes who now stood in the entrance.

Until Sizhui recognized him.

"Young master Mo?" he asked, bewildered.

His sword lowered. Jin Ling's did so as well a moment later, as he too came to his senses.

It was Mo Xuanyu. He looked more distraught now than Lan Sizhui had last seen him in that inn in Dafan, and the clothes he was wearing were dirtier as well, but he would recognize that sharp-eyed
face anywhere. Mo Xuanyu said nothing to them, only turned his back to close the shed-door behind himself and rest his back on it.

He held his bamboo flute in one hand. The other bore a slightly-bleeding gash, as did his sweaty forehead. Sizhui inhaled quickly in relief and smelled faint traces of honey on the air.

"What are you doing here?" Jin Ling asked, enraged again.

"I could ask you the same question," Mo Xuanyu replied. His eyes went over Jin Ling's body, his brow loosening slightly when he found no visible injuries on the boy. "Weren't you with your…"

He paused. He shook his head once, twice, and looked once again at Jin Ling, his mouth open in askance.

Behind Sizhui, Lan Jingyi let out a series of dry and painful coughs.

Mo Xuanyu reacted before even Sizhui could. He suddenly saw the bodies laid onto the dirt floor and stepped to them quickly, pushing Sizhui out of the way as if he did not exist at all. If others were surprised to see him lay a hand on an alpha with so little care, Sizhui was not: he had already been pushed aside by Mo Xuanyu thoughtlessly before in Mo village.

But now was no time to be thinking of such things. Mo Xuanyu crouched beside Lan Jingyi, his hand grabbing Jingyi's to measure his pulse even as he used the other to tug open Jingyi's bloodshot eyes, to squeeze his jaw till his tongue came out.

It was stained purple.

"Foolish child," Lan Sizhui heard Mo Xuanyu whisper through his stupor. Lan Jingyi seemed too surprised and tired to protest for once. The man then ordered Ouyang Zizhen to show his tongue as well, and then the three other boys who had fallen sick upon entering the city. "What are they teaching you in those classes?" he asked loudly as he rose. "Haven't you ever heard of corpse-poisoning?"

"Corpse-poisoning?" a frightened alpha girl exclaimed from the back of the group. Lan Sizhui could see her holding tightly to the arm of the boy next to her, who wore the same dark blue uniform of the Ouyang sect. "Isn't that incurable?"

Sizhui felt his heart drop like a stone.

No, he thought in a panic, looking again at Jingyi on the floor who was now as pale as a sheet, no, no, that's impossible—

"It's not," Mo Xuanyu replied curtly. "Not in the early stages at least."

Ouyang Zizhen let out a curt sob of relief. Next to Lan Sizhui, Jin Ling's hold on Suishua loosened with an audible crack of his knuckles.

"I need a kitchen," Mo Xuanyu said then. Sizhui was too dazed to even feel surprise at those words. "Does anyone still live here?"

"That old harpy does," Jin Ling answered. "She wouldn't open her house for us, so we had to take shelter in her shed—"

Before he could finish, Mo Xuanyu walked to the only other door of the shed and opened it to access the house. He vanished with a flutter of his black robes.
"What!" Jin Ling exclaimed angrily. "He asks all those questions and then leaves us here—"

Sizhui heard none of his words after this, so busy was he staring at Jingyi on the floor and feeling his own heart beat slowly, excruciatingly.

He had almost killed Lan Jingyi.

"Who was this, um," the alpha girl from before said. She seemed to hesitate between calling Mo Xuanyu a man or an omega.

"Mo Xuanyu," came Jingyi's weak reply.

Lan Sizhui crouched beside him again. He held his wrist, though there was no need to check on his pulse now.

"It's just my stupid uncle," he heard Jin Ling's voice say over the hazy buzzing in his ears. "What does he know about corpse-poisoning? He was so weak and mad that Little Uncle threw him out of the Tower ages ago."

"Don't argue while I'm dying, please," said Ouyang Zizhen.

Mo Xuanyu came back into the shed a few minutes later. He had drawn back the sleeves of his robes and washed and bandaged the cut on his hand, though there was no erasing the faint scars Lan Sizhui saw at the inside of his wrists.

"I need help to prepare the remedy," he declared calmly. "Any volunteers?"

Silence answered him. Those who did not know him looked at him in distrust, especially the girl who would not let go of her sect-mate's arm. Lan Sizhui found enough of his bearings to rise and answer, "I'll help."

"Me too," Jin Ling said immediately, walking over the boys on the floor and almost stepping on Ouyang Zizhen's hand.

They followed Mo Xuanyu through the decrepit house. It would be hard to believe anyone lived here even if Sizhui had not glimpsed the old and mean woman who had refused them entry; everywhere he could see was covered in dust and fallen leaves, the pots above the few tables and cabinets showing nothing but dead plants and flowers. The kitchen was in no better shape: the oven was cold as ice when Sizhui touched it, the wood inside wet and rotted.

"Jin Ling," Mo Xuanyu said, "go fetch us some dry wood. Keep your nose and mouth covered."

"I don't want to go outside with that spirit hanging around!" Jin Ling replied, one hand crossed over his chest in defiance.

"Do you want to help me or not?"

The boy hesitated. Lan Sizhui thought of Lan Jingyi so pale and cold on the floor, his breathing dry and hurried, and turned to him. He was not above begging, or offering to go out himself.

But Mo Xuanyu smiled, then, or something near to that. It did not erase the sadness in his eyes which Sizhui had noticed since the very first time they met, but it made him look as if he should be smiling more. As if, once upon a time, he had smiled more.

"There's bushes in the yard outside," he told Jin Ling. "You won't need to go far. Take another of
those kids with you if you're scared."

"I'm not scared," Jin Ling said predictably. He turned his back to them and walked out, muttering about Suihua not being meant for cutting wood.

Then it was only Lan Sizhui and Mo Xuanyu inside the tiny kitchen.

"What should I do?" he asked. His voice had never felt so frail before.

Mo Xuanyu did not immediately answer. He turned his back to Sizhui after a brief and fleeting glance his way, opening cupboards and drawers and then a wooden pot full of rice. He plunged his hand into it and brought it to his face, examining the grains under what little daylight filtered there.

It was almost nighttime. Birds would be long gone even if Yi City had such things as living beasts roaming around. When Sizhui took in a breath, tight within his lungs and cold inside his mouth, he smelled nothing but rot and honey.

He knew not why the smell comforted him then.

"Wash this rice," Mo Xuanyu told him after letting the grains fall again. "The water is clean at least."

Sizhui obeyed wordlessly.

Jin Ling came back with wood after a few minutes and hung behind them awkwardly. Mo Xuanyu had aligned a few bowls full of meager spices while he was gone, and now he tended to the fire in the oven and took the washed rice that Sizhui handed him, never letting their hands touch.

"Are you making… congee?" Sizhui asked after a few minutes.

"Congee?" Jin Ling repeated immediately, rushing to see what Mo Xuanyu had been doing.

They both stared at the white-and-red mixture that Mo Xuanyu was cooking over the fire.

"How's congee going to help Lan Jingyi?" Jin Ling said, and anger had made his voice loud and cutting; he looked a second away from grabbing Mo Xuanyu by the front of his robes in despair. "Were you lying when you said you could cure him!?"

"Calm down," Mo Xuanyu snapped.

Sizhui saw him take in a deep breath, eyes closed, before opening them again.

"It's an old remedy," he went on more calmly. His hand never ceased moving the congee overfire; it was odd to see him cook like this, almost as odd as the first time he had walked in on Hanguang-Jun preparing his own meals in that little house up the mountain. "Spices to expel the poison and decongestion the airways."

He did not speak again until a few minutes later, and then only to tell them to distribute the food to those who had been sick.

Jingyi almost choked after the first spoonful.

"Hot!" he cried out, waving a hand over his face, mouth open so that his purple tongue would find fresh air.

The other sick boys were not faring much better, except Ouyang Zizhen who only reddened brightly but kept eating.
"I can't eat this," Jingyi said with tears in his bloodshot eyes.

"You better eat it all, Lan Jingyi," Jin Ling snapped at him. "After all the trouble I went through to fuel the fire for you."

"I'd like to see you eat something to spicy, Jin Ling," Lan Jingyi spat in anger.

Jin Ling took the bowl from Ouyang Zizhen and shoved a spoonful of congee into his mouth.

To his credit, he did not splutter and cry as Jingyi had. His entire face turned red, however, and sweat started shining at his forehead around the red dot marking him as part of the Jin clan. "It's not hot," he said weakly.

It would have been funny in any other circumstance; as it was, Lan Sizhui could only find relief at the sight of Lan Jingyi pushing past the burn to eat more, so that he would not lose face to Jin Ling.

He left them to it and walked back to the kitchen. Mo Xuanyu was there still, leaning against the counter of the stove and watching the leftover congee still simmering there. His head was turned to the empty cabinets he had rummaged through earlier, his eyes unseeing. He looked deep in thought.

"Will he truly be okay?" Lan Sizhui asked him.

Mo Xuanyu did not jump at the sound of his voice. He stared Sizhui's way vaguely, blinking twice to clear his mind. "You're…" His words faltered.

Sizhui told himself not to mind that Mo Xuanyu had forgotten his name again. "Lan Sizhui," he replied. "Will Jingyi truly be all right, young master Mo?"

"He should be," Mo Xuanyu replied.

He seemed to snap out of his own stupor then. He leaned away from the side of the oven, opening it once to twirl the red embers within and spread the heat more evenly. Lan Sizhui shivered; he had not realized how cold he was until then.

"Thank you," he said.

He held back from bowing as the man looked at him again, remembering how he had reacted the last time. Still he brought his hands before him to salute properly, bending the neck no farther than the shoulders.

Bowing this way had always felt odd to him, much odder than bending the back as Jingyi had been taught by Lan Qiren. Here and then, with Mo Xuanyu's cold eyes on him and the smell of death wafting through the twilight air, it felt more than odd. It felt wrong.

"Thank you for saving him," Sizhui went on. "If he had died, I—"

He could not finish his thought. The words hurt enough within the confines of his throat and mind; it seemed unspeakable, unthinkable.

"He's mature now," Mo Xuanyu said all of a sudden.

Sizhui lifted his head in surprise.

Mo Xuanyu was looking directly at him. "I smelled it as soon as I came in," he said. "He doesn't use any medicine to hide himself, does he."
"We celebrated his coming of age only a few days ago," Sizhui replied, confused. "And no, Jingyi does not like those drugs. He says the taste of them is terrible."

"I can't blame him for that."

Mo Xuanyu must use them, Sizhui thought, recalling their meeting in Dafan. Although the honeyscent of him was heavy in Mo village, it had been gone entirely as he walked into that inn and slept in the room next to his and Hanguang-Jun's.

Even now, honey was but a faint and sugary suggestion on the rotten air of the house. Barely enough to be recognizable, had Sizhui not known beforehand what Mo Xuanyu smelled like.

"It's a foolish decision," Mo Xuanyu said, cutting Sizhui's thoughts short, "but I'm less worried about that than I am about those who circle around him."

Lan Sizhui reeled back. "I wouldn't let anyone—"

"I'm talking about you."

Sizhui's mouth shut, his teeth hitting together loudly. There were no words at all, no reply that he could think of, as Mo Xuanyu approached him. His black eyes were ever-so-hostile.

"I haven't seen that boy anywhere without you within a few feet of him," Mo Xuanyu said lowly. "Without you looking at him, monitoring him."

"I don't—"

"Do not interrupt me, Lan Sizhui."

It was as if a fire had been put out within Sizhui's chest, and as if smoke had replaced his capacity for speech.

_You can't protect him_, the Jiang sect leader had told him in Dafan.

He had not been able to sleep without hearing those words, not been able to eat or travel anywhere without fearing that Jingyi would be hurt because of his weakness. He heard them now, staring into Mo Xuanyu's eyes, the oppressive air of the city making the man look so much taller.

"You and your clan think yourselves so high, so benevolent for letting that boy roam free, don't you," Mo Xuanyu said. "When a word from any of his elders would suffice to have him be locked up again."

_There is no omega house in the Cloud Recesses_, Sizhui thought, frightened.

_There was_, Jiang Wanyin's voice replied.

"You think he belongs to—"

"No," Lan Sizhui cut in.

Mo Xuanyu's eyebrows lifted in surprise; Sizhui pushed past the shame within him, past the fear and confusion which had lingered in his belly since he had come back home after the hunt in Dafan and looked at Lan Qiren, at his sect leader, and not had the courage to ask them for the truth.

If only Hanguang-Jun had been there. Sizhui was never afraid to ask him anything.
"No," he said again, emboldened by the thought of his mentor's teachings. "I would never hurt him. Jingyi doesn't belong to anyone but himself."

Mo Xuanyu scoffed, "Of course you—"

"No! I would never. He's," his words faltered, knocked together and apart, but Sizhui clenched his teeth and said, "he's like a brother to me. I've known him since he was so little, I could hold him with one arm."

He had, so many times, in those days at the Recesses that followed the fuzzy and mud-like images of his past. He had held the baby Lan Jingyi when he could do nothing but cry and ask to be fed or changed. He had crawled with him on the grass next to the koi pond. He had held his hands as he took his first shaking steps.

He had seen Lan Jingyi speak and run and grow, seen him join his side in Lan Qiren's classes and smile as widely as any of them, seen him win his first praising words from the man on the day he first held a bow and arrow. He had been the one to help him train until he was the best archer of Gusulan, second only to their sect leader.

It was Lan Sizhui whom Jingyi had gone to, weeks ago, after feeling the first aches of fever. It was Lan Sizhui who had walked him to Lan Xichen, telling him not to worry, that nothing would change now.

"He's my brother," Sizhui said, blinking back tears. "I would never hurt him."

He looked Mo Xuanyu in the eyes again, ready to yell at him, to argue until his point was made, but Mo Xuanyu was the one now who seemed reduced to silence. The face he was making then was unlike anything Sizhui had seen of him yet.

Then a high-pitched scream came from outside, and the both of them turned as one to look at the open window.

It was the voice of the girl-spirit. Sizhui chased the conversation from his mind and ran back to the shed, Mo Xuanyu hot on his heels.

"She's back!" Jingyi was yelling now.

He already looked better than he did a few minutes ago: his face was red from the spicy congee, but the stuttering of his breathing was gone, and his voice had regained strength. Sizhui ran to his side, almost running into Jin Ling outright, as Mo Xuanyu pushed away one of the Jin sect boys who was taking fearful looks through an opening in the wall.

"She's been following and cursing us," Jin Ling told him, "she hasn't stopped screaming at us to get out."

She did so again in that high and terrifying voice: Get out! Get out of here!

"Are you sure she's a spirit?" Mo Xuanyu asked.

"What else could she be?"

"Why don't you take a look at her, then."

Jin Ling froze under the stares of all nine of them. The shed had quieted so much that any intake of air felt like enough to make the wet wood creak and tremble; the boy grabbed Suihua's pomme
again and glared at all of them in turn.

"I'm not scared," he declared.

"Good," Mo Xuanyu replied evenly. "Then come and look."

Jin Ling looked at his feet, than at Lan Jingyi on the floor, and walked toward Mo Xuanyu.

Mo Xuanyu stepped aside agreeably once the Jin heir was level with him. He gestured to the hole in the wall good-naturedly, his half-smile unfaltered even under the furious glare Jin Ling gave him.

Jin Ling looked through the hole. A second later, he jumped back in fright.

Most of the girls and boys around jumped with him, so taken were they with the mystery of the ghost who had not stopped circling them. Mo Xuanyu stepped away from the wall he was leaning against and asked, "Scared?"

"Not," Jin Ling muttered, obviously lying.

"It's because it's scary that you should look. Come now, tell me what you saw."


"Not bad, but not enough."

Watching Jin Ling be so offended was almost amusing, but Sizhui was too shaken still from his earlier conversation to smile at it. Mo Xuanyu looked at him as he asked, "Anyone else want to try?"

It must be a test, Sizhui thought.

Mo Xuanyu did not look so accusatory now, but his eyes on Sizhui still felt heavy. Judgmental. Asking him to look at the ghost outside must be his way of testing Sizhui's claims.

So Sizhui squeezed Jingyi's shoulder and rose, walking to the man's side. He did not meet his eyes, though he felt them on him, and with them the weight of expectation.

He cares about Jingyi, he told himself.

If Mo Xuanyu cared not about Lan Jingyi, then he would not have confronted Sizhui so. The thought was all it took to make Sizhui bend the neck and look through the coin-sized hole that weather had worn out of the rough wooden wall.

He saw nothing at first expect for the remains of the city: dusty and greyed, wild with grass and moss crawling over the paths and rocks. The night was full now above all of their heads, and moonlight did not shine well through the mist and clouded sky. Lan Sizhui did not see the girl-spirit until she moved against the backdrop of black and grey. His heart seized with fright at the sight of her—skinny and bloody and looking at him with unseeing eyes—but he did not pull back.

He made himself look at her. He saw the blood which Jin Ling had mentioned staining her sand-colored robes, though he could see no wounds on her. She was standing only a few yards away, her milky eyes fixed onto his through the small hole, and Sizhui saw her draw back her shoulders as she opened her mouth to yell.

"Get out!"

She was shaking as she said it, over and over and over again, unrelenting. He thought for the first
time since glimpsing her earlier that she could not be older than Jingyi was. He heard the gasps between her screams, the despair with which she screamed them.

The gasps…

"She's alive," Sizhui said, disbelieving.

It could not be; they had seen nothing but corpses within Yi City, nothing but walking cadavers and the half-dead old woman whose house they were occupying, and this girl looked dead. Her face was pale enough to seem bloodness, her eyes devoid of life.

And yet, Mo Xuanyu did not correct him when he pulled away from the wall. He nodded once in assent, his arms crossed over his chest and his mouth absent a smile.

"Alive?" Ouyang Zizhen exclaimed.

Immediately he was on his feet, though he stumbled weakly, and made his way to the hole in the wall. He stuck his entire face against it when he looked, so that his nose was crushed against wood and making his own gasps audible.

"She's breathing!" he said. "Lan Jingyi, come look."

Jingyi was only too eager to follow.

Fear made way for relief, then confusion. The boys and girls in the shed started murmuring again, and their hands loosened around the pommels of their swords. Sizhui saw Jingyi squeeze against Zizhen to look as well, heard him say, "She's pretty."

Jin Ling huffed disgustedly.

"Her eyes are quite wide and lovely," Ouyang Zizhen told Mo Xuanyu. "The shape of her face as well."

"We have a romantic," Mo Xuanyu replied in very dry humor. "Now that we've established that the girl is alive, I suggest we invite her in."

Tension immediately spread through the room again.

"Invite her in?" Jin Ling said, always eager to backtalk. "She's been harassing us for hours."

"She must have something to say."

"Yes, get out, we heard it the first five hundred times!"

But Mo Xuanyu was not listening. Already he was walking past the furious Jin Ling, passing by the alpha girl who had not stopped throwing him distrustful glances, and grabbing the door of the shed with both hands.

The girl was standing behind it when he opened it.

All of them jumped again—she looked so frightening, with her bloodless eyes and face, with her rough robes bloodstained so—but Mo Xuanyu showed no sign of surprise. "Good evening, miss," he told her. "You had something you wanted to tell us?"

The girl only glared at him.
She took three steps into the shed. Almost as one, everyone around Lan Sizhui stepped back in fear. It only seemed to make her more frustrated and angry; her teeth showed between her lips when she clenched them, and her fists balled by her sides and shook violently.

"You have to leave," she said.

Her voice was a lot deeper when she was not screaming, but it remained rough and breezy, as if she were fighting herself for the words to come out. Her lips grew red and wet with blood under Sizhui's very eyes. Droplets fell onto the front of her robes, widening the stain already there, and she said: "You have to go. He'll kill y—"

She stopped and put both hands to her lips, her eyes tightly closed against pain. Red seeped in-between her fingers and rolled slowly down her sleeves.

"A muting curse," Mo Xuanyu murmured. "You have been fighting it all along?"

The girl could not speak anymore. She nodded her head.

"This can't be true," Jingyi said to Mo Xuanyu. He looked shocked and unsettled. "I've never seen anyone bleed out of a muting curse."

"That is because your clan has taught you not to struggle against them, as they go away after a few minutes anyway," Mo Xuanyu answered. "But this is not as simple as the Lan clan's infamous discipline spell."

He turned his back to them entirely. Lan Sizhui could not see the face he was making now, though he imagined it to be less severe.

"What is your name?" Mo Xuanyu asked her.

The girl took her hands away. Her lips looked painted with blood, and some of it had smudged around her cheeks and chin. "A-Qing," she replied weakly.

"A-Qing," Mo Xuanyu repeated. "You've been very brave, haven't you, trying to protect them all this while."

A-Qing's eyes filled with tears.

She did not look like a fierce spirit anymore. Not even with the fresh blood over her clothes or the odd whiteness of her eyes, not even when she shook again as if possessed. She only looked exhausted.

She opened her bleeding mouth again and whispered, "Get out."

"We will," Mo Xuanyu said. He extended a hand toward her.

She took it immediately, mindless of her own state or status, despite the charred wood scent which marked her as alpha.

"I can't undo the curse on you," Mo Xuanyu told her. His hand seemed so very big around hers; his thumb was stroking the back of it in time with her shudders, as if trying to soothe a frightened animal. "But I know a way that we can talk without it hurting you. It might be uncomfortable for you, it might bring back painful memories, but it won't hurt you. I promise."

A-Qing cried and nodded her head, looking a second away from crumbling.
Mo Xuanyu lifted his other hand; with the tip of a glowing finger, he touched her forehead.

Wei Wuxian had no idea how long he spent in A-Qing's memories.

It was a painful place to be. Her life had been difficult from the moment she was born with white eyes, and she had struggled through theft and lying and through various streets in various towns. Not once had she known true happiness until the monk Xiao Xingchen had shown up in her life and protected her.

Those years were sweet and bathed in another glow. There was no room for objectivity within the confines of one's mind, but Wei Wuxian thought that even without the distorted perception of happiness which the girl assigned to that period of company and conversation, he would have found it kind. Warm. Xiao Xingchen spoke to her as no one had before, held her as no one had before. His companionship, Wei Wuxian felt, was the one thing she prized above everything else.

His anger and her own were one when he saw what he had to.

Waking up from Empathy was no easy task. Wei Wuxian pulled himself out of it with the sound of Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi's voices, with the feeling of the girl's tears falling onto their linked hands. He made sure to make the transition between memory and present gentle, so as not to shock her. He made sure to squeeze her hand so that she would know he was okay and not feel the need to ask.

The curse on her was quite painful.

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian said, interrupting the calls for his name that kept echoing between the Lan boys and Jin Ling and—yes, he saw after opening his eyes, the tall boy who wore the Ouyang uniform and had been sick earlier.

He dropped A-Qing's hand. She sat on the floor right where she had stood, silent and empty of strength.

"Get her some of the congee," Wei Wuxian ordered Lan Sizhui. "She hasn't eaten all day."

The alpha boy was quick to react if nothing else, he thought ruefully, seeing him run to the kitchen. There was no time now to reflect on their earlier conversation and how the boy's answer had ached in all-new ways.

Wei Wuxian ignored the questions that the other children immediately threw at him. He let them speak over one another as he thought of his meeting with Xue Yang earlier and what he had seen within A-Qing's mind.

So the fierce corpse that Xue Yang had called earlier, which had managed to cut Wei Wuxian before Wen Ning could reach him, was Song Lan. Wei Wuxian had felt no sympathy for the man when he had shown up in the girl's memory: he was too looming and broad, too familiar in a way, and Wei Wuxian had not yet stooped so low as to mourn an alpha killed by an omega's hand.

Xiao Xingchen's fate was another matter entirely.

A fool, he thought, A-Qing's grief still hot on his breath.
A fool to know his enemy and yet decide to help him; a fool to touch him as he had in those instances. A-Qing had spied on them, to make Xue Yang’s violent eyes sweeten with obsession.

He could not hear Wen Ning or Song Lan’s battle now as much as he tried to listen. The silence in Yi City was like a thick substance, and the two corpses had taken their fight far from the funeral home at the end of the village and deep into the forest behind, on Wei Wuxian’s order. Xue Yang had vanished when Wei Wuxian had managed to escape.

It was only luck that had made him stumble upon the group of frightened children. He had only meant to take shelter in that shed himself as he thought of a way to escape. This would be much easier if he had waited for Lan Wangji’s return before following a murderer out of curiosity.

Wei Wuxian smiled, thinking of Lan Wangji. The man must have come back to the inn by now and realized that he was missing. 

Sorry, Lan Zhan.

Lan Sizhui had come back and kneeled by the girl near the door. The boy took the time to hand over a bowl of the congee and make sure she could hold it on her own; A-Qing slapped his hands away when he made to help her eat it. Once again, Lan Sizhui showed no sign of outrage or even negative sentiment. He was quite unlike any—

No, Wei Wuxian had better things to think about now than his shovel talk earlier. He did not need to linger on an alpha boy's fright, or on his words which were so familiar.

He's my brother.

He looked at A-Qing eating and felt his lips curl and smile as she reddened from the heat of the meal.

"None of you saw anyone else when you came here, did you?" he asked the group of children behind him.

Or rather, he asked Lan Jingyi; he had no interest in anyone else here except Jin Ling, and looking at Jin Ling brought its own load of pain.

Lan Jingyi shook his head. Much of his strength was back from the meal and the poison leaving him, and he looked as excited as the last time Wei Wuxian had met him. "We saw that old woman in the house," he said. "And, um, that girl, but no one else."

"When did you battle fierce corpses?"

"Right when we arrived in the city, senior Mo," said the Ouyang boy. Wei Wuxian looked at him briefly; he looked younger than Lan Sizhui, but his body was taller and broader already than those of his peers', and he seemed to have a way with words. Wei Wuxian thought that the faint beta-scent of grass in the room belonged to him. "Three of them attacked us at the entrance of the city, but they were slow and in such advanced state of death… We didn't think to be careful of poisoning."

Wei Wuxian nodded. "Corpse-poisoning is rare," he told them, "so I'm not surprised. Think of covering your airways the next time. And if one of you gets sick again, spicy food should clear the poison out in the first few hours."

There came a murmur of thanks, a few eager-to-learn looks, over the group. Even the alpha girl who kept clinging to her friend gave him something like a smile. Wei Wuxian ignored her.
"How do you know all this?" Jin Ling asked him, suspicious.

"I do read books," Wei Wuxian replied.

The boy only frowned harder. The red dot on his forehead moved with it. "You were always hanging to Little Uncle's shadow like a desperate—"

The roof opened above them.

Or rather, the roof of the shed was torn off of its walls with inhuman strength. Wei Wuxian had only the presence of mind to grab Jin Ling and push him out of the way of falling wood beams, and to check that Lan Sizhui and A-Qing on his other side were not injured either. He found the boy intact, although surprised, but then it was A-Qing he saw grab at the door of the shed and run outside in fear, her weeping eyes stuck to the figure which now stood by Wei Wuxian's side.

Song Lan's corpse had jumped in through the torn-open roof. He landed by Wei Wuxian's side without any sound, black-veined and empty-eyed, his black sword in one hand and the other wrapped around Wei Wuxian's shoulder. His hold was painless but inescapable, and Wei Wuxian could do nothing as his back was pushed to the dead man's front and the sword placed against his throat.

"There you are," came Xue Yang's near-agreeable voice. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

He was the one who jumped into the shed next. The oversweet scent of him was still so cloying, almost like taste on Wei Wuxian's tongue. It did not matter that Lan Jingyi had come to maturity; the fresh berryscent that clung to him was gone in a second, erased by the heavy smell of flowers.

Wei Wuxian wondered if he had smelled so strongly too when he was the one ravaged by guilt.

Song Lan's hands tightened on him. The front of his body pushed against Wei Wuxian's back as he marched him to Xue Yang.

It did not matter that he was long dead, that he smelled of nothing except decay—Wei Wuxian had seen and heard him through A-Qing's memories, had smelled the firesmoke on him as he did on the girl, and it seemed to him that those were different hands, that this was a different body, pushing him onto the grass until he tasted dirt in his mouth.

He did not realize that his movements had stopped, that his eyes had closed, until his nose once again stung from the smell of guihua flowers. Xue Yang was standing before him and putting the white sword to his neck, pushing Song Lan's hands away so he could hold Wei Wuxian in place instead.

"I'll take it from here," he told the corpse in vicious hatred. "You go take care of the Ghost General now, mongrel."

Song Lan had no consciousness, no will to reply with. He simply obeyed his master's orders and left. Although a sword held by Xue Yang was just as much of a threat against Mo Xuanyu's frail neck, the hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder was almost bracing.

"What did you do with Wen Ning?" Wei Wuxian asked.

It was better than to focus on why, exactly, the touch of a murderer felt more comforting than that of a dead man's.

"Wen Ning?" Jin Ling's voice echoed behind them.
He had forgotten all about the group inside the shed.

"Oh, we have quite the public here," Xue Yang said, turning Wei Wuxian around with him to face the nine children looking at them with wide eyes. "And from so many sects, too! I haven't seen cultivators from Gusu in many years."

"I know you," Jin Ling said then, pointing at him with a finger. "You're that Xue Yang that Little Uncle locked up! I thought you were dead."

Xue Yang bowed deeply, forcing Wei Wuxian down with him. Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes.

"A pleasure to see you again, young master Jin Ling," Xue Yang said. His voice dripped with sarcasm. "You've grown a lot these past few years. Does dear Madam Jin still wet her bed at night in fear of me?"

Jin Ling turned as red as he did when he ate the congee; he opened his mouth to reply, but Wei Wuxian spoke over him.

"Jin Ling, you take them outside now," he said.

"But—"

"Young master Mo," Lan Sizhui said, his bright eyes wide open with concern. "What about you?"


Wei Wuxian ignored him in spite of the bright, bright worry which those words lit in him.

"Lan Sizhui," he called through clenched teeth.

The boy's body straightened, attentive. Wei Wuxian shoved away his dislike in order to ask what he must.

"You take those kids outside. Cover your mouths and noses and get out of this city."

"But—"

"Do as I say. Don't make me regret counting on you."

Those words did the trick, as Wei Wuxian thought they might. Lan Sizhui nodded in determination and grabbed onto Lan Jingyi's arm, guiding the seven other youths outside the shed with him. Many threw glances at Xue Yang in fear, some even in disgust. Xue Yang simply watched them go, humming a little song, his fingers dug deeply into Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

At least the white sword had not been sharpened in a while. Its blunt edge rested over Wei Wuxian's neck and risked nothing more than to bruise him unless Xue Yang chose to swing it with the strength of his back.

He had another sword on him, however: a short blade hung from his hip, the pommel of which sang with spiritual energy as it knocked into Wei Wuxian's back.

"This is Xiao Xingchen's sword," he told Xue Yang once all the children were gone.

Lan Sizhui had been the last to disappear from the frame of the door in spite of Wei Wuxian's orders. Wei Wuxian could still feel the hopelessness of his gaze before the door had closed.
"Yes," Xue Yang said amiably. "I find it rather agreeable to me."

"I couldn't see that well through the girl's memory. Did you kill him with it or with your own?"

Xue Yang was silent, now.

"There's nothing I can do for you, Xue Yang," Wei Wuxian said softly. "Xiao Xingchen died with no regrets or hopes. His soul is long gone to where you can't reach him."

"There are ways," Xue Yang replied.

"None that he would approve of or find happiness with. If you tried to bring him back the way that Mo Xuanyu brought me back, that man would simply kill himself again. You know this."

If the monk Xiao Xingchen, Baoshan Sanren's disciple, A-Qing's unfailing protector, was forced against his will to occupy the body of another… He was not like Wei Wuxian, for whom selfishness may as well be a second layer of skin. He was not like Xue Yang.

Xiao Xingchen had never had to feel that his life was half-lived. He had never been jailed, never been locked up as Xue Yang must have before the Jin sect leader abolished omega houses.

"Did you spend a long time in there?" Wei Wuxian asked.

He knew his voice was sorrowful; he knew, as well, that Xue Yang would understand his meaning.

The hand on Wei Wuxian's shoulder tightened until he felt the press of Xue Yang's blunt nails. The blade at his throat dug a little deeper into his skin. "Eighteen years," Xue Yang replied.

Then he was a man, already, when the great sects elected to set him free. His whole childhood gone without feeling the sun on his skin, his teenage years behind him without the freedom to wade into water, a sibling's hand in his.

"I always wondered," Xue Yang said.

His words faltered. Wei Wuxian waited him out.

"We are not that far from Yiling. I know that you went far and wide, I know that you went all the way to Qishan to open the houses there. Why…"

It seemed it was Jiang Cheng's voice he was hearing from far back in the past: You can't free them all, Wei Wuxian.

"I knew your name even when I did not know anything," Xue Yang said, his voice only a thin edge of anger. "I worshipped you. When I was living in Golden Carp Tower, when Jin Guangyao allowed me access to your writings and inventions, I thought I understood you. But Chang Cian—" his grip became painful, even the stub of his pinky finger bruising, "—had not the strength to stop the Yiling Patriarch even with his whole house behind him. So why did you never come for us?"

"I stopped after Jin Guangshan threatened me," Wei Wuxian replied.

"You spat in his face."

"I did." That memory was as fond to him now as it had been then, seeing Jin Guangshan's eyes widen with fury and his red cheeks catch light under a layer of saliva. "But the Burial Mounds already counted so many of us. I couldn't risk their safety, not with the Jin clan and all its associates laying siege."
Xue Yang took in his words, breathing hard against the side of Wei Wuxian's neck. The smell of him was near nauseating, the way that people's sometimes were in that village in the mountains, when grief awoke in them and made them unable to sleep.

Those days, Wen Qing had worked herself to the bone, preparing medicine until her own hands bled. Still she would lay them on Wei Wuxian's arm when the stillness struck him; still she would assist him into the long hours of night, until he had a voice again to tell her to rest.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. In the end, he had been unable to protect them as well.

He let himself be led out of the house by Xue Yang. Not even the cool night air could rid Yi City of its odor of death, and this must be the reason he was so maudlin, he thought. This must be why thoughts of that village, of Wen Qing, flew around in his mind with every step he took. He did not miss anyone from his former life in the way he missed her.

"You'll bring him back," Xue Yang was muttering again, his brief bout of sanity gone just like dust on the wind. "You'll bring him back."

When they reached the front steps of the funeral home, he dropped Wei Wuxian with a cry.

Wei Wuxian was quick to make use of his sudden freedom and step away from Xue Yang. He found him bowed and holding his head, blood seeping between his fingers, fragments of what must have been a clay pot laid on the ground around him.

"A-Qing," Xue Yang moaned, and never before had he said a name with such hatred.

The girl A-Qing stood above the little promontory that the home was built on. She had another clay pot in hand, which she threw at Xue Yang too. Her bloody face ran with tears.

Wei Wuxian had seen the moment Xue Yang had cursed her to be silent or suffer; he had seen through her the memories of roaming around the empty streets of Yi City, yelling at cultivators and common folk to get out, get out, get out.

There is a bad man here. He will kill you. Get out, run for your life.

"Why do you get in my way?" Xue Yang roared at her. His head still bled from the first hit, but he had managed to avoid the second pot easily. "Do you wish to join him so badly, girl? I can cut your tongue if you want, cut your eyes so you're blind for real, you little liar."

A-Qing's bloody mouth opened. "You're the liar," she croaked at him, defying the spell in spite of just how much it hurt.

Xue Yang was not holding Xiao Xingchen's sword when he ran to her, but his own; and the edge of that blade was not blunted by neglect at all.

It would not have mattered anyway. No blade, blunted or not, could measure up to Bichen.

Lan Wangji dropped in from the sky as the girl cowered and fell. He was as silent as shadow and as bright as sunlight, catching the edge of Xue Yang's rust-colored blade with his own, an expanse of white against the black and grey of the city. Wei Wuxian breathed in for the first time in hours, sandalwood caught in his mouth and lungs and soothing the ache in his heart.

Xue Yang must have been a great swordsman, once. Even with grief having thinned his body and made his hands shake, he held his own against Lan Wangji in a way Wei Wuxian had seldom seen. Not during his stay in the Cloud Recesses, not during the Sunshot Campaign when he fought by the
man's side.

But Xue Yang faltered. His steps shook. His shoulder bent under one more parry, and Lan Wangji disarmed him completely by cutting off his whole hand.

He had already turned his back to his opponent by the time Xue Yang fell to the ground and cried in pain, holding the stump of his wrist with his right hand and shaking through his whole body. Wei Wuxian hurried up the steps of the funeral home and hurried to A-Qing's side, who had fallen unconscious.

"Don't kill him," he told Lan Wangji, who was looking at him.

A-Qing had hit her head when she fell. Wei Wuxian laid her on her side to check the swollen gash through her dirty hair, but although it bled liberally, in that way head wounds tended to, he felt nothing more than a bump under his fingers. She looked sickly, but he had not felt a fever on her during Empathy. He felt none now as he briefly touched her forehead again.

Another silhouette emerged from behind the funeral home; Wen Ning was back, looking none the worse for wear, dragging behind himself the dead body of Song Lan. It was not moving anymore.

Wei Wuxian rose to his feet again.

Xue Yang had stopped whimpering, though his face was bloodless, his gaze heavy and confused with the pain. Wei Wuxian saw Lan Wangji try and kneel by him to bandage his wound; he saw the fear which lit up Xue Yang's face and made him push the alpha away bodily.

That fear was familiar. That fear was something Wei Wuxian could feel in his own throat, in his own heart.

"I'll do it, Lan Zhan," he said.

Lan Wangji looked at him in silence before offering him the cloth he was holding.

Xue Yang did not push Wei Wuxian away. He allowed him to sit on the ground and make a garrote out of the belt he was wearing, so as to stopper the bleeding. He let Wei Wuxian wind the cloth around his cut-off wrist and tie it up tightly with nothing more than a hitch in his breaths. The white cloth pinkened immediately.

"The Seal," Wei Wuxian murmured once he was certain that Xue Yang would not die of blood loss.

Xue Yang laughed weakly. "I fixed it for you," he said. "Everything... I fixed it for you, Wei Wuxian. For when you would come back."

"I know," Wei Wuxian said.

Xue Yang's right hand grabbed Wei Wuxian's sleeve and left blood stains on the fabric. They shone red-on-black in the faint light of the moon. "So you have to help me," Xue Yang murmured, fevered and lost. "I fixed it for you, so you have to help me, too."

"I can't bring Xiao Xingchen back."

Wei Wuxian did not think Xue Yang had noticed the tears running down his own face. "Take it," he was saying, grabbing from the pouch at his waist the two halves of the Stygian Tiger Seal. He pushed them into Wei Wuxian's hand, shaking, closing Wei Wuxian's own fingers around them so that he may be sure that he was holding them. "Take it, take it, I fixed it, so please, help m—"
An arrow stabbed into the ground right where their hands were linked; only Lan Wangji's speed when he pulled the both of them apart prevented either of them from being hurt.

In his surprise, Wei Wuxian dropped one half of the Seal.

Another shadow had emerged on the steps up the funeral home. A silhouette in black devoid of any scent, wearing the same ghost mask that had appeared before them in Qinghe's funeral site. They were quick on their feet, quick to avoid Bichen's glare and throw themselves to the ground in order to pick up the half-Seal.

Wei Wuxian had no time at all to stop them. The silhouette made as if to lunge at him next and steal the other half from his hand; Lan Wangji was quicker this time, stepping in-between them with his sword held high, his face a mask of its own, showing nothing but steel.

The masked person burned a talisman and vanished.

Silence reigned over them for another second; then Xue Yang screamed and howled, his lone hand digging into soil as he shook over the ground.

"No!" he yelled. It was the same despair he had used as he spoke to A-Qing, the same hopelessness in his voice multiplied thousandfold. "Come back, give it back—"

"Xue Yang," Wei Wuxian said.

It was his robes that Xue Yang was gripping now, forcing him to the ground again so that their eyes could meet, and Wei Wuxian saw nothing in his other than terror. "I'll make you another one," he begged, "even if it takes me another five years. I'll make you another one, I'll make a hundred, so you have to—"

"Xue Yang!"

The sound of his name finally seemed to get through him. He loosened his hold on Wei Wuxian's robes and let his dirty hand fall to the cold dirt path.

"It doesn't matter if I have the Stygian Tiger Seal," Wei Wuxian said. "Xiao Xingchen is gone. There is nothing you, or I, can do to bring him back to life."

"But you could," Xue Yang cried. "You're the only one who could."

If Wei Wuxian had met Xue Yang during those years of his youth, before the Lotus Pier had burned, perhaps he would have tried. Perhaps he would have researched a way, or given to Xue Yang's demand and made some poor soul call Xiao Xingchen back from the dead to condemn him to living.

He was not that child anymore, however. He knew better now than to attempt the impossible.

Wei Wuxian put a hand over Xue Yang's shoulder. The man looked at him with his mouth open, with tear tracks leaving pale lines into the dirt greying his face. He looked like a child; he looked like Wen Yueying did when Wei Wuxian lived with her, and she had exhausted herself crying for sweets that Linfeng refused her.

"What do I do?" Xue Yang asked him.

Wei Wuxian had no doubt, then, that he would obey anything.

He looked at A-Qing lying prone a few feet from them. Lan Wangji was by her side and checking
on her, making sure, perhaps, that she had not been hurt when the masked man attacked them. She looked unharmed but from the blood on her lips and the lump at the back of her head.

"You move on," Wei Wuxian said.

"Never," Xue Yang replied instantly. And then again, as if to make sure the whole world would hear him: "Never."

Wei Wuxian turned his eyes away. "Then simmer in misery until the day you die. You won't find what you're looking for even if you gain immortality."

Xue Yang's hand once more grabbed his sleeve. "Do not pity me," he ordered. "Not you."

"You are pitiful. It's only natural."

"I did not pity you when I learned about that child, Wei Wuxian."

The blood in Wei Wuxian's veins turned to ice.

There was a new light in Xue Yang's eye, a new edge of cruelty. But he seemed satisfied to have Wei Wuxian look at him again, and he did not utter another word.

"Undo the curse on A-Qing," Wei Wuxian said when he found his voice again. It felt to him as though an hour had passed in that heavy and cold silence. "She's been hurt enough."

"How that girl manages to charm every man she meets…"

"Just do it, Xue Yang."

Xue Yang's face was still slack with despair, still marked and bruised by the strength of his grief. Still, he lifted his only hand, shaking, and split the air twice with his fingers until the snapping sound of cursebreak echoed.

Behind them, A-Qing let out a sigh. She was still asleep, Lan Wangji kneeling next to her.

"You'll be the one to curse her when she talks your ears off," Xue Yang muttered with no heat.

He did not move from his spot on the ground when Wei Wuxian stood up. The weight of the half-Seal in his hand was familiar and painful; Wei Wuxian put it into the belt looped around his waist and tried to ignore the slithering and murmuring of a thousand souls.

"You wanted to know what to do with your life," he said.

Xue Yang looked up at him, empty-eyed.

"You can't have Xiao Xingchen back," Wei Wuxian told him. Even through that much stupor and weakness, Xue Yang's face found the strength to tense with misery at the sound of the man's name. "But there are things he left behind. Things you could take care of to honor his memory."

"Nothing," Xue Yang replied, "is worth as much as he is."

"He did not think that way. Not about you, and not about her."

Wei Wuxian had never met Xiao Xingchen who was his sect-uncle. He had never met the monk Xiao Xingchen who roamed the lands with Song Lan in charity. He had only glimpsed him through the memories of a teenage girl, leaving candy on her bedsheets to wake up to, kissing Xue Yang by a
dying fire as she spied in envy. He knew, however, that Xiao Xingchen had not once thought himself more important than the little girl in his care or the bitter enemy he picked up from the side of a road and fell in love with.

"You look after her," Wei Wuxian told the shattered man at his feet whose fate had been fabricated by his own hands. "You do not hurt her again. You make sure she survives and finds happiness, and perhaps Xiao Xingchen will forgive you in another life."

For a second, Xue Yang said nothing. Then he chuckled and laughed, and his laughter sounded like sobs.

*You're one to talk, Wei Wuxian*, he must be thinking. *This is some order, coming from you.*

But his laughing and crying were too loud for words, and so Wei Wuxian had only the voices in his head to tell him to feel shame.

Silence settled over the dead city. No wind rose to wash the air of decay, and no pine creaked from the forest near them where Wen Ning had fought. He was still standing there at their periphery, Song Lan's corpse by his feet, his unblinking eyes fixed onto his master. It did not look as though he had fully awoken yet from whatever spell had undone Wei Wuxian's work.

Only Lan Wangji moved within all that silence; only Lan Wangji stood by Wei Wuxian's side and touched his bleeding hand.

---

Wen Ning buried Song Lan in the ill-tended garden behind the funeral home. He buried Xiao Xingchen, too, once Xue Yang showed no sign of stopping him from taking his body. Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian stayed until A-Qing woke up, long enough to tell her that the curse had been lifted from her and to show her where her mentor was laid to rest. She did not cry when she bowed above his freshly-dug grave. She left for a few minutes and then came back with wild flowers in hand; she spread them over the wet dirt so that life would grow there, and she fled from them all with one last glare Xue Yang's way.

Xue Yang did not move until she had gone away. He rose when her footsteps stopped echoing and vanished into the dark trees that bordered the garden, holding his hurt wrist to his chest, Xieo Xingchen's white sword clutched into his one remaining hand.

"How did you find us?" Wei Wuxian asked Lan Wangji once they had gone back to the inn.

The rest of the night felt like a dream. The tomb where the spirit of the saber rested, telling them the name of the corpse which they had carried all this way. Wei Wuxian could hardly even think of it.

How odd, to think that only hours ago he had eaten dinner and been talked at by a rueful alpha woman. To think that he had shared wine with Xue Yang and not known, or felt, all that he did now.

Shame was dug into him like a knife. It pulled at his belly like the aches of fever, like Lan Wangji's overwhelming presence had in the Xuanwu cave, when he had kneeled on his injured leg and faced a wall for days.

Wei Wuxian was seated at the small tea table in the room Lan Wangji had bought for the night. Lan Wangji himself had made tea and set it before him. He answered as he took place on the table's other
"I met Sizhui at the entrance of Yi City. He told me what happened."

"Had you been looking for me for a long time already?"

Lan Wangji did not answer, but Wei Wuxian saw the way that his mouth tensed, the way that his tired eyes moved.

"I'm sorry," he said. "For worrying you."

"You are free to go as you wish."

Wei Wuxian laughed dryly. He took his cup of tea in hand, too exhausted to even fetch the scent-masking paste from the pouch at his waist, thou he should. Only hours ago, he had called Lan Jingyi foolish for not using it.

It seemed his hypocrisy knew no boundaries tonight.

"Lan Sizhui is quite the young cultivator," he muttered, looking at the green tea in the white cup, at the dregs of dried leaves in the bottom which floated every way he moved. "Smart and responsible. I'm sure you must approve of him greatly."

He could not hide the bitterness in his voice. Lan Wangji said nothing.

No. He would not think of Lan Sizhui's declaration, not now. "Although, I find I enjoy Lan Jingyi's company more," Wei Wuxian went on.

"He is like you."

"Obviously," Wei Wuxian chuckled.

But Lan Wangji shook his head. "No," he said, oddly serious. "He is like you in spirit."

Bright and funny Lan Jingyi, with his archer's calluses, with his sweet berryscent. Lan Jingyi who could plaster his body to his beta friend's to peer at ghosts through a hole in the wall, who could walk without shame after his maturity had come, who could touch Lan Sizhui and be touched by him with no fear.

If Lan Wangji thought Wei Wuxian was ever as bright as this boy, then he held him in too much esteem. Then he was blinded and foolish and needed to be told the truth.

"There was," Wei Wuxian started.

His throat locked up. Words caged within his mouth felt like sharp little blades, and Wei Wuxian thought he would taste blood soon, feel his tongue cut and his lips bleed like A-Qing's had under the muting curse.

"There was a child," he forced out. The cup shook within his hold, spilling tea over the tabletop, and were it not for Lan Wangji's fingers taking hold of his wrist, Wei Wuxian would have dropped it.

"There was a child in Yiling."

Lan Wangji's hand wrapped around his and held it tightly.

Wei Wuxian wept has he had not even when Jiang Yanli held him and cried with him. It felt like waves spilling overshere, like a river flooded with rain and landslides. Each hiccupsing breath he forced in was followed by more tears, wetting his face, wetting his clothes. He rubbed the sleeve of
his free hand so many times over his eyes that it grew drenched, that it left salt over his lips when he did it again. He shook with the strength of his sobs. His hand became clammy within Lan Wangji's grasp, slippery. Lan Wangji never let go.

And shame, shame swelled through him like a saturated lake, rendering his blood to water, to tears. Shame and anger such that he had not felt since Wen Qing had torn the golden core out of him.

"Don't look at me, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian begged in-between two heaving sobs.

In the Xuanwu's cave, on the mountain path where Jiang Cheng had stabbed him, amidst the golden rocks where Jin Zixuan had died, Wei Wuxian's name on his lips… Wei Wuxian could think of nothing worse than to be seen. Than to be watched and known.

"I won't," Lan Wangji replied.

His fingers stroked Wei Wuxian's, wetted themselves with the tea spilled over them. They felt to Wei Wuxian like the only source of warmth in the world.

Chapter End Notes

So... The Untamed, huh
Interlude 2

Chapter Notes

Warnings: mild description of violent murder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Interlude 2

When Lan Jingyi was still very young, he had not often wondered about the reason why master Qiren refused to allow him outside of the Cloud Recesses. He had not either thought deeply of the distance put between him and the other disciples. He was a member of the clan, even if his parents had passed away in his youth, cousins of Hanguang-Jun and sect leader Lan Xichen and closer to master Qiren than them both. Lan Jingyi had grown with them until sickness had taken them away. Then he had joined the clan disciple quarters where no child but Sizhui lived, and he had not felt so lonely.

Lan Sizhui had never allowed him to feel lonely. During his first weeks in the quarters, when confusion and grief were still heavy on his heart, Sizhui had talked to him and spent time with him, often choosing to sleep in Jingyi's room rather than his own. This way, he could be there if Jingyi woke and shivered. If Jingyi cried.

As a child, Jingyi had taken the outer disciples' distance to be nothing more than this: their status as outer disciples, and his as a clan member.

He attended the same classes and underwent the same training, but he slept in finer rooms than they did. He played in the same courtyard where fat fish swam in ponds, but he could access the back of the mountain, where Hanguang-Jun raised white rabbits. They could not.

Sometimes, he even saw Hanguang-Jun there, coming out of his secluded home. Hanguang-Jun would nod and greet him. He would speak to Sizhui in that soft voice reserved for Sizhui alone. He would pat Sizhui's shoulder, and his severe face would grow kind.

Jingyi could remember a time he had felt jealous of Sizhui's proximity with Hanguang-Jun—the same time he had come to understand that he and Sizhui were different, and come to resent it.

To this day, that time was the most painful of his life.

But Hanguang-Jun had found him alone in the mountain one day. Jingyi had gone there for peace and a place to cry, after yelling at Sizhui for several minutes and watching the older boy's face shatter with sorrow and confusion. It wasn't Sizhui's fault, he knew, that Jingyi had started feeling eyes and whispers on his skin when he walked around the Recesses. It wasn't his fault that master Qiren had taken him aside that morning for the third day in a row, and lectured him about his manners, and told him that he would bring shame to Gusulan.

Yelling was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses, and so Jingyi had run after yelling at Sizhui, and come to the back of the mountain to yell some more on his own.
His sight had still been blurry with tears when Hanguang-Jun found him. There was dirt on his white uniform from sitting on the cool and dew-wet forest ground—another thing he should be punished for later. Lan Jingyi's sobs had abated and left him tired and hollow. He felt that a great hole had opened in his chest, and guilt squirmed in his stomach. He did not notice that anyone else was there until he blinked tiredly and looked above the white rabbit that had been eating grass near his foot.

He saw a tall silhouette dressed in silver and white; he hurried to his feet and wiped his face furiously.

"Hanguang-Jun," he stuttered, embarrassed and frightened. "I, um, good morning."

He bowed, hoping that no dirt showed on the front of his robes. He knew that Hanguang-Jun had been a supervisor for punishments in the past; Lan Qiren often told the younger disciples so, when he thought they might try to go to the forest and bother the man.

Hanguang-Jun approached him in slowly and silently. The white rabbits ran around his ankles like they did no one else's, and it seemed to Lan Jingyi that each of the man's steps was calculated so as not to step on them by accident.

"Sizhui is not with you," he told Jingyi.

Guilt and sorrow once more took Jingyi by the throat. He bit his lip and replied, "No, I came alone. I'm sorry for bothering you."

"You're not bothering me."

Jingyi was so used to being thought a bother, by the outer disciples and by Lan Qiren, that he found himself without words to reply with.

He expected Hanguang-Jun to go on his way. Perhaps back to the top of the mountain in that small house where he lived, or perhaps downward to meet his brother. But Hanguang-Jun stayed where he stood and bent over the ground to pick up one of the rabbits. His wide sleeves brushed over the wet grass, but he showed no sign of caring.

In his hands, the rabbit was very small. It squirmed and then relaxed when Hanguang-Jun touched its head right between its long ears, blinking its red eyes open and closed.

Lan Jingyi wondered what it felt like to be Lan Sizhui, and to feel these wide hands squeeze his shoulder.

"You are upset," Hanguang-Jun said. He was looking at the rabbit in his hands.

"No," Jingyi replied. And then, afraid that this would be another slip of his manners for Lan Qiren to berate: "No, I am not, Hanguang-Jun. Thank you for your concern."

He bowed once more with his hands before himself.

"I heard you crying, and I came."

Jingyi's face grew hot with embarrassment. He could hear the blood pumping past his ears and jaw, and he was certain that should he touch his cheeks, his fingers would be warm.

"I—I'm sorry," he said, staring at the ground and hoping it would swallow him whole.

How humiliating! He had yelled at Sizhui, probably hurting him deeply, and now Hanguang-Jun
was here asking why he had cried. As if Jingyi had a reason to have been crying so loudly, when he was the one at fault. Master Qiren would surely make him copy the three thousand rules one more time when he learned.

"No apologies needed," said Hanguang-Jun.

Knowing he could not well spend the whole day bent in half, Jingyi straightened up. He still refused to meet Hanguang-Jun's eyes, and hoped with all his soul that the man would not notice how red and tearful he was.

The rabbit was laying still and blissed out in Hanguang-Jun's hands, its ears twitching faintly.

"I had a fight with Sizhui," Jingyi blurted out.

He wanted immediately to slap himself for it. What did Hanguang-Jun care about his childishness? What did Hanguang-Jun care about spats between children, when his cultivation was so high and respected, when he spent most of his days in seclusion?

But Hanguang-Jun showed no annoyance or boredom when Jingyi risked looking at him; indeed, he was looking back, and although his face was not as kind as when it was Sizhui he spoke to, it was not so severe either.

"Did he say something to hurt you?" Hanguang-Jun asked.

"No!" Jingyi yelled.

He forgot to feel shame for his attitude: he took a step toward Hanguang-Jun, embarrassment gone to make way for determination.

"No, he did not, Hanguang-Jun," he said. "I was the one who hurt him, I told him… I told him he couldn't understand, and that I didn't need his pity. He was only trying to comfort me after master Qiren lectured me for breaking the rules."

Hanguang-Jun nodded slowly, looking down the path behind Jingyi that led to the Cloud Recesses.

And then he said, "My uncle is still seeing the world through clouds and mist, after all this time."

Jingyi was too surprised to think of a reply.

Hanguang-Jun came to his side. The rabbit in his hands started squirming again, so he put it down and picked another one up. This one bit at his sleeve and then sat there, blissful.

"I was truly being unruly, Hanguang-Jun," Jingyi said belatedly. He didn't know why he felt that leaving Hanguang-Jun with the impression that he was faultless would be to lie. "Earlier today, I was uncouth to one of the guests from Lanling."

It was that time of year when disciples from many sects came to listen to master Qiren's lectures, and although Lan Jingyi was still a year too young to attend them himself, he saw the children in blue, purple, golden robes walk over the quiet yards and make the air thicken with chatter.

This year, a boy came from Lanlingjin whom Jingyi had the displeasure to meet while he was spending time with Sizhui. His name was Jin Ling.

"Young master Jin Ling called me by status instead of name, and I overreacted," Jingyi said sheepishly.
Not as much as Sizhui, who had grabbed the handle of his sword the second the word "omega" left Jin Ling's lips, but still.

The fact that Lan Qiren had punished him but not Sizhui was the reason he had grown mad at the other boy. For three days now, master Qiren had lectured Jingyi for answering Jin Ling's taunting and ignored Sizhui's own harsh attitude.

"So, I know that I was in the wrong. And I should not have yelled at Sizhui."

"Sometimes, it is okay to yell," Hanguang-Jun said.

Lan Jingyi was once again speechless.

He let out a small, panicked sound when Hanguang-Jun suddenly handed him the rabbit he was holding; the creature turned and struggled in the seconds Jingyi was holding it, but then Hanguang-Jun's hands were around his and helping him hold it right.

They were broad and warm. At the heel of Hanguang-Jun's right palm, which rested around Jingyi's left, he felt the tough bump of a callus left by sword-fighting. On each of his fingertips, hard little nubs spoke of years spent playing the guqin.

Since Jingyi's parents had died when he was still so young, no one had touched him but Sizhui.

He couldn't help the sudden warmth in his neck, the heat and wetness in his eyes. When Hanguang-Jun took his hands away, he had to restrain himself so that he would not chase after the contact.

"Sizhui does not understand everything," Hanguang-Jun told him in his calm and even voice.
"Though he tries."

It seemed that his words were one with the wind and the fluttering of leaves. That Hanguang-Jun may as well have become part of the forest itself, part of the bedrock and the trees.

Jingyi swallowed and said, "He is so smart, though."

"Some things can't be learned. Some things you know for being you, he will never understand."

Jingyi's heart swelled with pride.

Sizhui was so kind and so talented, loved by all who resided here, the pride of their generation. Jingyi loved him for it and envied him for it, and although most of the time envy was very far from his mind, occasionally, it nudged at his heart and embittered his words.

Now he felt as he did on the day he understood that he was a better archer than Sizhui: selfish and a little lonely, and yet, infinitely relieved.

"You should not fight, however," Hanguang-Jun told him.

"I will apologize to him, Hanguang-Jun," Lan Jingyi promised.

The perspective was not so terrifying anymore.

He said his goodbyes to the man after a minute of petting the rabbit in his hands. The animal would not sit still as he did when Hanguang-Jun was the one touching it, but it only bit Jingyi once, not deeply enough to hurt. Its fur was warm and soft. It breathed quickly and silently against Jingyi's palm, its little belly fluttering. After letting it go and watching it leap away, Jingyi started his trek down the mountainside.
He turned back only once, suddenly caught with the need to say *Thank you*, but Hanguang-Jun was not looking at him anymore.

He was looking up on the path that led to the old little house which Jingyi had seen only once. "Ah, *we can't go there,*" Sizhui had said after a second of looking at the small windows, at the oddly-heavy door which sealed its entrance. "*This is where Hanguang-Jun lives.*"

"*But you go there all the time,*" Jingyi had replied.

Sizhui had smiled and looked away and not given an answer.

Jingyi had thought then, in passing, that living here must be boring. Why so high up the mountain, where the winter must be cold and damp? Why in such a house, where the door looked so heavy to pull open and close, where the walls were blackened in places as if licked by fire?

Hanguang-Jun was looking up the mountain with his hand on his sword, regal and disciplined as any Lan clan member should be, the ideal which all children here were taught to model themselves after.

His face showed nothing but deep sadness.

---

The times Lan Xichen had been struck completely, entirely out of words could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

He was numb to the feeling of the little ivory cup he held. By all means the tea in it should still be hot enough for discomfort, but his fingers may as well have been made of a ghostly substance. They were not even warm.

Jin Guangyao stared at him from across the table.

Lan Xichen knew this study better, he felt, than his own back in Gusu. Since he had taken oath with Jin Guangyao and Nie Mingjue next to him in the ruins of the Nightless City, much of his time had been spent in Lanling, and even more so since Wangji had been stripped of his title and the duty had fallen to him.

But now the room swayed and twisted around him. Golden floorboards moved like water under him; rows of scrolls and books shelved on the walls flickered in candlelight; the very taste of the air seemed cold and diminished, and Jin Guangyao's woodsy scent with it.

"A-Yao," he said in shock.

Jin Guangyao closed his eyes briefly. "I know you are surprised," he replied. "But I implore you to think about it, er-ge."

The name was what shook Lan Xichen out of his stupor, in the end. Jin Guangyao always said it with the affection and respect given to blood family—now, he said it with a distance that Xichen should be showing him instead, given the inferiority of his status.

"I am... surprised," he said. "Not angry. I simply wish to know why, and why now."

"Then it is more than I hoped for. Thank you."
Lan Xichen nodded awkwardly. At last, his fingers felt the heat of the cup, and he released it. 

"You have heard," Jin Guangyao said softly, "of that incident three days ago in Yiling."

Xichen could not have escaped the news even if he wished to. Even though he wished to.

Three days ago in Yiling, near the supposed location of a village most of the sects refused to speak of, a young omega woman had been killed in broad daylight. She was stabbed again and again, her body defiled and stripped, her head hung from the very omega house she had tried to escape. It had taken a whole day for Jiang Cheng of Yunneng to hear of it and have the poor girl's body retrieved. No more than a few hours later, the three culprits had been flogged to death.

It was a cruel tale, a horrible tale, and although Xichen had seen neither victim nor punishment, he had felt great sorrow when the news reached Gusu. He had felt great sorrow when Wangji's back bent upon hearing of it, his burden made heavy once more.

"I hear that sect leader Jiang oversaw her funeral," Lan Xichen said. "If he took care of the purifying, then her spirit should find some peace at least."

Jiang Cheng was always rather good at setting angry ghosts to rest, for one so temperamental. 

"This is the sixth time such a murder takes place since the new year," Jin Guangyao declared.

Lan Xichen's mouth opened, though he had no words to reply with. 

"I have been keeping my ears open for rumors. Six is the number I could find out, but I have no doubt that several more were carried out and not reported."

"I had no idea," Lan Xichen said at last.

Jin Guangyao looked down at his tea with mournful eyes. "Since the new year, I have uncovered evidence of at least thirteen omega running away," he replied. "Omega houses stand empty all over the land in complete secrecy. No one wishes to admit to losing them or killing them."

"But where…"

"Where else would they go, but to that village Wei Wuxian built?"

Lan Xichen felt pained, as always, by the sound of that name.

"I know the rumors," he told Jin Guangyao, looking at him again. "I know what they say about that village. But it has been three years already, A-Yao. The Yiling Patriarch is dead."

Wei Wuxian was dead, and Wangji would never again sleep in the jingshi.

"There was no one left in the Burial Mounds when all the sects followed Wei Wuxian there," Jin Guangyao said. He tastefully did not mention what it was they found there instead, though Xichen ached at the memory. "At least a hundred people must have lived there in those years, if we count the Wen sect remnants Wei Wuxian had with him at the start. Could they truly have fled every way and never been caught? Someone must have led them to safety."

Jin Guangyao was right: nothing had remained of the Burial Mounds except empty makeshift houses, a vegetable garden, cooking pots and furniture and traces of sweetscent in the air.

Lan Xichen could remember entering such a house himself as cultivators raided the cave where Wei Wuxian must have lived. They had come out shouting, their hands full of trinkets and scrolls, while
he gazed emptily at the shape of a bed where two people must have slept.

"So you think the rumors are true," he said, blinking away the memory. "You think another village exists where those runaway omega still live."

"I think that the omega who are running away now and getting killed for it believe it, yes."

So this was why Jin Guangyao had invited him today; why he had served Lan Xichen tea and said, before he could even taste it, *I plan to open all omega houses.*

"I do not disapprove," Lan Xichen said. He saw surprise on Jin Guangyao's face, an odd sort of hope and delight even, before he schooled his expression. "But it has only been six months since your father died, A-Yao. I worry for your standing if you should make this decision now."

For Jin Guangyao would not simply content himself with opening the houses of Lanling; Lan Xichen knew without the need to ask that he would see all houses open, all over the country.

Oh, Lan Xichen had no doubt that the man before him could make the other sects bend the neck eventually. He knew better than most just how hard Jin Guangyao had worked to gain his father's recognition, to make up for the loss of Jin Guangshan's legitimate alpha son. He had become a pillar for Madam Jin. He had protected Jiang Yanli when her own standing fell after her husband's murder.

But it would be no easy task, and Xichen knew now what Jin Guangyao did: that some would rather see their omega dead than free.

"You are not saying what everyone else will," Jin Guangyao murmured, breaking Xichen out of his thoughts. "That it is unnatural and wrong for them to be raised this way, that I shall only bring forth another Wei Wuxian."

"I do not believe so," Lan Xichen replied.

He could tell that Jin Guangyao was surprised by his answer.

Lan Xichen smiled weakly. "There is a child in the Cloud Recesses," he said. "An omega child. He is still very young, but when the time should have come to sequester him, my uncle refused."

"Lan Qiren refused?" Jin Guangyao asked, disbelieving.

Lan Xichen nodded. "You know that the omega of the Lan clan died when Wen Xu burned down the Cloud Recesses. My uncle… was quite changed by this event. I think it hurt him deeply to have to bury them."

It hurt Wangji as well, though Xichen only learned how much years later.

"For a time after this, he lived in seclusion," Xichen went on. "A servant brought him his meals every day. I was with you for a while in hiding, but when I came back, that servant came to me and told me that my uncle was often muttering to himself about the omega cultivator Cangse Sanren.

"When that boy was born—the son of a distant cousin of ours who lived in Caiyi Town—my uncle allowed his family to live in the Recesses. Even after his parents passed away, and the elders of our clan insisted that he should be taken up the mountain, my uncle opposed them. He said that he had no wish to see another child die."

"How surprising," Jin Guangyao said. He had not moved an inch since speaking Lan Qiren's name.
"It was, to a lot of people," Lan Xichen agreed. "And even now, my uncle remains stricter to the boy than he is to anyone else. But the child seems happy. I have no doubt that he will wish to become a cultivator in a few years, and I intend to allow it. So no, I do not believe that he or anyone else should be raised differently."

Xichen felt only some mild guilt at speaking to Jin Guangyao of what was essentially a clan secret. Lan Jingyi was not the kind of secret which they could keep forever: he would grow soon enough into something like adulthood, and Lan Xichen had no desire to see him locked up. No matter what other sects may say of his leadership for it.

They said enough already, and anyway the other child in the Cloud Recesses whom Wangji looked at with ghosts in his eyes felt like a much greater secret to bear.

"They will not allow it easily," he warned Jin Guangyao, who was deep in thought and looking at his linked hands. The man met his eyes again. "You will have to fight, A-Yao, and many will question your authority and lineage. Some may even accuse you of being the one to steal their runaway omega."

"A second Yiling Patriarch," Jin Guangyao said in humor.

"It is the kind of decision Wei Wuxian would have approved of."

"I have no wish to gain a murderer's approval."

Lan Xichen's hand shook in his lap for the second it took to master himself. He too often thought of Wei Wuxian in ways removed his peers'; he felt shame now, remembering belatedly that Wei Wuxian had killed Jin Guangyao's brother and cursed his cousin Jin Zixun to die.

Jin Guangyao smiled gently at him. His homely scent always seemed to make the air around him kinder and safer to be in. "Do not worry, er-ge," he said. "Wei Wuxian and I could not be more different. Who knows what he was thinking when he kidnapped all those people? You saw him just as I did in those last months of his life—he was entirely mad."

Perhaps Jin Guangyao sensed how much the topic distressed Lan Xichen, for after this, he said no more words of his plans or of Wei Wuxian.

They spoke together of a few more clan affairs. They played the guqin into the late hours of night, Lan Xichen attempting to teach Jin Guangyao the healing songs he had found, buried within the Library Pavillion. Perhaps one of them could soothe Nie Mingjue's spirit when he came to join them the next day; his temper had suffered much those last few years, and his brother Nie Huaisang had visited Gusu recently to ask for help on his behalf.

Golden Carp Tower was a beautiful place to be when springtime spread over the land and made the flowered gardens bloom. Even at night when they closed and their stalks bent from lack of light, their smell wafted through the open air pleasantly. Lan Xichen made his way to his guest rooms after the careful steps of a servant; he paused when Jiang Yanli appeared under the light of a torch at the end of the pathway.

She had a hand over her son's shoulder; it tightened at the sight of him protectively. The boy Jin Ling simply looked up, tired and slow in that way young children are after too much playing.


Lan Xichen bowed at the shoulders. "Good evening, young madam Jin," he replied. He waited till she bowed as well before rising. "My apologies for interrupting your stroll."
"You interrupted nothing," she replied, less obvious in her dislike than her brother was. But then again, Xichen was not Wangji. She squeezed her son's shoulder and added, "A-Ling, say good evening to sect leader Lan."

"Good evening," Jin Ling muttered.

Lan Xichen smiled at him. The boy frowned and shoved his head into his mother's robes.

"You are here to see A-Yao, sect leader?" Jiang Yanli asked him, unperturbed by the toddler now hugging her leg.

"Yes, I will be staying for a few days."

"And your brother?"

Xichen inhaled quietly. "Wangji will not join me this time," he told her. "He was called for a case of spiritual possession before I left."

Jiang Yanli nodded absently, her hand in her son's hair, ruffling it gently. To anyone else she would have seemed entirely polite, and no doubt the beta servant leading Xichen to his rooms was bored out of his mind, waiting for them to finish exchanging pleasantries.

But Xichen saw the downturn of her mouth in the flickering light. He saw how her hand moved as she comforted her child, how straight and tense her back was in spite of the injuries there which often forced her to sit or lie down.

Zidian shone at her finger.

"I will impose on you no longer," he said, bowing again. "I wish you a pleasant evening, and young master Jin Ling too."

"Good night," Jin Ling said to him drowsily.

Lan Xichen left them with a smile on his lips and the feeling of being stabbed through the ribs.

That night, he slept fitfully. Vague dreams shook him awake every hour, forcing him out of bed, making him reach for the pitcher of cold water left on the nearest table. Sweat cooled over his skin and made him shiver. His underclothes felt too hot on him, but the world outside too cold to take them off even if propriety had not held him back.

He thought of Jiang Yanli, of Jiang Cheng, mourning the same man as Wangji.

He thought of his brother bleeding out of thirty-three lashes of the discipline whip. Lying prone on a bed with grief carved out of his back and heart. Telling him, I did something terrible, wearing the same face he did when their mother had died.

It felt to Lan Xichen that his palms were not covered with sweat, but blood; that he was once more sitting in the hallway of an inn in Yiling, watching Wen Qing laugh in despair, thinking that the red on her hands and his would never fully wash away.

No alpha or beta hand could be clean even if Jin Guangyao freed every omega.
The day of the hunt on Phoenix Mountain dawned bright and hot. Servants of the Jin sect had worked at securing entrances to the forest as soon as daylight broke over Lanling, shouting and running before the guests arrived, installing tables and shaded spots so that the sect leaders could rest, unbothered by the summer heat.

It was the first such competition to be held since Qishanwen had fallen almost a year ago. Meng Yao oversaw all preparations masterfully, never shying from dirtying his own hands to help despite Jin Guangshan's frowns. He gave instructions to the cooks before they left that morning, instructing them to reserve the best meat for Nie Mingjue, to keep the alcohol away from Lan Xichen. He read over each missive that his father received and penned answers in his name dutifully.

Jin Zixuan thought his half-brother to be quite competent and helpful.

He was standing now by the open tent where his father had taken place, watching delegations arrive one after the other. He felt glad for the hunting clothes he wore which were loose enough for air to come in and cool his skin. He wondered how Meng Yao was not sweaty, walking around as he did in a full set of robes.

Meng Yao was taking a brief pause now by their father's other side, and his scent felt cool and comforting next to Jin Guangshan's liquor-heavy smell. Jin Zixuan took the time to thank him for his work as Jin Guangshan greeted the Ouyang sect leader.

His words were hesitant, and someone overhearing them would likely think them mocking, but Meng Yao smiled at him. He nodded to Zixuan and said, "Thank you, brother." He never seemed to mind that Jin Zixuan had no way with words.

"Today will erase the memory of the Wen sect's last competition," Jin Zixuan told him.

"You're too kind," Meng Yao replied

Meng Yao became busy again after this when Jin Guangshan grabbed his arm. Jin Zixuan looked straight ahead once more and thought, flustered, that he could perhaps get used to having an older brother.

Because he was watching the entrance to the path leading down the mountain, he saw Yunmengjiang arrive first.

He was not the first to react, however.

"Oh, Yanli," his mother said from her end of the tent, rising to her feet with her maid's help and walking quickly to where the group in purple robes was dismounting their horses.

She had grieved Jiang Yanli's departure during the Sunshot Campaign, Jin Zixuan knew, and moaned again and again at her decision to go to Yunmeng after the war rather than remain in Lanling. Zixuan himself had found that he missed Jiang Yanli during the first few days. He had gotten used to eating dinner with her and telling her news of the search for Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian. The war had taken his mind off of her after that, though Luo Qingyang had told him of how Jiang Yanli cooked for him every night.

"He came," Jin Guangshan spat in disgust behind him. "That boy Jiang Cheng still has the audacity to bring him here."

Jin Zixuan needed not ask who he was referring to; there was only one person that his own eyes seemed to be able to see clearly, and the warmth in his chest was not due to sunlight.
Wei Wuxian had come dressed not in purple, but in black. He should be suffocating under the weight of the sun, but Jin Zixuan was standing close enough to see how pale he was, almost as if he were cold.

He seemed to have lost weight since the last time Jin Zixuan had seen him—when he had come accusing Jin Zixun of terrible crimes and then left, taking with him a whole encampment of Wen sect prisoners. Even then, Zixuan had found him emaciated, and had thought in worry that the war must have been hard on him.

That had been almost a year ago. Wei Wuxian should not look thinner now than he did weeks after Wen Ruohan had died.

"A-Xuan," his father said in warning when Jin Zixuan took a step outside the cover of tented cloth.

Jin Zixuan hesitated.

For years now, his name had been said in that same tone of warning whenever Wei Wuxian was around. Ever since that time in Gusu, when he had made the mistake of thinking that his father would approve of his choice.

"Do not talk to that boy," Jin Guangshan whispered furiously. "Do not talk to Jiang Yanli either, no matter what your mother tells you. This clan will bring us nothing but trouble."

"We will lose face if we do not greet them," Jin Zixuan said between his teeth.

"Zixuan—"

Meng Yao came back then from greeting Jiang Cheng and his guests, and he interrupted Jin Guangshan by bending down and whispering in his ear: "It seems young master Wei brought it with him…"

Their father lost all interest in scolding Jin Zixuan. Jin Zixuan seized the opportunity to leave, wondering not for the first time if Meng Yao could read minds.

The group from Yunmeng was not far, only a few meters, but he felt as though an eternity went by as he crossed that distance. Each step he took toward Wei Wuxian came lighter than the previous. There was such an odd mix of tension and joy in his heart that he could not tell one from the other long enough to name them.

For almost two years now, he had not had the opportunity to see him. Not properly.

"Sect leader Jiang," he greeted when he reached them. "Maiden Jiang."

"Young master Jin," Jiang Yanli replied with a smile.

She bowed in perfect manners, her brother nodding next to her just as agreeably. Jin Zixuan could remember a time when Jiang Cheng of Yunmeng would frown and speak back to him, his omega sect-brother by his side laughing full-heartedly. Now, Jiang Cheng said nothing at all, and Wei Wuxian looked like he had not smiled in years.

How far away their studies in Gusu seemed.

Jin Zixuan turned to Wei Wuxian with trepidation. "Wei Wuxian," he said; he nodded his head again, though he wanted nothing less than to stop looking at him.
He wished he could afford to put a hand over his heart in front of so many eyes.

Wei Wuxian did not bow to him. Jin Zixuan had not expected him to—the only time he had seen Wei Wuxian bow had been to Lan Wangji, years ago in Qishan, after the archery competition.

In fact, Wei Wuxian was looking in direction of the Gusu delegation now, his face as pale as death.

"Lan Xichen is here," he said in a very faint voice.

Jin Zixuan's heart leaped at the sound of it.

"Of course he's here," Jiang Cheng replied in annoyance. "Were you listening to a single word I said when I told you to come? You didn't even take your sword."

"I—"

"Wei Wuxian," Zixuan said once more. "Is something the matter?"

Wei Wuxian looked at him as if he were only now noticing his presence. Weight loss had carved lines of fatigue into his face, and his eyes were unfocused. His mouth closed. He licked his dry lips.

"Jin Zixuan," he said at last.

But Jin Zixuan could not rejoice in hearing his name in that voice, not when Wei Wuxian looked so distressed. Before he could say anything more, Wei Wuxian started walking away.

"Where are you going?" Jiang Cheng called after him.

"I'm taking a walk, Jiang Cheng."

"Wei Wuxian!"

The anger in his voice seemed darker and truer than what Jin Zixuan could remember of his youth, watching the two of them exchange inane spats over the quiet ponds of the Cloud Recesses. Jiang Cheng's frown dug deeply into his forehead; when he clenched his teeth, Jin Zixuan saw his jawbone swell under his skin.

Next to him, Jiang Yanli stayed very proper. "Thank you for inviting us, young master Jin," she told Jin Zixuan. He had no need to be as good a person-reader as Meng Yao to see that she was exhausted and worried; the bags under her eyes were almost as bad as when he had found her on the front steps of the Tower and taken her under his protection.

"Of course," he replied in confusion. "Maiden Jiang, is everything…"

She smiled fleetingly. "A-Xian has not been himself lately," she said. "Please forgive his rudeness. He seems to have come down with a cold."

Then she took her brother by the arm and led him away with heavy steps.

Jin Zixuan stayed right where he stood, knowing not how to proceed.

For weeks now he had anticipated that day to the point of sleeplessness. As soon as Meng Yao had voiced the idea of organizing a hunt to keep up tradition—as soon as he had understood what it would mean to invite all the great sects—he had lent him his support. He had helped his father and half-brother prepare everything. He had trained with bow and sword to learn again how to compete, knowing that his experience of fighting had been tainted by war, that he should not strike to kill this
time.

He had known that Wei Wuxian would be coming, and he had been eager for it. Although there had been no time to talk to him on the day he had stormed into the Tower and threatened Jin Zixun, Jin Zixuan had not forgotten the promise he had made himself after the Lotus Pier had burned.

*I will help him even if he does not want me to.*

Even if all the sects now feared him and called him Yiling Patriarch, even if people spoke in horror of him thieving omega all over the land.

Wei Wuxian had already walked far toward the edge of the forest. He could not enter before the hunt had officially begun, and even from afar, Jin Zixuan could see the servants of his house barring passage and looking at him rudely. Wei Wuxian did not seem to mind; he looked back at the assembly from time to time. He looked at Lan Xichen, who was not looking at him.

Lan Wangji was, however. White-clad and spotless despite the dusty ground, his silver bow over his shoulder, his somber face gone soft with worry. His pale eyes never once left Wei Wuxian's back.

Jin Zixuan frowned and turned away.

It mattered not if things were more awkward than he had expected. Today was still the same day he had waited for, the same circumstances. He would find Wei Wuxian after the hunt had begun; he would talk to him in the forest, away from prying eyes, unchaperoned like they had been in the rocky mountains of the Nightless City.

He would bow with a hand over his heart. He would tell Wei Wuxian what he had felt for him since they were just children—since he had visited Yunmeng with his mother and been ordered to talk to Jiang Yanli, and he had sat next to her and not said a word to her and watched the young omega boy play in the water below him, the honeyscent of him so sweet that he had barely dared to breathe.

He didn't care anymore what his father thought. Jin Zixuan had fought the war for him while he cowered in Lanling, he had protected Jiang Yanli, he had driven the Jin clan out of the shame of having given Wen Ruohan so much leeway.

He would be a coward no longer.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Jin Zixuan :(

AND NOW FOR SOME BORING ANNOUNCEMENTS!

First, since many people have been asking: Lan Sizhui and Lan Jingyi will not end up together romantically. I was a little surprised to still receive messages and comments about this after the last chapter, where I wrote a whole scene to explain that Sizhui loves him as a brother / that their relationship parallels Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng's, so here it is. Their love for each other is purely brotherly. No romance here.

Second, thank you to everyone who answered me on Tumblr when I asked whose POV should be included in this interlude!! I had a great time writing Jingyi.
Lastly, the chapters after this will pick up the story from the middle of the Sunshot Campaign and until Wei Wuxian's death before we go back to the present. I'm not sure when I will have time to write more, so please be patient with me (cries) I updated twice in like 4 days... even though I should be working... anyway, thank you all so, so much for the wonderful support. I hope you enjoyed the updates! Leave me nice comments, I survive only thanks to nice comments these days.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Warning: gore, murder, abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow
Chapter 17

The call for his name came like just another whisper over rocks and water.

"Wangji."

Lan Wangji did not turn yet to face his brother. He had missed him in the months since he had left the Cloud Recesses, and yearned greatly to meet with him and speak with him, but he was in the middle of another conversation. One that required far more than simply the focus to open his mouth and breathe.

The blue-white spirits before him swayed upon a breeze he could not feel at all. The air was hot and dry even at night, now, and especially this close to the Nightless City. The sun shone until the very late hours of day, burning the skin of the men and women who slept beneath tents downriver. Lan Wangji brushed with his fingertips the tired strings of his guqin, asking again and again the same questions, facing over and over the same answers.

*Is the man called Wei Ying among you?*

*No.*

*Do you know where he is?*

*No.*

On a rare strip of grass hidden in the shadow of a pine tree, the Yunmengjiang spiritual bell glinted.

Wangji pocketed it after the breath had come back to him. He stayed for a moment longer seated under the tree, his boots and clothes covered in the pale dust that rose with every step taken around here. He waited till the fear in him had abated, mellowed by the knowledge that no, Wei Wuxian was not dead. Not for another day.

"Brother," Lan Wangji said at last. His heart beat slowly and hotly through him, carrying in the stuffy air of the dry mountains around. Only the proximity to the river and Lan Xichen's frosty scent made it so his throat was not parched for water.

Lan Xichen smiled at him kindly when Wangji looked up. Sensing, perhaps, that Wangji was in no state to move just yet, he sat by his side in the dust and dirt and stained his own clan robes.

Lan Wangji had no words to describe the gratitude he felt; no words to explain why he felt once more six and not nearly-twenty, his brother holding him and telling him that although mother was gone, he would always be there.
"I have missed you," Lan Xichen told him, echoing the ache in Wangji's chest. He rested a hand next to Wangji's over the strings of the guqin. "I had to look for a while to find you."

"I needed quiet," Lan Wangji replied.

Lan Xichen nodded. He must understand, if he had walked through the rows of tents down the side of the mountain, and heard the cries of the wounded and the drunken yells of the unharmed.

"You played Inquiry," he said softly.

Lan Wangji's hands tensed and then relaxed.

"Who are you hoping to find?"

"Your health," Lan Wangji said.

It came awkwardly and tensely, and Lan Xichen must have immediately recognized the diversion for what it was, but he smiled. "I am fine," he told Lan Wangji. "As you know from my letters. I met with sect leader Nie when I reached the mountain, and he explained to me his plans for the next few days."

"In the Nightless City…"

"You are curious as well, and I understand, but I will have to keep this secret a while longer." Lan Xichen never was happy to keep secrets from Lan Wangji; he smiled at him with sorrow in his eyes, even as he said, "I hope you will forgive me. The life of that person is at stake."

Lan Wangji looked away. "There is nothing to forgive."

Around them, the few bare-branched trees shivered in unseen wind. Little nightly creatures crept and crawled out of their hiding holes, heedless of the war being waged over their land. A spider ran up the length of Lan Xichen's leg; he picked it up with the tip of a finger and set it atop a grey rock.

"I came with Jiang Cheng of Yunmeng," he said.

Lan Wangji did not answer.

"He told me that young master Wei has been missing. It seems young master Jin Zixuan, too, is looking for him wherever he can."

"He is alive," Wangji said.

Lan Xichen's eyes were bright, so much brighter than Wangji's ever were. "Wangji," he said once more. "I do not doubt your ability to question the dead. I simply wonder if you are not exhausting yourself."

"I have to…"

Lan Wangji could not finish this reply with any word he knew, but it mattered very little. Xichen had never needed his words to understand him.

"If he is not dead now, after months, then it is unlikely to change within a few hours," he declared. "Young master Wei is strong. You know this."

Wangji nodded quickly. He knew Wei Wuxian's strength well—he had seen him equal him in combat, seen him best his brother in archery, seen him hold the handle of a cursed sword through the
leathery jaw of a monster. And if not those occurrences of physical prowess, then others; his cleverness and his talent for art and words, his bravery in the face of hostility. His unwavering smiles.

Still, a cold panic shook his heart every time he remembered that clearing in Yiling. The dented bell of Yunmengjiang, the cut bark of a tree. Dry blood on the petals of a little blue flower.

He had to find Wei Wuxian. He must find him by any means necessary.

Lan Xichen stood up once more and offered to help Lan Wangji up. Wangji refused; he wrapped his guqin in grey cloth and pushed himself to his weary feet, blinking quickly so that his eyes would be rid of grey spots. Together they trekked down the dusty path that led to the wide encampment, silent but for the sound of their footsteps, the silver bell in Lan Wangji's belt chiming every second.

They found the encampment very much awake despite the late hour. More of the men were drinking in the alpha barracks, joined by beta who had no care for boundaries. Lan Wangji saw his brother frown at the lack of order. He wondered how long it had been since he himself cared about such a thing as status.

The sicksweet smell of honey laid over the stench of a beast's dead body— "Don't look at me."

"Lan Wangji," said Jiang Wanyin as soon as Wangji reached the biggest of all the tents, where Nie Mingjue and his half-brother slept and held council of war.

He looked less gaunt now than the last time Lan Wangji had seen him—emaciated, limping through the hills of Yiling, attacking him blindly in rage, so weak that he could barely hold his sword. Lan Wangji had thought then that Jiang Wanyin looked almost like one of the younger disciples of his clan, that his haphazard spiritual energy resembled that of teenage boys and girls learning to handle the sword. He had regained muscle and weight since then; his wide and solemn face once more full and suntanned, his shoulders high, his hand atop a borrowed sword.

His fingers twitched and refused to settle, sometimes stroking the iron pommel, sometimes fitting quite awkwardly around it. Lan Wangji understood. He missed Bichen as well.

Jiang Wanyin stepped toward him, his face eager and not hostile, and he said: "Have you found him —"

"Xichen," Nie Mingjue interrupted in a loud voice. "There you are at last."

He rose from his chair in a full set of armor, bloody and sweaty still from the labor of the day. Next to him, his brother Huaisang cowered, his fine clothes untouched but for a line of dust at their hem.

Lan Wangji made way for Nie Mingjue and his brother to join, stepping away so that the sound of their conversation would not be so loud to his ears. He eyed Nie Huaisang for a moment longer, wondering vaguely at the boy's honor and courage, to sit away from the battlefield each day—wondering vaguely that he did not think much of it at all.

Even the sect rules engraved into the mountainside seemed so far away to him now.

"Lan Wangji," Jiang Wanyin said again. This time, he stood directly before Wangji, the intent obvious on his face even if Lan Wangji had not had his name called. "Did you find him? Did you find Wei Wuxian?"

"No," Lan Wangji replied tiredly.
Just as the drowsy spirits said, day after day, no matter the hour or place: *No. No. No.*

"He is not dead," he told Jiang Wanyin, seeing the man's face fall.

Jiang Wanyin shook himself at his words. His severe brow furrowed again. Lan Wangji noticed, at last, how much older he seemed now than when they were both classmates. "Then where is he? I have searched through so many towns between Yiling and Qinghe…"

Lan Wangji shook his head and whispered, "I do not know."

"Jin Zixuan searched through the Lanling region as well, to no avail. Though," Jiang Cheng's teeth clenched visibly as he spat, "perhaps he wasn't as enthusiastic about the job as sister made him out to be."

Lan Wangji doubted that Jiang Yanli had to spend much effort to convince Jin Zixuan to look for Wei Wuxian. He did not say as much to Jiang Wanyin, who must have never noticed the way the Jin heir looked at his sect-brother.

"You'll need to keep inquiring the dead," Jiang Wanyin said as they walked side by side out of the night-blue tent. "We need to know that he's…"

Lan Wangji nodded without a word. He looked at the disorderly alpha and beta celebrating the day's victory in front of Nie Mingjue's quarters. He looked at the shadows between the still tents of the wounded; at the dark corner where Nie Huaisang was headed now, a wide bowl of steaming water held in his hands, perhaps to pretend to help as he could not on the field.

Wei Wuxian would have never shied away from it all. Not the fighting, not the wounded.

*Shoot the sun,* the inebriated ones sang now as he walked with Jiang Wanyin. *Shoot the sun, eclipse it whole.*

"They'll be too tired to fight if they go on," Jiang Wanyin muttered in simmering rage, all of his nervous energy focused on the loudest of the groups. "Do they not realize?"

The grief was so fresh and tangible on him, still.

Lan Wangji made no move to separate from him. For all that Jiang Wanyin had attacked him the last time they met, and for all his promises of revenge the time before that—as they both watched Jiang Fengmian carry a fevered Wei Wuxian away—he exuded no hostility now. He seemed to have regained most of the mastery he had over his own spirit when he studied in Gusu. There was no sign now of the awkward, almost childlike way he had directed it unto Wangji in Yiling.

Night had fallen quick and severe over the dusty mountains, and warmth had gone with it. Lan Wangji felt goosebumps prick the skin of his arms and neck when the air moved about him. Jiang Wanyin tightened the travel cloak he wore around himself, his eyes wild and grieved, his steps only adamant in order to mask his fear. The smell of landslides followed behind him.

No, Lan Wangji did not separate from him. He felt close to understanding why Jiang Wanyin, who had lost more than anyone else here to the Qishanwen sect, would not want to be alone now. Not even to avoid the company of a man he distrusted.
For weeks after that night, Lan Wangji heard no whisper and no echo of Wei Wuxian's whereabouts. He had no time to search either. The days he did not spend trying fiercely to make the Wen sect troops fall back, he spent instead caring for the wounded alongside his brother. Every night as sunlight washed away, he sat within walking distance of the encampments they built and called upon the dead. Their answers never changed.

Jiang Wanyin sat by his side and fidgeted, his somber face fraught with fear.

They met with the troops from Lanling at the border of Qishan. It took three weeks to make Wen Ruohan's forces fall this far back, and three days more to secure enough of a space to sleep without fear of being annihilated. Jin Zixuan flew in one day followed by hundreds of gold-clad youths, looking as tired as Lan Wangji felt, his own borrowed sword stained brown at the pommel.

Jiang Yanli came with him. She and her brother held each other as soon as she dismounted; her shoulders shook within his arms, and her smile was watery. Exhausted. She looked as if worry were eating her alive.

Jin Zixuan took Lan Wangji aside that night as he prepared to walk to the nearest stream. He had wiped the dust from his face and changed into cleaner clothes, and Lan Wangji thought, looking at him, that he was very different now from the arrogant child who had once perturbed the silence of the Cloud Recesses with his provoking. With his provoking Wei Wuxian.

"Jiang Wanyin told me what you were doing to find him," he said without preamble.

There was a little pink scar above his left temple. Lan Wangji looked at it instead of his eyes. "Wei Ying is not among the dead," he replied.

"How can you be sure? How can they know him?"

Lan Wangji took the silver bell out of its perpetual spot within his belt. "His sect's bell," he said, "is enough of an identifier."

Jiang Wanyin had not made to take the bell from him when Lan Wangji had showed it to him in Yiling, nor any time after that while he watched his Inquiries, but Jin Zixuan knew no such restraint. He plucked it from Lan Wangji's hand—tugged it out of his hold, when Wangji's fingers tightened around it—and brought it up so that moonlight shone upon it.

It was not anything special, only a dime-a-dozen bell carved with lotus flowers, the very same as the one hanging from Jiang Wanyin and his sister's hips. The enchantment on it was only meant to keep one's spirit calm. Jin Zixuan stroked it with his thumb as if it were a gemstone, however. He held it close to his face.

Lan Wangji realized what it was he was looking for when he saw his nostrils shiver slightly. His neck heated, his hands tensed, his heart beat at the roof of his mouth. He knew not why watching Jin Zixuan chase for a scent like this made him feel as if his blood were boiling; for a second the haze of the past few months vanished and left him tangibly, physically here, the way it had when he had first set foot into the omega house up the mountain and seen the little girl's dead body.

Wei Wuxian had asked not to be seen in the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter. And Wangji knew that if it were at all possible, he would have asked not to be known in any way at all, not to be breathed in or heard—Wangji would have done it, too, would have stopped breathing entirely if that was what it took to appease the terror in Wei Wuxian's voice.
He grabbed the bell from Jin Zixuan's hand forcefully. The nail of one of his fingers left behind a very faint scratch on the man's skin, and Lan Wangji did not look at it, did not look at him, as he pocketed it again.

"I will play Inquiry again," he said, ignoring the breath of surprise which Jin Zixuan directed at him.

"I'll come with—"

"I need to be alone for it. Excuse me."

Lying was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses, but they were very far from Gusu.

Jiang Wanyin did not join him that night, no doubt to find the time to speak with Jiang Yanli of all that had happened. Lan Wangji trekked up the mountain until his robes were covered in dust to the knees. He sat upon the dirt and unwound the cloth wrapped around his guqin.

The dead were not more forthcoming that night than any previous. The white-blue spirits were fewer to answer his call as well, either for how shaken Wangji felt, or because they had grown tired of his questions.

They replied, No.

Every and each day until three months had gone by since Wei Wuxian vanished.

Every day was not a victory. They were four sects against one, but Qishanwen had not built its power on ashes; the number of smaller sects it had annexed was consequent, and the troops it could gather even more so. Some days, they were forced to recede like the tide. Others, they crossed through land and mountains, chasing away the specters of white-and-red robes, of scarlet sun motifs.

Wen Ruohuan and his sons never showed themselves directly. Lan Wangji had heard that Wen Xu was injured during a skirmish against Jin Zixuan and fled the battlefield, no doubt to return by his father's side. Wen Chao commandeered the army laid around the region in groups of a few dozen cultivators. His exact whereabouts were unknown.

Three months after Wei Wuxian had vanished, Lan Wangji followed a group of soldiers led by Jiang Wanyin away from the direct road to Nightless City. The idea had come from Jiang Wanyin himself, who had expressed in no few words just how dearly he wished to be the one to end Wen Chao. As he had somehow managed to build a group of three hundred people into somewhat fighting shape, despite his sect grounds having burned, he had garnered a lot of respect from the elders advising Nie Mingjue. Nie Mingjue had allowed it.

When Lan Wangji asked Lan Xichen if he could follow, he was allowed as well.

They could not fly over the wooded lands at the border of Yiling—it would be too easy for a scout to see them, and anyway Jiang Wanyin's sword Sandu was gone as Bichen was—but they rode on horses for days, camping beneath trees and drinking out of icy rivers. They followed the traces of a group thought to be led by Wen Chao until they reached the ruins of a fortress.

"We'll set up camp here for a while," Jiang Wanyin declared.

His weary soldiers acquiesced, barely standing on their feet. They were set to work immediately on fetching water and hunting for food.

Lan Wangji climbed to the top of a watchtower and played Inquiry.
In the days that followed, strange things occurred everywhere they went.

They tracked down several small encampments of Wen sect cultivators, according to the locations given to them by Lan Xichen's mysterious spy in the Nightless City. But those encampments were empty. The abandoned houses in the villages creaked and groaned when they opened the doors, the talismans stuck to their walls stained with blood and devoid of spiritual energy. On camping sites proper, they found no living souls, even when food and other necessities had been left behind. The men rejoiced in finding such provisions that they would not have to hunt for later, as well as arrows and bows and medicine. They spoke of good omens from the gods, of fate turning around itself.

After the sixth day, living corpses showed up on the roads.

They were not the corpses which Lan Wangji had learned to pacify in his uncle Qiren's classes. Neither were they the fierce corpses of legend, those who sometimes attacked places that tragedy had struck. No, they were most like living people whose soul had been stolen: they stood silent and still by the side of roads and forest paths, their empty eyes staring fixedly at the ground. Some of them were stained with fresh blood.

Jiang Wanyin ordered them to be purified and buried, but the men did not look so hopeful now. Several nearly refused after another day had gone and no less than twenty bodies were found on the way. They drew talismans with their eyes closed in fear, dug graves in a hurry, ran away from the burial sites with prayers on their lips.

Still, not a single living Wen sect soldier had shown.

Jiang Wanyin grew restless. He spent his evenings in the abandoned fortress pouring over maps in silence, his wide back bowed upon broken tables and chairs, and let the most apt of his recruits teach the others the arts of war. Lan Wangji did not offer to help them. He climbed to the watchtower alone, giving the dead the same question, receiving the same answer. Jiang Wanyin did not ask him anymore what they had to say.

They reached a wider town on the seventh day, and found its streets littered with dead bodies wearing the uniform of Qishanwen.

"What happened here?" Jiang Wanyin asked, struck dumb with surprise as he dismounted his horse.

But there was no answer to give him; all the men and women around wore the same surprise and horror on their faces, watching the wide street before them, the corpses laid onto the muddy ground, the torn Qishanwen flags waving in the morning breeze.

Lan Wangji stepped down from his grey horse. The animal huffed, drawing back, tugging on the reins now held by a young man wearing Yunmeng's purple robes. Fear permeated the air so tangibly that Wangji felt as if he could smell it too.

He approached the nearest dead body slowly. It belonged to a woman who had fallen face-first to the ground and who, outside of bloody trails under her broken fingernails, showed no outward sign of injury. When Wangji pulled her to her back, he saw that blood had also poured out of her eyes and ears.

"What is this," breathed Jiang Wanyin, who had joined his side.

All the corpses they found in the empty city were the same. Some had bled out of their eyes, others from their mouths or noses. None showed a single other injury, except from broken fingernails and scratches acquired in defense.
On one such body, Lan Wangji picked up the same talisman they had all seen in previous towns and enemy camps: a thin piece of yellow paper wearing spirit-repulsion signs, stained in blood all over.

No, he thought, examining it more closely. They were not stained; they were written in blood.

The discovery left him colder and number than the rain did as they journeyed back to their stronghold.

He did not think anyone else had picked up on the altered talismans. He did not think they would be so worried about a hundred dead Wen soldiers if they had. Writing talismans in blood like this was old and outlawed practice, something master Qiren would have considered heretic. Wangji could remember him now, speaking of long-gone ancestors who had lost their souls to forbidden arts: such practices harm the body and soul, harm the temperament more. They bring malice with them.

That night, Lan Wangji did not climb up the watchtower. He stepped behind Jiang Wanyin into the study he occupied to sleep in and closed the door behind them.

"Young master Lan," Jiang Wanyin said coldly. "Did you have something to ask me?"

Lan Wangji looked at him in the trembling candlelight.

Whatever measure of confidence he had regained since his family was murdered had gone once more. Jiang Wanyin had lost weight in the last weeks of trekking; his thin face was shadowed, bruised with lack of rest. His high-cheeked face had once been the source of a few murmurs of admiration, Wangji knew, yet now he looked again as if his skin were ready to split open on his bones.

He was not as emaciated or lost as he had been in Yiling, but he was not far from it either. His control over his spiritual energy seemed to have lessened as well: oftentimes his hand shook over the iron pommel of his sword, but this was not Sandu. This could not help him master it.

Lan Wangji took the talisman out of his sleeve. It felt cold and grimy against his fingers, though he knew this to be the fruit of his imagination. "These were strung in each of the encampments we found," he told Jiang Wanyin.

"What do spirit-repelling talismans have to…"

But Jiang Wanyin halted his words, and Wangji knew that he was noticing the odd design on the paper. He took it from him silently.

A moment of silence passed as he examined the talisman. His face grew paler than before, nearly bloodless in the shifting light of the fire.

"What is this?" he murmured at last. He turned the talisman over and over. "What am I looking at?"

"I do not know," Wangji replied.

"You have an idea, or you wouldn't have shown it to me."

Wangji tensed. Jiang Wanyin had no accusation on his voice as he said those words, but they were true. Wangji was not used to being understood by someone who was not his brother so easily.

By someone who was not his brother or Wei Wuxian.

"The writings," he said slowly, "were drawn with blood. I have not tested it, but I believe this
talisman is made to attract spirits, not repel them."

"But why would anyone…"

He did not finish his sentence this time either. Lan Wangji saw light glint in his dark eyes as his face turned to one of understanding.

"This is what has been killing the Wen sect before we could even arrive," he said. His hand tightened around the stained talisman until the paper creased loudly. "Someone has been helping us all along."

Lan Wangji frowned.

"Helping," he repeated.

"Of course," Jiang Wanyin scoffed. The look he gave to Wangji then showed him so sure of himself, so enthused by the possibility of a new ally this far into the war, when the fighting stagnated and exhausted everyone.

"Those practices are evil. They seek to hurt and curse, not cultivate. Whoever is doing this is not someone we should associate with."

"We can't be difficult," Jiang Wanyin replied, "not when Wen Ruohan is still hundreds strong within his mountain peak, and our men have gone without proper rest for over two months. If someone is willing to help us kill those dogs—whether it be by blood sacrifice or demonic cultivation, I'll accept them. I'll welcome them with open arms."

The glee on his face was tinged with grief, with vicious hatred. There was nothing Lan Wangji could say to make him see reason.

He thought of the little silver bell ever-hidden in his belt sash, of how he had reacted when Jin Zixuan had taken it and made to look on it for a trace of honeyscent. How could he claim a moral high ground now?

He did not play Inquiry that night. He sat in a corner of the wide hall where alpha men and women in Yunmeng colors slept. None of them drank and sang, now, to shoot down and eclipse the sun whole.

He slept fitfully, the dead left unasked for once, his fingers still grimy with the touch of that cursed talisman.

They found Wei Wuxian the following night.

A messenger came on swordback, exhausted and hungry, from a subset of Jin clan affiliates roaming the other end of those mountains. He told Jiang Wanyin in-between mouthfuls of roasted bird that Wen Chao had been found; that he and his group of cultivators had been made to flee by the Jin clan affiliates, that they had last been seen only a few miles east of where Jiang Wanyin was holding fort.

"Only about thirty of them, all of them injured and terrified. We saw living corpses standing by the roads—"

Lan Wangji looked at him then, the coldness in his chest spreading once more, but Jiang Wanyin was faster and louder than he. He questioned the messenger about the state of Wen Chao's horses and men, about the weapons they had. He had no interest in the grey-skinned corpses they had all seen for days, standing emptily between trees, circled around by frightened animals.
It was not a half-hour later that all of them left the fortress except for a group of a dozen people. Jiang Wanyin rode fast with his back to the setting sun, barely leaving enough time for his soldiers to follow. Lan Wangji knew that if he could have flown there on his own, he would have.

They arrived with the night in one of the villages they had already explored. It was not empty now, however; dozens of corpses lay over the upturned ground and bled out of every hole.

"Where is he," Jiang Wanyin said, walking between bodies, kicking open doors and ransacking empty houses. His voice grew louder, full of rage, every time he was unsuccessful in his search. "Where is he!?" he bellowed. "Where is Wen Chao!!"

"Sect leader Jiang," a woman called after a while. "One of them is still alive!"

Jiang Wanyin ran to her without thought, pushing aside a boy not much younger than he was so that he could reach her faster. Lan Wangji followed, and caught the boy's elbow with his hand so that he would not fall.

"Thank you," the boy said to him helplessly.

Lan Wangji dropped his hand and did not look at him. He would not find the smile he wanted to see on his face.

The only Wen sect man still breathing in the village must be tall and gnarly when he stood to his full height, perhaps even intimidating. His traits were fierce and battle-honed. He was no such thing now, however: he sat curled up on the floor, bleeding from his ears and mouth, and terror had made his skin white and thin as paper.

"Demon," he croaked in a broken voice, balancing back and forth on his behind. "Demon, oh, demon, demon, demon…"

"Where is your leader?" Jiang Wanyin barked at him, grabbing him by the collar of his cream-colored robes. Blood had leaked onto the sun shape sewn there and made the design drool. "Where is Wen Chao?"

"I'm going to die," the man moaned.

His eyes were wild. He was staring at Jiang Wanyin as if he couldn't see him at all, and all of his body shook.

"The demon came and killed everyone, he'll kill me too—"

"Sir," a weary man said, joining them in a hurry. Jiang Wanyin stared at him with madness; he went on, "Sir, we found tracks leading into the forest. Two people fled no more than an hour ago."

Jiang Wanyin dropped the Wen sect man, who went back to his crazed muttering. "Lan Wangji," he said blankly. "Fly with me."

Lan Wangji had no desire to touch Jiang Wanyin now, but he unsheathed his own sword all the same.

They flew into the cold night hair, Lan Wangji on his sword and securing Jiang Wanyin's shaking hold on the training sword he held. He stumbled many time over the lackluster blade, which was absent the bright glare that Lan Wangji remembered seeing on Sandu, when they hunted water ghouls together in Gusu. Jiang Wanyin only tightened his hold on Lan Wangji. He stubbornly refused to fall.
They followed the near-invisible footsteps deep into the forest. They touched ground when those tracks disappeared at the edge of a small clearing, where a thin stream ran between moss-covered rocks and licked at the grass and dirt. There was blood near a dip in the stone. Someone must have sat there recently.

Then a cry came from within the woods, and a dark silhouette jumped at Lan Wangji.

He would have recognized him even in complete darkness; even if Jiang Wanyin had not said, "Wen Zhuliu," with so much hatred in his voice that the air seemed to freeze around him.

Wen Zhuliu did not seem to care that he had been recognized. He took his bronze sword in hand and attacked Lan Wangji, and if his his eyes seemed wide and afraid, if his countenance was shaky from whatever it was he had seen earlier, his attacks were no less fierce.

He heard Jiang Wanyin scream Wen Chao's name. He saw from the corner of his eyes that another figure stood in the shadow of trees, one much less brilliant at swordplay than Wen Zhuliu was. But Wen Chao looked healthy despite the terror writ on his ashen face, and he held his own against Jiang Wanyin, who was tired from the war, tired from grief and worry.

Lan Wangji evaded the hit that Wen Zhuliu would have marked upon his shoulder with his gold-lit hand. He remembered the sight of him attacking a young man in Qishan—the sight of Wei Wuxian rushing to the victim and saying his golden core was gone.

"Core-Melting Hand," he whispered.

"Let my master go," Wen Zhuliu replied, "and I will not use it on you."

But he was distracted, too. Lan Wangji saw him look in stupor at Jiang Wanyin, who attacked his master with so much rage and heartbreak; he saw in his body the wish to flee to his master's side, the panic which only the realization of having made a grave mistake could bring.

Lan Wangji stepped within touching distance of him when his footwork faltered, and stabbed him through the shoulder with one decisive thrust of his sword.

"Master," Wen Zhuliu rasped as he fell to the floor.

For good measure, Lan Wangji stepped on his leg and broke it.

Wen Chao's face was bloodless in the moonlight. Jiang Wanyin had cornered him against the bark of a wide tree, and the man looked at him as if he were seeing a ghost. "You," he panted, blood spilling out of cuts on his cheek, on his shoulders and arms. "You, it's impossible—"

"I'll kill you," Jiang Wanyin roared; "I'll kill you for what you did to my family."

And he raised the training sword high, the blood on it gleaming sharply.

Lan Wangji was almost too late to prevent it. He thrust his sword in the direction of their fight, infusing it with power so that the blade could fly alone and intercept the fatal strike which Jiang Wanyin was to deliver. It was an old sword from his clan, a blade which had once belonged to his ancestor Lan Yi, and who agreed to him almost like his own would. Metal struck metal in a high and pristine sound and made the air around them shake.

Wen Chao and Jiang Wanyin looked at him in unison, both of their faces rendered white by the light of Lan Yi's sword. Wen Chao looked half-dead with fear already. Jiang Wanyin, however, was lively with hatred.
"Lan Wangji," he growled.

He sounded like a wounded animal. Like a wild wolf or bear, bleeding and feral, ready to attack impartially.

"We need him alive for questioning," Lan Wangji said calmly.

He did not feel calm at all.

Still, he did not relent. He approached with slow steps, his sword still blocking the unnamed blade that Jiang Wanyin held like an executor's axe. He watched reason inch its way over the Jiang sect leader's face until his eyes blinked quickly.

"Questioning," he said haltingly.

He seemed to have suddenly learned how to breathe again. His arm lowered, his mouth opened; his shoulders rose under the limp line of a uniform worn for too long.

He turned to Wen Chao and asked, "Where is Wei Wuxian?"

Wen Chao had looked between the two of them in half-hearted hope since Wangji had saved his life. At those words, fear washed over him bodily, making him cringe against the tree and look around wildly.

"He's dead," he muttered quickly—like the man earlier who had whispered about demons. "He's dead, he's dead."

"What do you mean he's dead?" Jiang Wanyin roared again, and this time both of his hands came to grasp the man's collar so that he could shout in his face. The training sword fell to the ground, abandoned.

Lan Wangji stilled a few feet away from them. The heart within his chest seemed to have stilled, too.

"He's dead!" Wen Chao screamed in rage and in horror. Lan Wangji heard it through mist and fog, through a body of stillwater, through the awful coldness in his chest. "I threw that bitch into the Burial Mounds of Yiling—there's nothing left of him! No body and no soul, nothing! Wei Wuxian is dead, and he cannot come back!"

He sagged against the tree, breathless, and repeated in a murmur: "He can't come back. He can't be back..."

Jiang Wanyin's hands let go of Wen Chao's collar weakly. They fell to rest by his sides like puppet limbs cut from their strings.

Wind flew between the leaves above them. It knocked against wood and bamboo, breathing out flute-like sounds in the eerie silence. Jiang Wanyin stood lifelessly in front of the man who had taken everything from him. He laughed.

He laughed, and his laughter was as wet as tears.

Footsteps echoed behind them. It seemed to Lan Wangji that looking for their source was as difficult a task as lifting a boulder bare-handed. He felt nothing at the sight of another of the living corpses they had seen for days now, grey and unseeing, walking slowly toward them.

But Wen Chao reacted. His face grew even paler, his fingers digging into the rough bark of the tree
behind his back. Bloodsmell reached Lan Wangji's nostrils, as he understood that Wen Chao was splitting his own nails on it.

"Jiaojiao," he murmured in such a thin voice that it felt like another wisp of wind.

Another wisp of wind. Another note of an unseen flute.

The living corpse walked toward them leisurely. At first Lan Wangji could not make out its face and body, but then it stepped out of the cover of trees, and he saw that it belonged to a woman. He recognized her as Wang Lingjiao, who had ridden a palanquin with Wen Chao while they trod through the forests around Qishan's Nightless City in search of the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

Wen Chao screamed. He fell on his behind and crawled away from the sight of her, white as a sheet, his bloody hands shaking before his face as he cried, "Go away! Oh, go away, Jiaojiao, stop following me—"

"Master!" Wen Zhuliu called from his end of the clearing, crawling as his master did in spite of his broken leg. "Master, run, please!"

"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Chao howled.

The name shot through Lan Wangji's body like an arrow, like cold water in suffocating summer heat. He saw Jiang Wanyin jump and notice the corpse at last, his tear-streaked face shining under ghostlight.

"I was wrong!" Wen Chao sobbed into the open air. He shifted from backside to knees over the soil, staining his robes with mud, putting his face to the ground as if he were trying to eat the very grass. He trembled and begged like this, his high voice breaking over his words: "I was wrong! I was wrong! I'm sorry! Wei Wuxian, Wei Ying, oh, spare me, please—"

"I don't think I will."

Jiang Wanyin breathed in loudly, his body swaying on his feet. He turned around, looking desperately for the one who had spoken those words, finding him as Lan Wangji did standing by a thin and high pinetree.

He almost looked ghostly himself. His face had thinned over the months, his once-sunkissed skin turned pale by shadow, by the spirit-light which Wang Lingjiao's raised corpse diffused. If not for the movement of his throat as he breathed, Lan Wangji could have believed him to be just another dead body.

Wei Wuxian stepped into the clearing. He held a black flute in one hand, with a rough-made tassel hanging from it in the shape of a lotus flower.

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Wanyin said, choked by relief.

Wei Wuxian smiled at him.

It was not, either, the smile that Lan Wangji had so longed to see.

When Wen Chao first saw him emerge between the houses of the village, he had looked half-dead
already.

It was as Wei Wuxian wanted. It was what he had aimed to do from the second he managed to walk out of the haunted hills of Yiling, the souls there trying so desperately to latch onto him and keep him behind, keep him trapped. He would not have managed to leave without the weeks it took to make and cultivate Chengqing. Without chopping black bamboo with his bare hands, without the sunless days and nights spent carving it with rocks and jewels stolen from open graves.

He had raised ghosts and corpses everywhere Wen Chao went as soon as he found him. He had walked behind his steps like a shadow, had hung from houses and trees the spirit-attracting talismans he drew with the blood of birds and squirrels, had made it so every second of Wen Chao's days and night were filled with nightmares. He had terrorized him like this slowly. He had killed the men standing in protection of him with fright alone, one by one until it was just him and Wen Zhuliu running alone in night-lit woods.

He had not felt satisfaction when Wen Chao saw him in the village. Not when his anger had turned to fear, not when he had first called his name in begging, throwing his men between himself and Wei Wuxian in defense. Wen Chao had once begged Wei Wuxian, after all; he had begged for his life in the tortoise's cave, and then gone on months later to call his name in arrogance again, his wet lips touching Wei Wuxian's ear.

"Wei Wuxian!" Wen Chao begged and begged, prostrate on the floor of a forest not unlike the one where they had last met. Not unlike the way Wei Wuxian had prostrated, though his kneeling had been forced and not offered. "I was wrong! I was wrong! I'm sorry! Wei Wuxian, Wei Ying, oh, spare me, please!"

But there was no satisfaction to be found in the sight. There was nothing at all except for the burning hatred in Wei Wuxian, honed and weaponized by those months spent amidst vengeful spirits. There was nothing but the shame he still felt like a second layer of skin; the feeling of wet grass in his hands, the taste of dirt against his lips.

"I don't think I will," he replied.

He had never even thought of sparing Wen Chao.

There were others in the clearing, other people and other smells. Wen Zhuliu crawling with a broken leg and blood spilling out of a wound in his shoulder. Wang Lingjiao, whose corpse had terrified her master so wonderfully. Sandalwood on the white silhouette of a man.

The aftermath of a landslide.

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng said, his face as wet with tears as it had been when his parents had died.

Wei Wuxian hesitated at the sight of him.

He realized, slowly and foggily, that he had not thought of his shidi in a long time. That Jiang Cheng and his shijie had been far from his mind as he struggled to stay alive, to heal his wounds, to find a way out of the maze of dead hills.

"Jiang Cheng," he said.

His own voice felt foreign to him. He felt the muscles of his face attempt a smile reflexively—had he not smiled, always, when in the company of his shidi? How could the act of it now feel so odd and awkward that his mouth pulled painfully, that the emptiness in his chest where Wen Qing's stitches had pulled for weeks seemed to be seeping blood again?
He looked over Jiang Cheng as the man approached him, looking for injuries or signs of illness. He found none but for the emaciated quality of his face and the trembling in his limbs, which must be because he had fought Wen Chao.

Yes, he thought. Jiang Cheng had fought Wen Chao. That was what he saw when he traced Wen Chao's footsteps to this clearing: Wen Chao and Wen Zhuliu and two other blurry silhouettes, caught in the throes of combat.

White light made Wei Wuxian blink as a sword flew before his eyes. The cold and viscous energy fled from his hands and to Chenqing, but it was only the man in white, sheathing his weapon and turning to face him as well.

"Wei Ying," the man said.

Wei Wuxian thought his name blurrily. Lan Zhan.

"Where have you been?" Jiang Cheng asked him, standing before him and putting a hand over his shoulder. He squeezed it shakily, blinking over and over, as if he thought that Wei Wuxian should disappear between one fall of his eyelids and the next. "I… Sister has been worried sick for you."

"I was… tracking Wen Chao," Wei Wuxian replied hesitantly.

He felt stretched two ways. Pulled and pulled till his body thinned over the distance.

In front of him was Jiang Cheng, whom he remembered suddenly as if amnesia had only just lifted. Jiang Cheng who had lost his family and his golden core because of him, who looked at him now with wide and helpless eyes. To whom Wei Wuxian owed a debt that could never be repaid.

Behind Jiang Cheng, Wen Chao cowered and sobbed onto the forest ground.

Wei Wuxian stepped away from his shidi. He walked the few steps separating him from Wen Chao's wretched figure. Wang Lingjiao's corpse had kneeled next to him, looking silently at Wen Zhuliu, who could approach no longer.

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Chao cried. He showed his dirt-stained face to him and grabbed the hem of his robes in pleading.

Rage such that Wei Wuxian had never felt before turned his blood hot and boiling. He stepped on the man's wrist with all of his weight until bone snapped loudly.

He could barely hear the scream that Wen Chao let out through the pumping of his own heart. Not even this—not even the pitiful sight of Wen Chao crawling and squirming at his feet seemed to appease him.

"I'm sorry!" Wen Chao sobbed over and over again. He couldn't retrieve his hand from under Wei Wuxian's foot; after a moment he stopped struggling, realizing perhaps that it hurt more if he moved. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Shut up," Wei Wuxian snapped at him.

Wen Chao whined like an animal.

"You think we'll spare you now?" said Jiang Cheng, who stood again by Wei Wuxian's side. The helplessness on his face was gone. Instead he smiled cruelly, arrogantly even, his eyes looking
between Wei Wuxian and the man on the floor in deep pride.

"You think we'll spare you now, after what you did to my father? To my mother and to my clan?"

"I should have never attacked Yunneng," Wen Chao weeped. "I will pay anything, oh, spare my life."

"There are no riches in the world that could pay for what you took, dog."

Jiang Cheng had a weapon in hand now—one of the training swords he and Wei Wuxian had used after Suibian and Sandu were stolen. He could not pour power into it as he did Sandu, but the blame seemed to brighten all the same.

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Chao howled, crazed and desperate, once more grabbing with his hand the hem of Wei Wuxian's clothes. "Wei Wuxian, Wei Wuxian, I should never have touched you, I should never—"

Wei Wuxian kicked him in the face; Wen Chao bit so harshly on his tongue that blood spilled over his teeth and lips, and cried out in pain once more.

He would have done more. He would have kept kicking, kept breaking his bones, so that Wen Chao would stop speaking and making any sound. He would have broken the man piece by piece until he found satisfaction, if not for Lan Wangji's voice calling, "Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian met his eyes. Lan Wangji fell silent again, pale-faced and stricken.

"Young master Lan," Jiang Cheng said evenly. Wei Wuxian left him to it and approached Wen Chao, who stared at him as if staring death itself in the face. "This is my clan's business from now on. You have no stake in this. Please go back to the fort and inform the rest of my men."

"I will not," Lan Wangji replied.

If he said anything after this, Wei Wuxian did not hear it.

He played on Chenqing one of the melodies he had composed in the dead lands of Yiling. Wang Lingjiao obeyed his orders quietly, her long nails digging into the face of her master and peeling away his skin and his eyes.

Wen Zhuliu screamed until he too quietened, his life taken rightfully by Jiang Cheng's sword. Wen Chao had no voice at all to scream with, no eyes or skin left to show his horror. White bone glistened into the open air where his cheeks had once been; white teeth pinkened with blood within his mouth, after his lips had been torn away for good.

Wen Chao's charred scent filled the clearing around them as if a bonfire had been lit. It vanished when he died, but Wei Wuxian still smelled it. He still tasted it.

The restlessness within him did not grow quiet.

As they walked together toward the village where Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji had left their horses, Jiang Cheng oddly silent by his side, Wei Wuxian noticed a house ensconced between rock and trees. Neither Jiang Cheng nor Lan Wangji seemed to see it, the both of them walking ahead with sure steps, moonlight shining over them between the branches overhead.

But Wei Wuxian stopped. He watched from afar the heavy entrance door, the windows curtained and barred. The house was dug deeply into the ground and rock. A wooden fence surrounded it, and
a thick padlock hung from its only door.

He took within his empty lungs the smells of the nightly air: the moist ground under his feet, the warm scent of pinecones cooked by the sunlight hours. In the middle of it all, he caught a fragrance unlike the others. Something tenuous and stifled, something as fresh and sweet as new-wine.

"Wei Wuxian?" Jiang Cheng called after him.

Wei Wuxian walked toward the small house. He broke open the padlock and kicked in the fence door. He knew not what he was thinking when he reached the front of the house and banged his fist against the wall, when he listened for any sound within. When he heard what could have been the wind in-between the beams of the roof, but could also be the breath leaving one person's frightened lungs.

He shoved his shoulder against the heavy door, trying to no avail to make it budge. "What are you doing?" Jiang Cheng yelled at him, running until they were side by side and he could grab him by the arm.

Wei Wuxian shoved him away. "Help me open this," he said.

"But—"

"Hurry!"

He did not know what Jiang Cheng saw on his face then, if he saw anything. Panic perhaps, for that was what Wei Wuxian's entire body felt like, what his heart told him to feel, looking at this heavy door. Looking at the red color of it which so reminded him of a time long gone in the Nightless City.

It was not Jiang Cheng who first made a move then, but Lan Wangji. He took his white sword out of its sheath and slashed the air with it; a great beam of light dug into the oakwood door, dislocating it from its hinges, bending its panel forth.

Wei Wuxian pushed against the marred wood until, finally, it opened before him.

There was no light inside. No candles or fires, no interstices in the walls to let in pieces of sky. The windows had been curtained and barred outside, and they were curtained and barred inside as well. A layer of dust had flown with Wei Wuxian's entrance. It tickled his nostrils and made him want to sneeze.

There was a man at the other end of the room, his back stuck to the wall, his hands holding before him a piece of fine wood as if it were a sword.

"This is," Jiang Cheng said in shock, but Wei Wuxian did not listen.

He was alone when he stepped into the house. Neither Lan Wangji nor Jiang Cheng followed him. He watched his feet leave traces onto the dusty floor. He saw one half of a fruit already eaten through with rot over the only table of the room, and knew with deep, bone-deep certainty, that no one had come here in days to freshen up the pantry.

"W-Who," the man at the end of the room said.

Terror could have worn his face in the picture books of children. He slid against the wall, opposite to the way Wei Wuxian advanced, shaking from hunger and despair. He must be older than Wei Wuxian by at least ten years, and yet he seemed almost like a child.
"I won't hurt you," Wei Wuxian said.

He remembered Wen Ning crouched before him as he sat on the floor of his old bedroom; his smile and gentle voice, his words which had warmed Wei Wuxian's heart at a time he had thought it to be set to ice by hopelessness.

He spread his hands palm-up before himself so that the man would see he was unarmed. He crouched when the man fell sitting to the ground, so that at no point he would be looking down on him.

He said, "I'm like you."

And for the first time in months, he felt that the hole within him was no more.

---

They gave Wei Wuxian and the omega man one of the many rooms of the fort to occupy for the night. Wei Wuxian did not leave Zhu Yuansu's side for a moment after coaxing him out of the house; and it had taken the better part of an hour to do just this, to explain to him that the villagers were gone, to convince him that Wei Wuxian was not lying.

Jiang Cheng had watched silently as all of this unfolded. Lan Wangji had only spoken once, after the third time Zhu Yuansu refused to believe Wei Wuxian's claim of being omega.

"He is," Lan Wangji had declared.

He had been half-turned away from them, his pale eyes gleaming with moonlight. His tone had left no room for uncertainty; his status made such a lie inconceivable.

And somehow, that was all it took. Zhu Yuansu had followed after them, frightened out of his mind after who knew how many days spent in darkness and silence, with no food on his table and no way to call for help. He was so weak after those days of fasting that Wei Wuxian had to help him walk every step.

"You don't smell of anything," Zhu Yuansu told him then, his face laid upon Wei Wuxian's shoulder.

Wei Wuxian had not known how to answer him.

Zhu Yuansu was asleep, now. He had holed himself into the room as soon as they were both led to it. All of Jiang Cheng's troops—men and women in purple robes whom Wei Wuxian had never seen before, whom he felt would never be worth the lotuses sewn at their backs—had watched them walk through the fort with stupor. If not for Jiang Cheng standing by their side, Wei Wuxian had no doubt that some would have turned hostile.

He was not afraid of it, but Zhu Yuansu was. Zhu Yuansu had begged him to be taken somewhere more secluded, saying that he should never survive the shame of being seen by so many.

So Wei Wuxian had hidden him and fed him warm soup, and had not lingered on the ache that his words burned into him. He had not closed the door either, after seeing how scared Zhu Yuansu was of being locked and left to die again.
He sat against another wall of the candlelit study, leaving the straw bedding to Zhu Yuansu, and resolved to spend the night making sure that no soul crossed the threshold of the door.

No soul did, but in the small hours of dawn, Lan Wangji appeared behind the frame.

Wei Wuxian took a long time to notice his presence. He had fallen into a meditative state, the way he did in the Burial Mounds when the spirits' anger threatened to drive him mad. The scent of sandalwood brought him out of it slowly.

He blinked tiredly and looked at the open door.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said. He stood straight and regal in his white uniform, the unfamiliar white sword at his waist, a bow strung over his shoulder.

Wei Wuxian shushed him with a hand over his own lips; he nodded in the direction of Zhu Yuansu, who had wrapped himself so completely into the blankets they were given that not a hair on his head could be seen.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian replied once he was certain that the man had not woken. He made his voice as quiet as it could possibly be. "My apologies for not greeting you earlier. Things were…"

But he did not know how to describe it. The memory of Wen Chao's dying screams, of his skinless and eyeless face as he begged and begged for his life, seemed so far away. It seemed to Wei Wuxian that part of him was here in this dark little room, watching over a stranger who felt to him like kin, and that another had never left that clearing at all. That some of himself would forever remain by Wen Chao's skinned corpse, looking down on him emptily.

Lan Wangji said nothing to berate him for his rudeness. He took out of his sleeve a yellow piece of paper and infused it with enough energy to fly to Wei Wuxian; Wei Wuxian snatched it from the air with two fingers. He needed not examine it.

"Were you the one who drew it?" Lan Wangji asked him plainly.

Wei Wuxian replied, "Yes, I was. I drew many of them."

He crumpled the paper in his hand with no remorse. It had played its part already.

"And those corpses," Lan Wangji said, "they were also your doing."

"Yes."

Lan Wangji's forehead creased as if he were pained by the news.

Wei Wuxian watched him distantly. Lan Wangji too had suffered the harsh stroke of war: there were marks upon his face that Wei Wuxian had never seen before, and his sect uniform had gone grey in places rather than pristine white. The sheath of his sword bore several specks of old blood.

Wei Wuxian had never minded Lan Wangji's presence before; now, however, he could not help but thumb Chenqing's shaft nervously.

"It is heretic," Lan Wangji said at last.

Wei Wuxian chuckled hollowly. "Lan Zhan, we are not in Gusu. There is no master here to expel me from class if I misbehave."

"Not misbehavior. Only…"
But Wei Wuxian grew tired, watching this man struggle with his words. He stood up from the hard ground, wincing when his numb behind ached with the movement. He had sat there all night, watching over the open door, chasing away with a glare the few who dared to peek in. Soothing Zhu Yuansu with words when the man awoke and panicked, not recalling where he was.

"Does it matter?" Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji met his eyes surely, as he had always done since they were both children, except for the few times Wei Wuxian had embarrassed him deeply.

By the wet edge of a cold spring. Trapped in the rancid cave of a monster.

"Does it matter how I do things, as long as we win this war?"

"The demonic path is not without price," Lan Wangji replied, ever-serious. "For as long as people have tried to walk it, there has been no exception."

"Then I simply will have to make one."

Lan Wangji's frown grew deeper. His hand tensed by his side, above the silver pommel of the sword, which he could so easily unsheathe and brandish at Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian tightened his own grip on Chenqing accordingly.

Seeing this, Lan Wangji's face relaxed. He drew his hand away from his sword; he took a step backward.

"Wei Ying," he said in a kinder voice. "The people who attempted to walk this path, none of them survived it. The heretic arts hurt your body and your temperament."

"Why should you care," Wei Wuxian replied coldly, "about my temperament?"

"You will fall into qi deviation sooner or later."

Wei Wuxian laughed.

It was not kind, not happy. This laughter was not brought forth by any sort of joy. He could almost believe himself back in Gusu; Lan Qiren eyeing him with contempt and Lan Wangji lecturing him for breaking the rules. But Lan Wangji had done then what no other would have when he raised a sword to Wei Wuxian's throat, and at the time, Wei Wuxian had been exhilarated. He had been grateful.

He was not the same as he had been then, however, and Lan Wangji did not understand him now as well as he did then. He could not know that Wei Wuxian had no core to deviate from.

If he knew, he would not be standing there. If he had any idea what depths Wei Wuxian had sunken to through no one's fault but his own, he would not look at him at all.

"You've always disliked me, Lan Wangji," Wei Wuxian said mournfully.

He saw Lan Wangji's beautiful face shutter; he felt something like regret himself, as he turned between them a page he knew could never be turned back.

Zhu Yuansu shifted above the straw in his corner of the room. Wei Wuxian glanced at him quickly, only to make sure that he had only moved in his sleep and not woken up from the sound of their voices.

"You have avenged your clan," Lan Wangji said then. "With Wen Chao dead, there is no need for
you to continue with these practices."

"Don't speak to me of Wen Chao," Wei Wuxian snapped.

Anger shone again at the pit of his belly and made his fingers twitch. He wished, suddenly, that he had carried with him the corpse of that wretched man, so that he could cut it down again and again.

"He's dead," he said. He felt a shiver at his own words, as if he could not fully believe them yet—as if he ought to be waking again on the cold ground of the Burial Mounds, all of his body aching, his mouth choking on grass. "There's nothing left to say about him."

He added viciously, "There's nothing left of him in this world."

"Very well," Lan Wangji replied.

Footsteps echoed in the stony hallway, and soon Jiang Cheng appeared with a tray in his hands. He paused at the very edge of the door, looking between Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian with a frown.

"Lan Wangji," he said with only a hint of hostility. "What are you doing here?"

"Lan Zhan and I were just catching up, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian replied before the other could. He felt Lan Wangji's eyes on him as he smiled at his shidi. "Keep your voice down, though. He's still asleep."

He saw Jiang Cheng hesitate at the foot of the door, looking in direction of Zhu Yuansu's sleeping form. Wei Wuxian took the tray from his hands and set it atop the wooden desk shoved into another corner of the room. There was food enough for two on it. Light foods, broth and plain rice and tea, so as not to upset Zhu Yuansu's belly after so long spent starving. Wei Wuxian looked at the sleeping man for a moment longer, searching on his half-covered face a trace of wakefulness, but he looked to be slumbering deeply. The blue bruises under his eyes had lightened somewhat.

When he turned back around, Lan Wangji was nodding to Jiang Cheng in parting. His eyes found Wei Wuxian's immediately after that; the nod Wei Wuxian was given was a lot more curt and hasty.

Then he left, taking with him the scent of sandalwood and incense, leaving behind only Zhu Yuansu's sweetness and Jiang Cheng's storm-likeness.

"Have you eaten yet?" Wei Wuxian asked his shidi.

Jiang Cheng answered only after a long second. He was staring at the man behind Wei Wuxian who had shoved himself so completely against the wall, it looked as though he wished to become part of it.

"What will you do with him?" Jiang Cheng said.

Wei Wuxian's thin grasp on his own smile failed him again.

"I don't know," he replied. "Keep him with me for now."

"His family will—"

"His family fled and left him behind to starve."

He could see Jiang Cheng pale under the grey light of morning. He could understand, in a way, the shock that this must be to him; but his feelings on the matter were too steeped in anger to express sympathy.
Zhu Yuansu had only told his name to Wei Wuxian long after they had arrived at the fort, and then again, he had shaken. Then again, he had looked to be carrying such a heavy burden of guilt, like a man caught red-handed murdering someone else.

"I need to go back," he had told Wei Wuxian several times while failing to fall asleep. "I need to go back before they learn that I came out…"

His voice had been so thin and broken from thirst, Wei Wuxian had trouble making out any of his words. He had to play as many of Gusu's soul-soothing songs as he could remember seeing in the Library Pavilion in order to make him rest.

"I don't know what I should do with him next," Wei Wuxian said, "but I will not let him die out of respect for his family."

He feared for a second that Jiang Cheng would push the topic or refuse, but Jiang Cheng nodded. "All right," he agreed. "Then I'll make sure the others stop trying to gawk at him."

The relief that washed through Wei Wuxian then almost made him dizzy.

Silence spread thickly over the stone-walled room. The lone window high up under the ceiling lit up with the first rays of the sun, and some measure of warmth crawled in as summer started settling outside. The day was still so young that this light broke almost horizontally through the study, falling just short of touching Jiang Cheng's hair, glinting with specks of dust.

It had been spring when Wei Wuxian fell into the Burial Mounds. The time since then seemed like nothing at all, barely more than a breath; yet Wei Wuxian felt as aged as if he had spent years there among the cadavers. That it was summer and not fall, or winter, was to him more surprising than anything else.

"Where have you been?" Jiang Cheng asked him softly.

Wei Wuxian stroked the length of Chenqing and knew not how to answer.

How to tell Jiang Cheng of the place where he had been forced to live? The shadows and ghosts and spirits, the vengeful energy which had murdered the very soil and made growing things impossible. The rats and birds he hunted for food. The poisoned water he drank past the point of sickness. How to face him now and tell him, I know you needed me, but I couldn't be there for you, once again?

"I looked everywhere for you. I looked all over Yiling, I looked in Qinghe, in Qishan." Jiang Cheng turned to face him, and with him standing tall rather than slouched, the top of his hair lit up with the window-light. It painted a golden crown over his black hair. "I looked everywhere," he repeated, wide-eyed and helpless.

"I'm sorry," Wei Wuxian replied. "I couldn't come back before now."

"I thought you were—"

His voice died with a tell-tale shake.

Wei Wuxian made to squeeze his shoulder in reassurance, his own throat too knotted and painful for words, but Jiang Cheng pushed away his hand. He crossed the last step separating them and crushed Wei Wuxian against his front.

It did not matter then that Wei Wuxian's breath was knocked out of him, or that his own body swayed with the fatigue of the previous night, with the terrible exhaustion of watching Wen Chao die
and carrying Zhu Yuansu. Jiang Cheng's arms closed around him with desperate strength. He was only slightly shorter than Wei Wuxian, but he buried his face into Wei Wuxian's shoulder as if he were so much smaller and younger.

He trembled and held him, and he said, "I thought I lost you too."

His tears dampened Wei Wuxian's collar.

Wei Wuxian brought his own arms up. He put them at Jiang Cheng's nape and back, hesitant to soothe him or push him away—to be sincere or prideful.

But Jiang Cheng had never hugged him before. They had knocked shoulders and pulled each other up by the hand, they had shoved at each other, they had wrestled and sparred, but never touched like this. Never had Jiang Cheng given to him what Jiang Yanli could afford to: the physical kind of affection, the embrace of a brother, denied by the distance between their statuses.

Wei Wuxian grabbed the fabric of Jiang Cheng's robes until his fingers ached and gave him back his embrace with twice as much strength. "You won't," he replied. "You won't lose me, I promise."

"You said I'd be Yunmeng's hero, so don't you dare die before it happens, Wei Wuxian."

Wei Wuxian laughed wetly against his temple. Every time he breathed, the smell of storm and earth filled his nose.

In the corner of the room, Zhu Yuansu mumbled and moved. The light rays from the window were now low enough to sting Wei Wuxian's eyes and make him close them. Jiang Cheng's tears abated slowly, his hold becoming lax around Wei Wuxian.

He only pulled away once his breathing had quieted.

Chapter End Notes

I got banned from Twitter for saying I hate men so instead of tweeting all day I just wrote fanfiction
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Warning: vomiting, Wei Wuxian's Very Bad Not Good Coping Strategies

See the end of the chapter for more notes

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 18

Jiang Yanli's embrace lasted much longer than her brother's did.

Wei Wuxian had never felt as much shyness as he did when he saw her in the middle of the Qinghe encampment. Never so much shyness, never such strange fear at the sight of her back bowed above the bedding of a wounded stranger. She had her hands dipped in the woman's blood and wearing the gauze she intended to put on her. He let her finish her task, not out of concern for the woman who bled out of a deep gash in her shoulder, but because he suddenly thought that perhaps, Jiang Yanli would resent the sight of him.

Jiang Cheng stood ripe with tension and excitement by his side. Wei Wuxian needed not look at his face to know that he burned to call for her and show her that Wei Wuxian was here, was safe; that he wished more than anything else for the three of them to be together again.

Just like before. Just as they had been only months ago, before Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan's blood stained the steps of the Lotus Pier's entrance hall. Even though Wei Wuxian felt not like the child he had been then, but a much different person altogether.

"Shijie." Wei Wuxian called once the woman under Jiang Yanli had been tended to.

He saw her back shudder at the sound of his voice. He heard her gasp, saw before she even turned around the tears that would shine in her eyes. They were no less hard to face, once she did look back at him.

He heard the lovely way she called his name, "A-Xian," and wondered in free-falling relief that he had ever thought she would instead scream it in anger.

The circle of her arms, much more familiar than her brother's, felt like being back home. Wei Wuxian did not cry, though he thought he should, while she sobbed against his shoulder. He left that duty to Jiang Cheng standing by them, who smiled through embarrassed tears and patted both of their backs without fully touching them.

I'm home, he thought, touching her frail neck.

It was all that mattered in the grand scheme of things. Even if part of him had remained by a dying man's side in helpless fury—even if he could barely sleep, even if food made him sick and Zhu Yuansu's silence made him mad—he was home.

Wei Wuxian did not stray from their side until the war ended.

Nie Mingjue had gone a long way in the days Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji had trekked the
mountains in search of Wen Chao. His forces sat at the foot of the Nightless City, threatening Wen Ruohan's stronghold a little more each day. The cultivators who came down the mountain to meet them in combat oft came back up wounded, or not at all. Wei Wuxian was welcomed without doubt by the Qinghenie sect leader, as well as Lan Xichen who smiled at the sight of him warmly and expressed his relief that he was alive.

Wei Wuxian had not thought Lan Xichen would even remember him. He had not met him since the archery competition in the Nightless City so long ago, and before that not since his own stay in Gusu which had ended in disaster. The man's eyes were kind, however. His words rang true when he bowed to Wei Wuxian, when he called him young master in as certain a voice as he had when Wei Wuxian was a child wreaking havoc unto his home.

Lan Wangji rarely left his brother's side. He stood dignified and beautiful despite the dust and hunger of the campaign, the unfamiliar white sword he held almost as kind to him as Wei Wuxian remembered Bichen being. He carried with him a guqin made of pale wood, which he called Wangji.

He looked at Wei Wuxian often.

Three weeks before the end of the war, Wei Wuxian climbed up a familiar path through maple trees in the mountains. Zhu Yuansu followed him as always, unwilling to be left alone and in sight of so many. He cried out in fear when they descended into the depths of a cave that Wei Wuxian had visited what felt like eons ago. Although the corpse of the Xuanwu of Slaughter had been carried away, a heavy odor of death and decay remained, and Wei Wuxian was not surprised to see Zhu Yuansu fall to his knees and retch before they could reach the edges of the poisoned pond.

In this cave, Wei Wuxian called to him the sword he remembered holding while Lan Wangji cut off the head of the monster. It rose from the depths of the pool, dark-steeled and gleaming, its cold and viscous shine ricocheting off of the water-smoothed rocks around. Zhu Yuansu had no cultivation to his name to feel just how haunted the air became in its presence, but Wei Wuxian did. Even in the absence of a golden core, his whole body shivered at its somber energy. If he had been hot and not desperately cold, he could perhaps have believed himself fevered again.

Out of this haunted piece of metal, Wei Wuxian built the Stygian Tiger Seal.

Things moved quickly after that. Nie Mingjue became gleeful with the power that Wei Wuxian's undead army granted him; he led more and more assaults onto the gates of the Nightless City, killing all who stood in his way, staining his great saber with blood and guts. All who perished by his hand became part of Wei Wuxian's forces. Wen Xu did so at the highest of summer. His beheaded body fell over the rocks at the entrance of the City, and his blood thickened and hardened in the scorching sun, staining stone forever.

Nie Mingjue disappeared for a day. Lan Xichen did as well. They came back as the sun set holding Wen Ruohan's head, accompanied by a man Wei Wuxian had never seen before: a meek alpha not much older than he, who smelled of weathered wood, whom Lan Xichen looked at with care and Nie Mingjue with distrust.

His name was Meng Yao. He was, according to Lan Xichen, a spy who had spent months in Wen Ruohan's company and risked his own life to carry information to them all. Meng Yao greeted every sect leader in Nie Mingjue's high tent, and when Wei Wuxian's turn came to stand before him, he nodded his head deeply.

"Young master Wei," he said. "I have heard much about you."

His eyes were eager, his tone oddly sweet. He had a face in the shape of a heart, with wide eyes
glowing brightly under torchlight, with a quality to him that made him seem a little helpless, a little too kind. He did not once look at Zhu Yuansu cowering behind Wei Wuxian's back and ask about his unlawful presence, or about the rumors which had spread thickly over all allied forces.

Wei Wuxian is opening omega houses. Wei Wuxian is stealing from ravaged villages and sects, and walks around with his loot shamelessly.

Wei Wuxian did not take part in the celebrations that followed.

He took the shaking and resentful Zhu Yuansu with him to the very top of the City. The trek burned in his tired legs and thighs, and he knew that Zhu Yuansu struggled even more, as he had never walked so far in his life before. His body was weak with malnourishment, weak with atrophy. Still, he rejected Wei Wuxian's touch when he was offered an arm as support.

The omega house of the Nightless City had not changed at all since Wei Wuxian had last seen it: made of black, smoked wood, its windows barred, its redwood door even thicker than the one which had held Zhu Yuansu prisoner. The two lone guards before it did not dare block their passage, though their faces were pale with disgust and defeat.

"You're doing it again," Zhu Yuansu whimpered at Wei Wuxian's back. "Oh, you shouldn't do this."

"No one's stopping me," Wei Wuxian replied to him.

For weeks now, Zhu Yuansu had done nothing but follow in Wei Wuxian's shadow and bemoan his actions. He would not take a step by himself, no matter how much Wei Wuxian encouraged him to. He would not see his own freedom as anything less than a curse, no matter how many times Wei Wuxian reminded him that his family had abandoned him to his death.

"I would have deserved it," he had said on the third night.

Wei Wuxian carried those words in him like a wound, seeping pity and anger like blood.

He stood, unmoving, before the Wen sect's omega house. The smell of scorched earth was so unlike any other place he had been; if he closed his eyes, he could almost picture himself being led here by Wang Lingjiao, hearing the door close at his back. Smelling for the very first time the sweetness of one like him.

Fear holed within him. He ordered the two guards, "Open it."

For a second, he thought he might have to come to threats. His fingers brushed the cool length of Chenqing at his waist, thinking of the corpses he could call from below the mountain. Thinking of Wen Ruohan's very corpse, left by his son's side in the sun to be picked at by crows. But the two guards obeyed him in fear, and Wei Wuxian remembered, not for the first time, that he smelled of nothing now.

He was not shown the deference that an alpha would be, but he was not scorned either. These two beta were not the ones who had once locked him here. They had no idea of his name or status.

The heavy door opened, pushed forward by the both of them, to the familiar house within which smelled of sweet candles. Wei Wuxian crossed the threshold with Zhu Yuansu in his steps and looked at the silken couch where he had once spent the night. It was the same as always, crowded with clothes that none of the children here liked to tidy away. There were more drawings pinned to the walls around: birds made more lifelike as the hands creating them wisened, a boar, a squirrel.

He thought then that this would be all; he thought, petrified, of the three other houses he had opened
since pulling Zhu Yuansu to freedom, all empty and bereft for years. Where are they? Where are they all?

*MARRIED,* Zhu Yuansu had said. *They left to carry out their duty.* His voice had been harsh with envy.

So Wei Wuxian stood frozen by the memory of three children, dug through with fear of their being lost, of their being taken away. His ears rang with the memory of Wen Linfeng’s terror as she asked him what fevers were like, as she looked to him for mentorship of a kind. She had been so young still. Immature still. Surely, she couldn’t have been sold, not yet, and Wen Yueying and Wen Yiqian were much too young—

But then the door to the bedroom in the back opened; a girl much taller than he remembered her came out, her face sweetened with excitement and joy, and she called their shared name: “A-Ying!”

She tripped on her way to him against the foot of a chair. Wei Wuxian rushed to catch her, stumbling when she threw herself at him with all of her weight.

She had grown so much. Wei Wuxian couldn’t tell anymore how many months had passed since a little girl first showed him a way out of her own prison, since he sat by her side and watched her play in the dark. If they had stood, the top of her head would have almost reached his shoulder. As they were both fallen to the floor, she simply clinged to him with all of her tall body, her face pressed to his chest as if she wished to become one with his heart.

She already was. She had been since she first burst out of that bedroom a lifetime ago and hugged him for the first time.

The little boy, Wen Yiqian, had not grown as much as she had. He hid again behind the frame of the bedroom door, looking at Wei Wuxian with the same suspicion as always.

Wen Linfeng stood next to him.

"I knew you’d be back," Wen Yueying said excitedly, looking at him from below with wide and shiny eyes. "You promised you’d come back."

"I did," Wei Wuxian said. He tore his gaze away from Wen Linfeng. "I couldn't break my promise to you, could I?"

Laughter pearled out of Wen Yueying’s mouth as if she simply could not contain her happiness at all. She did not release him as he pushed the both of them upright, and she giggled when he patted dust off of her arms and off his own backside.

In the bedroom, Wen Linfeng tensed and shuddered. She said not a word to him when their eyes met again—and Wei Wuxian saw, now, the differences on her; the lightness of her scent belying her immaturity, the thinness in her face, the way that her body had changed in the months he had not seen her. Her lips trembled, her hold on the doorframe grew weak. She stood behind that single line as if her life depended on it, as if he were once more threatening all that she knew with his presence alone.

Perhaps he was.

"Hello, Fengfeng," Wei Wuxian told her.

Her hand fell limply from the wall. Tears spilled out of her eyes and flooded down her face.

She cried loudly, heaving sob after sob, when he wrapped his arms around her. She clinged to the
front of his robes helplessly, shaking through all of her body, growing even louder when he shushed her and stroked her hair. Wen Yiqian and Wen Yueying looked at her as they had the first time she had done this—after he had told her, "You look scared to me." Aghast and infinitely childish.

Zhu Yuansu fidgeted near the entrance of the house. Wei Wuxian heard him only through the sighs of the three children around him: Wen Linfeng against his front and Wen Yueying hugging his side and Wen Yiqian, ever-so-shy, sliding a hand in his quietly.

Sunlight set over the Nightless City. Birds grew quiet over the dried lands, except for where their beaks pecked at the flesh of Wen Ruohan and his son. Down the harsh slope of the mountain, Nie Mingjue's forces drank themselves to oblivion, triumphant, victorious.

For Wei Wuxian, the war ended only when Wen Linfeng took her first step out of Qishanwen's omega house.

"You won't catch it," said Wen Yiqian.

His voice was always breezy with lack of use. Wei Wuxian had come to learn that it was not for fear of speaking, really; Wen Yiqian simply was a little boy of few words, who would rather be silent and still than roaming the many shores of the Lotus Pier as Wen Yueying liked to.

"Will too," Wen Yueying replied.

"A-Ying is slow."

"I am not!"

While they argued, the round little hen they had been chasing for the last few minutes vanished behind trees.

Wen Yueying cried out in frustration. She rose from her crouch behind a bush and ran into the edge of the forest, exclaiming all the while that she was not slow at all, that the bird was simply too quick and clever. Wen Yiqian stood with much more grace than she had. He patted his knees free of dirt with care, worried as usual that he should stain the Yunmeng robes gifted to him when he arrived, and gave Wei Wuxian a look so full of annoyance that Wei Wuxian could not help but smile.

"Are you not going after her?" he teased the boy. "She'll catch it before you."

"No," Wen Yiqian replied, his nose scrunched cutely. "A-Ying is not very smart."

Next to them, Jiang Yanli laughed.

Wen Yueying did not go far anyway. She joined them again as they walked along the shoreline, between the edge of the river and the young trees bordering the woods, her anger warmed by sunlight and water. Unlike Wen Yiqian, she looked to be unable to simply walk; for days now she had done nothing but run until her entire body tired and Wei Wuxian had to carry her to her room half-slumbering. But she grew stronger every day. Wei Wuxian had no doubt that his help would soon be unneeded—that she would run much farther and longer than he himself could, and not have to ask him to carry her back.
The hen was an excuse like any other for them all to be outside like this, basked in the light of summer's end, picking lotus seeds as they went. Wen Yueying's belt and pockets were so full of them, they fell behind each of her steps like a trail of breadcrumbs. If ever she got lost, it would not be difficult to find her.

He had told her so the night before as they ate dinner. "I'll just follow the seeds," he had said. "Maybe if we let them grow, little A-Yings will push out of the ground."

She had splashed him with soup in answer, to Wen Linfeng's great horror.

"How did that bird even escape?" Jiang Yanli asked Wei Wuxian when they reached one of the many wooden bridges crossing over the river and to an islet in its center.

Wen Yueying hurried over to the other side, yelling for Wen Yiqian to follow her. Her smile was bright enough to make sunshine look dim.

"The cooks said it pecked its way out of the coop last night," he replied. "Smart thing."

"A-Ying must have been delighted when she heard."

"Oh, yes. She wouldn't stop screaming that she'd catch it herself until I told her that she could. Twice."

Jiang Yanli hid her mouth behind her hand to laugh again, and the sight of her so quiet and content made Wei Wuxian's heart feel a little less heavy.

They were far from the buzzing noise of the Jiang clan house, where Jiang Cheng was overseeing reparations and training. For weeks now, carpenters had come from all over the region to help rebuild the ancestral hall and clear away the debris of the fire. Young alpha and beta came as well to seek instruction, aspiring cultivators that they were; and Jiang Cheng accepted most of them in grim silence, his eyes fleeting toward Wei Wuxian, asking for him what his mouth could not.

Wei Wuxian did not like to spend time in the old house anymore. He did not know what he would say, once Jiang Cheng made up his mind to ask him what he wanted to.

He and Jiang Yanli walked together alongshore, their boots wet with the ever-present mud of the riverbed, their ears filled with the whisper of wind in foliage and the sounds of running water. Often the childish cry of Wen Yueying's voice reached them from ahead, as she failed again to catch the hen she had set her mind to return. Wei Wuxian knew just how dearly she wanted to be the one who handed it over to the old cook, after the woman had given her sweet cakes on the day she had visited the kitchen for the first time.

They reached a slope in the ground, a wooden and decrepit fence surrounding a house made out of rough wood. The soil had subsided there over the years, and the house almost looked ready to slide into the water. The river licked its southern edge softly.

Wei Wuxian saw himself there, years ago, drinking from the river in hope of quenching more than simply thirst.

"A-Xian?"

He blinked. Looked away from the house. "Yes," he replied, "sorry, did you say something?"

Jiang Yanli was staring at him; she must have spoken several times already, trying to catch his attention. Her forehead smoothed over when he pushed himself into smiling at her. "I simply wanted
Did you know more about how you met them," she told him. "Those children. They seem to love you very much."

"I told you already how I met them," Wei Wuxian replied in confusion.

He had told her and Jiang Cheng the very night he had come down from the Nightless City with three children in tow, Zhu Yuansu hiding behind them all, crushed by his own shame. Though Jiang Cheng had frowned at the sight of them, though Jiang Yanli had looked sorrowed, they had not asked him any questions then. Jiang Yanli had even welcomed them, establishing herself near-instantly as a figure of adoration for Wen Yueying and Wen Yiqian.

She was so good with children. She learned so quickly to touch them as she did Wei Wuxian, to play with Wen Yueying, to make Wen Linfeng's young face warm with shy blood.

Three weeks had gone since then. Wei Wuxian had brought Zhu Yuansu and the Wen children with him to the Pier when they all headed home, delighting Wen Yueying with tales of the place where he grew, eager to see how she would like it. And she loved it, as he had expected; she ran and ran, muddying her clothes, staining her hands and hair with dirt. She loved everything he had to show, she loved the training clothes she was given and which were so much easier to move in. She loved the room she slept in even more, after learning that it had been Wei Wuxian's.

Wei Wuxian could not live in it anymore without remembering Wen Qing's hands pulling the golden core out of him.

"I met them when we were all in Qishan for indoctrination. You remember this."

"I remember that Wen Chao made you sleep in their omega house, yes," Jiang Yanli replied.

Wei Wuxian's disgust upon hearing the man's name was no lesser now than it had been when he crushed Wen Chao's wrist under his foot. He made himself look at the water, made himself lick his lips to chase sudden dryness away.

"You never told me then what you were doing in that house, however."

"I spent time with them," Wei Wuxian said. "They were all very surprised by me. I think I had to answer at least a thousand questions."

Jiang Yanli chuckled and replied, "Yes, I can imagine."

She could not.

There was no way she could imagine the least of it—the house and the children, Wen Linfeng's terror about the moonless tea, about her own future. But Wei Wuxian could not explain it to her even if he wanted to.

"I'm glad you didn't grow up in there," Jiang Yanli said softly.

A glance her way told him that she was staring at the forlorn house almost dipped into the river, where a man had once grown old and died without ever setting foot outside. Where Wei Wuxian had spent his fevers alone and hungry.

Thankfully, she did not wait for him to answer. He could not think of anything to say. She took him by the arm and led him onto the bridge, saying, "I think I hear A-Ying laughing. She must have caught the bird."
Wen Yueying had, and was only too proud to show her catch to them. She refused to let Wei Wuxian hold the hen for her even when it started pecking at her fingers to try and make her drop it.

They ate in easy companionship that night, together around a wide table of the kitchen, surrounded by the smell of cooked meat. Wei Wuxian had not much appetite, and the vapor coming from the wide copper pots made him feel a little ill, but he feasted on other things. On Wen Yueying’s voice when she called Jiang Yanli ‘jiejie’, on Wen Yiqian's red face as he recalled just how soft the hen's feathers were. On Wen Linfeng, sitting by Jiang Yanli, making shy conversation with her with worship in her eyes.

Zhu Yuansu did not join them. He had been fevered for days and refused to come out of the room Wei Wuxian had given him, not even to eat. Every night, Wei Wuxian knocked on his door. Every night, silence answered, and he left by the foot of it another serving of food that the servants would find untouched the next morning.

"I want a story," Wen Yueying ordered when Wei Wuxian accompanied her to his former bedroom. She shared it with Wen Yiqian. He had found him a room as well on the first night, but habits were hard to break for children so young. After the third morning in a row had found the both of them sleeping in the same bed, Wei Wuxian had given up.

Wen Linfeng would have probably joined them too, had her own room not been close to Jiang Yanli’s. Yanli did not say much about it, but Wei Wuxian saw the way she smiled at the oldest of the three children. He knew they must be spending time together.

"Aren't you too old for this?" Wei Wuxian asked with half a smile.

"I'm not," Wen Yueying replied adamantly.

"And here I thought I heard you call yourself all grown up only yesterday…"

She pouted fiercely. Wei Wuxian could not help but feel something in him give at the sight of it, of her, so loose and free within his home. It tugged at him through the fatigue haunting his steps.

Jiang Yanli came to his rescue. "A-Xian was always very good at telling stories," she told the girl with a smile. "Sometimes he even made up things, and we all believed him like fools until the lie was revealed."

"A-Ying doesn't lie," Wen Yueying replied, deeply offended.

"Oh, you think so, but I have so much to tell you…"

She was so very good at this. So very good at catching their attention, at holding them abreath with words or playing, at plowing them with distractions. Wei Wuxian watched her magic the two children into listening to tales from his childhood, when he would run through the river and steal lotus stems for snacking, when he would chase after a bird for hours in order to catch it with an arrow, until he and Jiang Cheng were lost in the forest and covered in mud from head to toe. Until she had to come fetch them, guided by the sound of their crying.

He could barely remember any of it. All of it felt like another life entirely, like something out of a dream, so vivid in the moment and yet impossible to recall afterward. Gone like a wisp of wind.

"They are both very cute," Jiang Yanli told him.

It was a while later, after Wen Yueying and Wen Yiqian had finally succumbed to sleep, after Jiang
Yanli had tucked them into bed and blown out the candles. She had closed the door slowly in order not to make a noise.

"Especially little A-Ying. She's so much like you, I feel like I've gone back in the past."

Her words ached within him. "She's much smarter than I ever was," he replied, and the playfulness he tried for fell flat and lonely.

He didn't know why the thought of being compared to any of these children made him feel so queasy.

But this was Jiang Yanli. It was Jiang Yanli looking at him with worried eyes, her gentle face framed by night-light so that it seemed so much kinder still. Wei Wuxian allowed her to take hold of his arm and lead him away from the bedroom door, and part of him was feverishly glad that he was still permitted her touch.

Part of him cried with relief that this had not been taken from him: the ability to touch her, to have her touch him, without wanting to push her away.

"They love you," she murmured. "It's obvious."

I love them too, he thought, but the words would not come out.

"You're very good with children, A-Xian. Do you think you'd like to have any one day?"

Wei Wuxian pulled his arm out of her hold.

Jiang Yanli's steps halted. She turned to face him fully, her robes only slightly creased by the childish hands which had held it as she narrated Wei Wuxian's childhood. War had not completely vanished from her face; there were bruises under her eyes, and a grieved quality to the way she held herself, to the way she held the sword at her hip that Yu Ziyuan had forged for her. She looked sleepless.

"A-Xian?" she called, surprised.

"Why would you ask me this?" Wei Wuxian blurted out.

They had come near the half-built dining hall, where only weeks ago had the garish Wen clan insignia been taken off of Yunmengjiang's banner. Where a few years ago, Wei Wuxian had sat in silken robes, and watched a man bargain for him to Madam Yu.

He felt still the touch of those light robes, the open collar which had let in cool air and made him shiver. That air was the same as the one in Yiling, when it had slithered between skin and grassy ground as Wen Chao lay over and in him.

"I just," Jiang Yanli said, "I just wondered… We used to talk about this, didn't we? Don't you remember?"

"About what?" he replied foggily.

Her hand came to rest by his elbow. She squeezed it, staring at him, her brow once more marked with worry. "Marriage," she replied. "The future."

He couldn't remember at all.

He stepped backward. He gently pulled away from her touch and smiled at her, feeling hollow all the time, as if rid of his own substance. "Ah, I think I'm tired, shijie," he told her. "I should head to sleep..."
"Of course," Jiang Yanli replied. He could tell by her voice that she was confused and hurt, but the fear within him could not abate enough to make him soothe her. "Have a good night, A-Xian."

He did not sleep at all.

He tossed and turn on the bed of the small room he had picked for himself after giving his away. His body grew sweaty, although the nights were fresh now. His whole skin seemed to burn on him, seemed to want to detach from him, and Wei Wuxian wished that it would. Would that he could pull it off entirely, wash it, and put it on again. Perhaps then it could settle over bones and muscles the right way, instead of feeling to him as though someone had pulled on it and misaligned it from his skeleton.

But he could not, and neither could he go back to the time Jiang Yanli spoke of with such simple nostalgia. So he lay over the bed and sweated the night out, with his off-set skin, with his dream-like memories.

He tried not to think of her question and feel as though his insides were being emptied out.

Zhu Yuansu came out of his fever even more frightened than before.

He did not come out of his room again. At the beginning, when Wei Wuxian had taken him to the Pier and shown him around, he could be pulled out by the Wen children. He sometimes shared a meal with them, sometimes exchanged a few words with Wen Linfeng, whom he seemed to consider the most proper out of them all. He never spoke to Jiang Cheng or Jiang Yanli, however, and very little to Wei Wuxian.

After his fever, he picked up the food left by his door every day, but never set a foot outside again. His behavior filled Wei Wuxian with anger. He would knock on the door of Zhu Yuansu's bedroom each evening and ask to speak with him. He tried to be kind. He tried to make himself quiet and welcoming, so that the frightened man would not think him a threat, but Zhu Yuansu simply did not answer. After a week of such silent treatment had passed, Wei Wuxian stopped trying.

Jiang Cheng found him as he sulked on the edge of a window. It was a cool and overcast evening, and the servants' quarters where Wei Wuxian had hid were rustling with the murmur of conversation. Some said the hearths should be lit so that the halls of the Pier could remain warm that night. Others argued that it was still too soon, and that surely the sun would be back tomorrow to make them all suffocate. Wei Wuxian had sat there with a foot upon the ledge, with his knee raised to his chest. He had hoped that the noise would distract him.

Jiang Cheng's storm-like scent reached him before the sound of his steps could. Still, he did not look away from the river beneath him which the sky had colored green and grey. He spun Chenqing with his fingers in restlessness, waiting until Jiang Cheng's footfalls stopped right behind him.

"Wei Wuxian."

"If you're looking for the weapon master, he's gone to the village to buy wood," Wei Wuxian said. "You just missed him."
"I'm not looking for the weapon master," Jiang Cheng replied, his voice irate.

Wei Wuxian let his leg fall from the window's edge and looked at his shidi.

One could not have painted a more severe difference between Jiang Cheng as he had found him in those woods in Qishan, and Jiang Cheng as he stood now, in full sect leader regalia. His uniform was spotless and richly sewn, thick now to parry the chill of oncoming winter. His face had filled again with good meals and good rest. Sandu hung from his waist, recovered at last from the treasure hall of Qishanwen's Nightless City.

He looked so much like his mother.

"We need to talk," Jiang Cheng told him.

"Then talk," Wei Wuxian retorted. "I'm all ears."

Jiang Cheng's teeth ground together in annoyance. "I need to know," he said, "what you are planning to do with those omega."

"Nothing," Wei Wuxian replied. "Except to feed them and clothe them and protect them from harm. I told you this already."

Jiang Cheng stared at him in silence for a while. Then he pulled out of his sleeve a rolled piece of paper, which he handed him wordlessly.

Its content was nothing Wei Wuxian had not expected: pleasantries from Jin Guangshan, an invitation to Lanling which felt like a summons, thick and convoluted words and imagery, begging the Yunmengjiang sect leader to understand that some trophies of war needed to be returned.

For the first time in days, Wei Wuxian felt sick not with nausea, but with sheer dislike of a man.

"I'm not giving them away," he told Jiang Cheng in no uncertain terms. He resisted the urge to burn the letter right here with a talisman, and instead gave it back to him with one last disgusted look.

"They aren't mine to give away."

"I wouldn't fall for the Jin sect's threats anyway," Jiang Cheng retorted.

He was offended too, though for reasons different than Wei Wuxian's.

"Jin Guangshan has very thick skin if he thinks he can just appoint himself a new Wen Ruohan and order us for anything."

"Then I don't see what the problem is," Wei Wuxian said.

"The problem," Jiang Cheng replied, "is that I know you've been looking for more of them. I know you've been going round the neighboring towns, forcing houses open, threatening people with that flute of yours."

Wei Wuxian fell silent.

To Jiang Cheng, this must be as good as a confession. His face lightened with rage, then with exhaustion. Wei Wuxian knew that if the topic had been anything else, Jiang Cheng would have let away all of the ugly words now gathering through his mind—but Jiang Cheng, except for one memorable time, had always been rather shy with this. With Wei Wuxian's status and what it meant for him. He never liked to speak of it if he could avoid it.
"It's one thing when they belong to Wen dogs," Jiang Cheng said. "It is one thing if Jin Guangshan rattles our front door asking for spoils of war. I can refuse him, I can say that Yunneng was there first and only claimed their due. But I cannot have people under my protection come to me, asking me why a member of my sect threatened to have ghosts eat them alive if they did not give away their omega."

"I couldn't find any," Wei Wuxian said. "They've all gone from the houses, all married. So, you can rest easy. I'll be looking farther ahead now, not from people who answer to Yunnengjiang."

"And what will you do when you find them, Wei Wuxian? Will you bring them all here? Shall we find every single unwedded omega in the country a room in the Lotus Pier?"

It was Wei Wuxian's turn to grind his teeth in frustration. He pushed himself off of the window ledge, standing so that Jiang Cheng had to look him right in the eye. "And what of it?" he asked. "You said it wasn't a problem when I brought them with me, you said you didn't care."

"I said this for four of them, three of whom have no family to claim them anymore," Jiang Cheng replied. "I did not say that you could just go around kidnapping people, or that our sect would be here to fend off angry visitors asking for their omega back."

Wei Wuxian understood, then, why Jiang Cheng looked so distraught with the whole thing.

"Did someone come asking for Zhu Yuansu?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Jiang Cheng spat, red in the face with shame. "Earlier today. They won't leave before they have him back."

So this was why Jiang Cheng had refused Jiang Yanli so harshly when she had asked if he planned to dine with her and the children.

Wei Wuxian remained silent a long while, looking at Jiang Cheng in a daze, watching shadows cover his face as daylight faded behind him.

"They're not of Yunneng," he said eventually. Each word pulled itself out of him painfully. "You could just refuse them."

And he saw the expression that washed over Jiang Cheng's face. He knew before he even replied that his words would cut deeply.

"If I did," Jiang Cheng declared, "our sect would be nothing more than a thief in the eyes of all others."

Wei Wuxian's jaw ached. *Who cares?* he wanted to ask him. He wanted to grab his collar and shake him, to ride the emotions flooding him even through the gaping hole that the absence of his core had dug; he wanted to tell Jiang Cheng, *Who cares about keeping face now? Why is this more important to you than the rest?*

Jiang Cheng had once defended him before the other sects. He had once called Jin Zixuan callous in Gusu after the Jin heir had called Wei Wuxian omega and nothing else. He had claimed Wei Wuxian to be a talented cultivator, a disciple of Yunneng, in front of Wen Chao.

Why couldn't he show the same bravery for Zhu Yuansu?

"He doesn't even want to stay," Jiang Cheng said, seeing that Wei Wuxian had no words in him to reply with. His tone was not begging, not fully, but not far from it either. "Sister told me all about it,
"You don't know anything," Wei Wuxian replied.

Jiang Cheng grabbed his shoulder tightly, painfully. "No, I don't," he said. Each of his fingers felt like a blade digging through cloth and skin. "I don't like it. I remember the state he was in when you found him, but he's recovered now. He's healthy again. If he wants to go back, who are you to stop him? His family wants him."

"You don't understand—"

"I will not put our sect in danger again because of you!"

Wei Wuxian's mouth closed.

"You can't take every single one of them, Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng said. The edge of despair in his words had thickened—each of them felt like a slap to the face. "You can't protect them all. I don't have the means, I'm sorry, I know that this is important to you. I know this."

"Why are you apologizing," Wei Wuxian said slowly, "if you've already made up your mind?"

Jiang Cheng shuddered. He seemed to realize just how tightly he was holding Wei Wuxian's shoulder; his fingers loosened and left him entirely. The weight of them remained on Wei Wuxian's skin like ghosts.

"You can't shelter them all," he said. He sounded grieved, which made it all the worse. "It's a fool's dream. I'm doing all I can, I'm trying to rebuild what father and mother left me, but I can't—"

His voice choked. Despite the strength he had regained, despite the comfort of the war being far behind him, Jiang Cheng looked completely exhausted. He was overseeing all the repairs of the main house. He was training and recruiting people, finding masters to teach the ways of cultivation in his stead when work buried him alive. He asked Wei Wuxian for no help in this, even though he wished to; even though, for weeks now, he had looked at Wei Wuxian in anger, wondering why Wei Wuxian wasn't offering to teach.

And, in truth, did Wei Wuxian have a right to ask this of him? Did he have a right to populate the sect whose destruction he caused with people he wanted to save, when Jiang Cheng would be the one to deal with the consequences?

"The children can stay," Jiang Cheng said once his emotion had gone way. He stood once again to the full of his height, his chin lifted forward, the way it always was when he made a promise. The way it was when he had told Wei Wuxian, *I'll keep all the dogs away from you.*

"Jin Guangshan has no right to ask for them in the first place."

"They are of the Wen sect," Wei Wuxian replied faintly. "I doubt many of the sect leaders will care."

"Even I can put this aside for three children who had never set foot outside of their house before," Jiang Cheng said. "Wei Wuxian, I swear it. I won't let anyone have them, just like I wouldn't let anyone have you."

Coldness spread through Wei Wuxian from fingertips to toes.
He breathed in and out softly. He let his freezing lungs warm with the fire that the servants did light in all the torches of the corridor. When he thought he could speak again without feeling a heavy weight at his back, he pleaded, "Let me try to convince him."

"I've already told Zhu Yuansu that his family is here," Jiang Cheng replied mournfully. "Wei Wuxian—"

Wei Wuxian turned his back to him and walked away.

Only a few seconds seemed to go by as he traversed the Pier toward the quarters where Zhu Yuansu and the children slept—the ones he and Jiang Cheng had slept in, once, before Jiang Cheng took his mother's room in the washed-out pavilion standing above the river; before Wei Wuxian discovered that he could not sleep there without feeling his own heart tear away from him.

He felt no wind upon his skin. He smelled no water and no mud, no flowers, no berries. He hardly seemed to see anything, except for the half-open door of a room which had not allowed anyone in or out for days.

"Zhu Yuansu!" he called.

But there was no answer. The room was empty, the bed made, the candlewax cleaned off of cabinets and tables, as if no one had slept here in days. Wei Wuxian kept calling for the name as he ran through the halls of his home, looking for a sign of the man, for a trace of winescent.

He found it near the stables. Zhu Yuansu had taken the long way toward the main hall, no doubt afraid to cross paths with anyone. He sneaked there between shadows and walls, looking like a thief, a murderer caught red-handed. He had put on again the ragged clothes that he had worn when Wei Wuxian first met him.

"Zhu Yuansu," he called him breathlessly, stepping onto the damp grass.

Zhu Yuansu stilled at the sound of his voice. His achingly sweet scent thickened the air with his fright, and Wei Wuxian was not ready for it to be directed to him, for those eyes to stare at him as if he were not made of the same fabric, but instead someone to resent and fear.

"Young master Wei," Zhu Yuansu said softly. Fearfully.

Wei Wuxian took a step forward. "I told you not to call me that," he said. "You don't need to be formal with me."

"I wouldn't dare," Zhu Yuansu replied.

He bowed until his back was as straight as a ruler.

"Don't bow to me." Wei Wuxian could not stop his own blood from rushing up his neck. "Do not bow to me," he spat out, all of his skin hot to the touch.

"It is what should be done," Zhu Yuansu said stubbornly, "when meeting someone of higher status."

"I am not of higher status."

"Can you prove it?"

"Why would I lie about this?" Wei Wuxian exclaimed, desperate.

He felt torn three ways over, his misshapen skin laid awkwardly upon his bones, his back bowed
"Why would I lie to you!" he howled. "Why would I fucking pretend to be something I'm not, what could I possibly gain from claiming to be omega? You tell me, Zhu Yuansu! You tell me what your status has given you except grief, you tell me what I could possibly envy about being like you!"

"Perhaps," Zhu Yuansu replied, "you would hate yourself a little less if you were."

Wei Wuxian choked. His lungs seared with the pain of it; his belly grew an ache right below his ribs, as if he had run miles without breathing properly.

"What?" he croaked.

Zhu Yuansu stared at him as if he were the one who should be pitied. "You ask me what I was given," he said. "I have a house. I have safety. I have a family—"

"Your family left you alone to starve!"

"They didn't have a choice, young master Wei," Zhu Yuansu exclaimed. "Who was it that made horrible things crawl over the village, who was it that made them all flee? They would have all died if they had not left as quickly as possible."

Wei Wuxian could hardly think. He could hardly blink even with the nightly wind wetting his eyes, so shocked was he by Zhu Yuansu's words.

"Tell me," Zhu Yuansu said to him, "what has your status given you?"

"I'm," Wei Wuxian stuttered. "I'm like you."

"No, you are not," Zhu Yuansi replied, his voice ripe with pity. "You may be omega, but you and I could not be more different."

Wei Wuxian drew back as if the man before him had unsheathed a sword.

"You were raised irresponsibly," Zhu Yuansu went on. His frail voice had grown stronger with every word he said, and it grew stronger now, until he looked to be the one imparting truth upon Wei Wuxian. "It skewed your vision of the world. It hurt you deeply, and I feel sorry for you."

"I was not hurt by freedom," Wei Wuxian snapped.

"Weren't you?"

Wei Wuxian had held his own against so many others in the past. He had spoken back to Lan Wangji and Lan Qiren, to Jin Zixuan, to Wen Chao. Earlier, he had spoken back to Jiang Cheng, in spite of how deeply indebted he was to him and his clan.

Why was it that in front of this man, this near-stranger who should be the one to understand him the most, he could not find a word to say?

"You hate yourself so much," Zhu Yuansu told him, his pitying eyes almost unbearable to meet, his frail and helpless body suddenly become nightmarish. "You hate your status, and you hate me as well. It's not your fault. People decided to expose you to the world without a thought for what would become of you, and it was irresponsible of them."

"You're wrong," Wei Wuxian breathed. "I don't hate you."
"You hate my way to live. Isn't it all the same, young master?"

No, Wei Wuxian wanted to say. He wanted more than anything to yell it at this foolish man, to make him understand that he was the one in the wrong. That Wei Wuxian had never hated him and never would.

Zhu Yuansu's eyes softened. He spoke to him then not as an omega, but as someone older; just as Wei Wuxian had spoken to Wen Linfeng so long ago in Qishan, and made her feel as if the very ground were slipping from beneath her feet.

"You can hardly look at me," he said mercilessly. "You do not like to speak to me, you do not like that I prefer to remain hidden. You wish that I were like those children of yours."

"They are not mine," Wei Wuxian replied, sickened.

Zhu Yuansu shook his head. "No," he said. "I dare say you would make a very poor father to any progeny of yours."

Wei Wuxian swallowed back the bile rising up his throat. He licked away the taste of grass from his lips. "They are happy," he forced out. "Can't you see that?"

"Of course they are. They're children, the eldest isn't even mature yet. They don't know that living like this will break them like it has broken you."

Wen Qing's voice came to him from a faraway memory, from before the emptiness and before the fall: *Don't make the mistake of thinking every omega you meet is your friend, Wei Ying."

"So you'll just go back there," he said. "Just go back to that house, to being alone."

"Yes," Zhu Yuansu replied, "I will. I am lucky that they still want me. You should be grateful that your family wants you, too."

He meant that Wei Wuxian should feel lucky to be wanted at all.

Wei Wuxian did not move from his place in the shadows even after Zhu Yuansu walked away. He followed him with his eyes until his thin silhouette vanished behind a wider hall, and even then he looked to be slithering around like someone trying to hide something. Even now, he clung to shade and darkness as if it could fully hide him.

His wine-like scent made Wei Wuxian want to throw up long after he was gone.

Night fell over Yunmeng, clouded and dark, without a star in sight. Moonlight was but a halo through the thinnest of the clouds, and only the torchlight coming from open windows lit the space around Wei Wuxian enough for him to see. He sat on the grass with his head between his raised knees. He clutched his ankles with his hands until his knuckles ached.

It was Jiang Yanli who found him what felt like hours later, her voice soft and hurried, her cool scent like a balm for the nausea in him. "A-Xian?" she called in so kind a voice that the sound alone shivered within his chest. She was a way ahead, stepping slowly in the dark.

"I'm here," he replied.

His voice was as rough as if he had screamed for days.

"Oh, A-Xian," she said once she reached his side.
He must make for a very poor sight indeed, with his miserable face and dirt-stained clothes. Jiang Yanli kneeled by his side, hesitating for all but a second before putting an arm around his hunched shoulders.

"I heard," she whispered. "About young master Zhu. I thought you might be upset about it."

Wei Wuxian unstuck his tongue from his palate and asked, "Is he gone already?"

"Yes. He and his family left a while ago. Perhaps he left a message for you with A-Cheng, to say goodbye?"

Wei Wuxian laughed dryly. He shook her arm off of him with as much kindness as he could and pushed himself to his feet.

He almost fell when he managed to rise fully—his knees felt weak, and the grass and houses around him vanished for a second behind grey and black spots. Jiang Yanli caught his elbow when he swayed, calling his name in worry.

"Sorry," he breathed out. "I'm just... I'm just tired, I think."

"You haven't eaten yet," Jiang Yanli said pressingly. "Come now, follow me, I've left soup on the stove for you."

"You spoil me, shijie," Wei Wuxian replied. It was enough to make her smile.

He didn't need her help to walk to the kitchen, thankfully. Jiang Yanli remained by his side without needing to support him as they crossed the different halls. The Pier was shrouded in silence at this time of night, most of the torches unlit, most of its inhabitants asleep. Wei Wuxian regretted for a moment not saying good night to Wen Yueying, who would surely pout at him for it the next day. She could hold such a grudge.

"Sit down," Jiang Yanli told him. She went so far as to pull a chair for him at the table and squeeze his shoulder while he sat. "I made lotus rib and pork soup for A-Qian and A-Ying. It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Did they like it?" Wei Wuxian asked eagerly. "Your soup is always so good."

"Yes, they did. A-Qian even asked to be served twice."

Little Wen Yiqian had a fragile stomach, and often pulled faces at the dishes placed before him if he did not like the taste of them. Picturing him asking for more of his shijie's soup made Wei Wuxian feel a little less cold.

Then Jiang Yanli lifted the cover of the pot simmering upon the stove, and Wei Wuxian's smile faded. Gas surged again up his chest, much more potent than before, until he felt the burn of it at the back of his throat.

He rose hurriedly from his chair. It slid away from the table with a loud creak of wood, catching Jiang Yanli's attention before Wei Wuxian could slip away unseen.

"A-Xian?"

Wei Wuxian put a hand over his mouth. It was shaking badly, almost as much as his entrails shook.
"Sorry," he forced out, "I need to—"

He only had enough time to cross the length of the kitchen, to push open the small door at its end which led to a vegetable garden, before he fell to his knees in the dirt and retched.

Nausea was common to him now, another symptom he attributed to the loss of his core easily—he couldn't eat without feeling it, couldn't sleep without feeling it, but it was not usually this violent. It had not been this sudden and overwhelming since his days in the Burial Mounds, where the very smell of the air was enough to have him on his knees for hours, his throat burning as he expelled what little he had managed to eat or drink.

He had not eaten today, and so there was nothing to expel but bile. It tore itself out of him like a stab wound through the stomach, making him shake from thigh to shoulder. Jiang Yanli called his name several times as she ran after him, and she was not afraid either to kneel again by him and push away his hair so that it would be spared his vomiting.

Her hands were cool upon his skin. After he was done—after an eternity of digging his own fingers into dirt in order not to fall—Wei Wuxian let himself rest against her side.

She never stopped stroking his clammy forehead.

He could not have told how long he stayed like this until he found the strength to speak. "I'm sorry," he told her. Saliva dripped from his mouth, but he felt too tired to wipe it away.

Jiang Yanli shushed him as if he were still a child. "Do you feel better now?" she asked gently.

"Yes," he lied.

He felt miserable.

It was impossible to tell if she believed him, but either way, she helped him to his feet and walked him to his room. They went the long way around the kitchen rather than traverse it again, for which Wei Wuxian was grateful.

He washed his mouth and hair with weak hands while she prepared tea for him. He could hear her through the door of the little water room, walking hurriedly around his bed, leaving and then coming back a few minutes later.

"I brought you something light to eat," she said once he emerged from the little room. There was a steaming bowl of plain rice on his bedside table, as well as tea in a rust-colored pot. "I know you probably feel sick, but you need something on your stomach, A-Xian."

"Thank you, shijie," he replied.

He ate the rice more for the relief on her face than out of true desire. Even this much rested queasily in his belly. His throat ached still from the minutes of retching.

Jiang Yanli stayed with him until he finished the tea. She sat by his side in a chair as he lay in the small bed and took his hand in hers. Her fingers stroked over the little scars on his knuckles that had gone so white and thin, they were nearly invisible if one did not know they were here.

Zhu Yuansu's accusations rang through him like the aftermath of falling, like hitting ground after tumbling down a cliff: You hate yourself. You hate your status.

"A-Xian," his shijie murmured, her cool hand squeezing his in spite of how sweaty it was. She
sounded desolate. "You're not well at all, are you."

"I'm fine," Wei Wuxian mumbled. "I must've caught a cold, walking alone tonight."

"It was rather chilly…"

He could tell that she had more she wanted to ask him.

He would have to be an utter idiot not to notice how much time she had spent with him recently, how careful she was to put food before him when he shared meals with her and the Wen children, how she inquired each day after his sleep, worry wrinkling her forehead. Jiang Yanli had always cared for him in a way no one else did. Not Jiang Cheng, who was proud and awkward. Not Jiang Fengmian, who had feared his wife's reprimands.

Wei Wuxian held Jiang Yanli's hand tightly. "It looks like I'll always need my shijie when I'm sick," he joked feebly. "I feel like I've gone back to being ten years old. A little cold and I need you to tuck me in."

"A-Cheng is just the same," Jiang Yanli smiled at him. "The both of you, I don't know how you'll ever manage on your own."

"You'll just have to always be with us so we don't die of sickness."

She poked his forehead with a finger of her free hand in false anger; then she stroked wet hair out of his face, laying the flat of her palm there as she used to whenever a bout of sickness took him.

Those memories of his childhood did not feel like dreams at all.

"Don't worry about me," Wei Wuxian told her. "I hate when you worry."

"How can I not worry?" she asked, barely louder than a whisper. "A-Xian, you do not eat, you do not sleep… You disappear for hours each day, and we hear such horrible tales from the places you go—do you truly think us so heartless, that we wouldn't worry when we see you like this? Did you think we wouldn't care at all?"

Their linked hands wetted with her tears. Hers was shaking in his grip, now, and he was the one to hold her rather than the other way around.

"I thought at first, surely it is the war," she went on haltingly. "As long as you were alive, I could wait. I thought after everything was over, after we came home, you would tell us what happened to you, but you did not. Where were you? What happened to you? Why do you look so ill all the time?"

Wei Wuxian swallowed and replied, "I can't tell you. It would make you more miserable if I did."

His words only served to make her shake with silent sobs.

He stroked her hand with his cold and clammy fingers. He knew his decision to be sound; he knew how badly she would take to knowing how he had lived in the months before he escaped the Burial Mounds, and he knew that should she learn of it, she would grow sick with guilt herself.

As for the rest, it was as Zhu Yuansu said: Wei Wuxian should feel lucky to have a family at all.

"I'm fine, shijie," he told her as gently as he could.

Her chair groaned against the wooden floor when she left it to kneel by his bed. Wei Wuxian did not
protest the arm she spread over his middle despite the nausea still clogging up his chest and throat, and simply let her hold him and dampen his sheets with tears. He stroked her hair with his free hand, breathed in the cool beta-scent of her which always roamed through the halls of the Lotus Pier. She cried silently against him. Never did her hand let go of his.

"I'm just fine."

Chapter End Notes

Can you believe I thought I'd be able to reach Wen Qing & Wen Ning in this chapter... I'm a fool. Pwease weave cwoomments I just wrote this in a single day.

J'en peux plus d'écrire en anglais putain j'ai le vocabulaire d'un gamin de 5ème dans cette langue. Balavoine avait raison j'aimerais mieux être un oiseau
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Warnings: off-screen rape and murder, denial of pregnancy, off-screen child birth. This one's the heaviest chapter in the whole story, so take care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 19

The Golden Carp Tower of Lanling reigned over the peak it was perched upon in obvious show of power. It gave out the same impression of grandeur and timeless magnificence that Qishan's Nightless City did, something neither the Lotus Pier nor the Cloud Recesses had ever reached for. Perhaps Qinghe's Unclean Realm did as well; perhaps this foothold of the last great cultivation sect also towered overland, its masters greedy for renown, but Wei Wuxian doubted it.

The city laid under the Tower was flourishing, too. Colorful and noisy, threaded with quick mountain rivers flowing downstream in a hurry, trodden upon by merchants and craftsmen in a flurry of voices. But there was no mistaking the distance put between those people and the golden gate of the Jin clan's household. Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were arrested at the foot of hundreds of stairsteps leading to the great halls. They were asked to dismount their horses by a pair of alpha women clad in golden robes.

"Damn Jin Guangshan," Jiang Cheng muttered as they started their ascension.

Over their heads, a few cultivators rode in on swords. None of them were asked to tire themselves by climbing the magnificent stairs. This was a statement, Wei Wuxian thought darkly. A sign of unwelcome laid in all the underhanded ways that the Jin sect leader prized.

It did not give him incentive to reply to Jiang Cheng’s words, however.

Jiang Cheng perhaps felt that this was due to resentment, though it was not entirely. He remained silent as they walked up the stairs side by side, one hand grasping Sandu's scabbard in irritation, the other balled by his hip into a fist. Wei Wuxian did not touch Suibian which hung at his own waist.

The hole within him pulsed with every tiring step. He felt not sleepy with it, although for a few nights now, dread had kept him awake, whispering dark omens of the discussion conference to be held that very evening. Ever-present nausea crawled just shy of his throat instead.

He stopped when they reached a small promontory about two-thirds of the way up. From here the city was far enough below them that more of the land around could be glimpsed; and it was the sight of a familiar red flag at the foot of the mountain that halted his steps.

It seemed to be speared into the ground in the middle of a small encampment. Ant-sized people scurried there from one end of a wide enclosure to the other, surrounded by guards on horseback.

Prisoners of war.
"Wei Wuxian," came Jiang Cheng's hesitant voice.

Wei Wuxian looked up.

Jiang Cheng had gone a few steps above and beyond before realizing that Wei Wuxian had stopped. He called him now subduedly, as he had been wont to since Zhu Yuansu had left the Lotus Pier forever. He had barely spoken to Wei Wuxian since then, and looked full of awkwardness every time, even when he had shared with him Jin Guangshan's invitation, which requested Wei Wuxian's presence rather than his alone.

Wei Wuxian still had not made up his mind about whether this was a bad or terrible thing. He could hardly think that Jin Guangshan, who had ignored his existence whenever he visited the Pier, would want for his company now in order to be friendly.

"I'm coming," Wei Wuxian replied at last.

It was only a few words, and devoid of much meaning, but Jiang Cheng's brow smoothed over immediately.

At the entrance of the sunlit hall where the conference would take place, they were greeted by a servant boy who told them all the usual pleasantries—that they would be shown to their rooms soon, that his sect leader would welcome them in a few minutes, that refreshments would be served to them. His deference showed no sign of the rancor which Jin Guangshan must feel for them now. Before he could take them away, however, a man opened the doors to the dining hall from within.

More than the red mark drawn between both of his eyes, the air of arrogant boredom he exuded showed him to be part of the Jin clan.

Wei Wuxian would have only glimpsed at him for a second before looking away, but the man stopped short at the sight of him and Jiang Cheng, a scandalized expression tightening the inelegant lines of his face.

"You," he said in obvious fury.

Wei Wuxian realized a tad lately that it was him the man was addressing.

"Yes?" he replied, skipping over ceremony altogether.

Perhaps he would have bothered with it if the man's weakly alpha-scent had not reached him then and made him want to sneer. As it was, the thought of dealing with yet another crisis of status from a stranger annoyed him to no end, and he would rather hasten it so he could reach his guest room and be alone at last.

But the man seemed to know him; he called, "Wei Wuxian," in such deep and embarrassed anger, that Wei Wuxian had no doubt they had met before.

"Is there a problem?" Jiang Cheng asked loudly, having noticed that Wei Wuxian was straggling behind him again.

The face that the man pulled at the sight of someone of higher status than himself was almost comical. Yet it was not enough to cow him, for he barely nodded in Jiang Cheng's direction before spitting to Wei Wuxian, "How dare you come here."

"I was invited," Wei Wuxian replied evenly. "Do I know you?"
He was so tired of it all. At least in Yunmeng, even those who cringed away from him had learned not to make a fuss.

The man spluttered and reddened, and it seemed that his whole face swelled under the strength of whatever grudge he held. "Do you 'know' me?" he parroted, seething. "How dare you!"

His hand came to the handle of his golden sword as if he meant to unsheathe it and ask for a duel there and then; but another voice joined him from within the dining hall, calling, "Jin Zixun!"

Jin Zixuan emerged from behind the door, his own forehead wrinkled with annoyance as he looked between Wei Wuxian and his clansman.

Wei Wuxian was not looking at him, however.

It was coming back to him, now: that oddly-delicate sword in the man's grasp, that name which Wei Wuxian had already heard Jin Zixuan call in such a voice, years ago. The sight of a rude alpha seated by the dais in the Lotus Pier's welcoming hall, exchanging pleasantries with Madam Yu, bargaining for ownership of Wei Wuxian light-heartedly.

Bile spread over his tongue so bitterly that for a single second, he feared his own anger would make him retch again.

"I remember now," he said out loud.

The two men before him turned to him at once.

"Jin Zixun," Wei Wuxian muttered without an ounce of respect to his words or voice. "You're not any less unsightly now than when I saw you last."

Jin Zixun's thick face paled and then reddened in outrage.

"Wei Wuxian!" he cried, and this time he did unsheathe part of his sword.

"What are you doing?" Jiang Cheng answered angrily.

Wei Wuxian had no doubt that those words were half-directed to him, although Jiang Cheng was only looking at Jin Zixun.

Surprisingly, it was Jin Zixuan who broke the fight-to-be.

He grabbed onto his cousin's arm tightly, forcing the half of the sword back into its sheath with the strength of one shoulder alone. "Wei Wuxian is a guest here, Zixun," he said in a tight voice. "My father asked for his presence."

"Oh, your father did," Jin Zixuan replied mockingly. With his face as shamed and furious as it was, the effect was lost to all. Still he shook his arm out of Jin Zixuan's hold and said, sneering, "Yes, I'm sure Uncle was the one who asked for this omega to be here."


His own face had flushed with blood.

Jin Zixun seemed to have some modicum of manner left to him. He huffed like a bothered horse and turned his back to them all, leaving the way he had come with not a word of salute to Jiang Cheng, who watched all of this in confusion.
"What did you do to that man?" Jiang Cheng asked Wei Wuxian.

Neither he nor Jiang Yanli had ever told Jiang Cheng of what Madam Yu had once tried to do while he and Jiang Fengmian were away on a hunt. He felt very little like disclosing it now; Jiang Cheng never liked to speak of such things about him, and anyway Wei Wuxian was too mortified still by the ordeal to wish to dig up the memory.

Jin Zixuan cleared his throat. He nodded shakily to them, his face still red, his sword hand moving oddly before him, as if he did not know what to do with it. "Sect leader Jiang," he greeted. "I apologize on behalf of my cousin. He is rather ruder than the rest."

His eyes met Wei Wuxian's when he said this, something like a smile lifting his lips at the corners, though it quickly vanished.

"Is your sister well?" he asked Jiang Cheng rather brusquely.

"Yes," Jiang Cheng replied, surprised. "She has remained in Yunmeng to oversee reparations while we are here."

"I hear the Lotus Pier is well on its way to regaining all of its former glory. I should like to visit in the future and reassure my father of our greatest ally's health."

"Yes, of course..."

Wei Wuxian lost interest in the conversation when it veered toward matters of war again. He looked over the spotless white-and-gold of the hallway they stood in—the unstained and gleaming floor below their feet, the aching neatness which hung even from the leaves of carefully-tended potted plants—and longed for home.

Wen Yueying had been so distraught upon learning that he would be gone for a few days. Wen Yiqian and Wen Linfeng were less effusive than she was with their emotions, but he had still understood their fear at being left alone, even with Jiang Yanli there to keep them company.

No matter how much he tried to reason with himself, Wei Wuxian could not parry away the fear that one of them would be gone when he returned.

"Let me take you to your rooms," Jin Zixuan was saying now, showing with one arm the length of corridor extending to their left in direction of guest quarters.

The servant boy who had waited to do just that since they arrived looked almost angry at his words.

"I'll take a walk," Wei Wuxian declared.

Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan both looked at him in surprise.

"You must be tired," Jin Zixuan said, his face pinched oddly. "You have all of the next three days to visit if you want, you should rest now."

"I'm not," Wei Wuxian retorted, though he was.

Exhausted and hollow and sleepless, and feeling all the while as though something simmered beneath his skin that he could not give a name to, pulling it inside-out, swelling like sickness through him.

He felt like vomiting again. "Your father never graced with with an invitation before today," he told
Jin Zixuan, who must truly feel off, for his face once more twisted weirdly. "I would like to visit the city."

"Yes, but—"

Jin Zixuan looked helplessly from Jiang Cheng to Wei Wuxian and back, waiting perhaps for Jiang Cheng to deny Wei Wuxian, as so many people did whenever Wei Wuxian expressed something not dictated by the people of higher status who stood by him.

He was out of luck, however. Jiang Cheng had been avoidant of Wei Wuxian since the incident with Zhu Yuansu, and surely would not insist on being in his presence now if he could avoid it. Indeed, Jiang Cheng only nodded once and quickly before walking away.

Wei Wuxian turned his back to them both and walked once more down the endless stairs.

He stopped only when he reached the same little stone bluff he had paused by while they were ascending. Here the air came more clearly to his lungs, soothing his nausea and clearing his thoughts till he felt something like himself again. The prisoner camp at the foot of the mountain was still as visible as before, the red Qishanwen flag planted in its middle still just as stark against the sloped grey land.

Wei Wuxian looked away from it and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. He near-jumped when light footsteps echoed behind him, followed by the glide of metal on leather and wood—a sword unsheathed—

But his next intake of air filled him with familiar sandalwood, and it was only Lan Wangji he found when he turned on his own feet, Chenqing held in one hand.

Lan Wangji's movements paused when their eyes met. He must have come flying and touched ground a few yards behind Wei Wuxian, for he was in the middle of sheathing Bichen. He held still until Wei Wuxian breathed out and took his hand off of his dizi.

Bichen's pommel knocked against the edge of its scabbard softly.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian greeted once the blade was out of sight. "I didn't see you, my apologies."

"No need to apologize," Lan Wangji replied in his usual even voice.

It had been less than a month and a half since Wei Wuxian had last seen him. He should not be surprised that Lan Wangji looked the same as ever: troublingly beautiful, unwasteful of so much as movement or air, ethereal again now that he was not covered in the sweat and dust of months of war.

He remembered once comparing him to the great beauties of ages past, to Lan An or Wen Mao, as they both stood above the stairs of the Nightless City. The comparison felt apt again with the white light of coming fall painted thusly over him.

Wei Wuxian felt himself smile as he had not in a long time. Lan Wangji's pale eyes caught onto light wetly; for a still and breathless second, he looked more statue than man, before he blinked and looked away.

"It is good to see you. Did you come with your brother?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Yes," Lan Wangji said softly.

As if called by the mention of him alone, Lan Xichen appeared down the harsh slope of the stairs,
walking up slowly in company of a familiar man in golden robes. The both of them stopped a few steps below the bluff where Wei Wuxian stood and bowed, one at the shoulders, the other at the neck.

_Meng Yao_, Wei Wuxian remembered, eyeing the man in gold.

The spy who had infiltrated Wen Ruohan's ranks and offered the man's head on a platter to Nie Mingjue.

Lan Xichen was the one to speak first as he rose. "I was wondering where Wangji had gone to," he said, looking at his brother fondly. "He must have seen you from below, young master Wei."

"Lan Zhan has a keener eye than me," Wei Wuxian replied, "I hadn't seen any of you at all."

His words were perhaps a bit rude, but none of the three men seemed to mind. Nor did they point out his lack of manners for not bowing back to them.

Wei Wuxian was unsure of what his own reaction would be if they did.

"My apologies for not greeting you and sect leader Jiang when you arrived, young master," said Meng Yao. "I'm afraid my help was needed elsewhere, and then I wished to wait for er-ge and Wangji to arrive."

He said nothing of the fact that Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng were asked to climb the mountain by foot. Perhaps he did not know, Wei Wuxian thought blithely. He had heard that Meng Yao was an illegitimate child of Jin Guangshan's; perhaps he was not privy to the man's moods and decisions like his half-brother Jin Zixuan must be.

"Jiang Cheng was greeted by your brother," Wei Wuxian replied at last. "So no harm done, Meng Yao."

His use of the man's bare name was a test of sorts, but Meng Yao showed no offense. He simply nodded to him and gave him another of those weak smiles he seemed so fond of.

Lan Xichen was the one who spoke next. "If I may, young master Wei," he said subduedy. Wei Wuxian tensed before he could even finish. "You look… rather tired. Are you in good health?"

"Have the servants not shown you to your quarters?" Meng Yao asked worriedly. "Then allow me —"

"They have," Wei Wuxian interrupted. Suddenly, all the ease he had felt in Lan Wangji's presence was gone. He turned away from them all and left the flat expanse of stone he had stood on a second ago, saying, "I wished to take a walk, that's all. Excuse me."

Although only soft and polite parting words reached him, Wei Wuxian felt three pairs of eyes upon his nape until the long and winding stairs took a sharp turn around the curve of the mountain.

He had no wish to know what Lan Xichen or Lan Wangji thought of his appearance. His shijie had done quite enough aimless worrying over the past few weeks.

The city was no less bustling now than it had been when he first arrived. People walked and shouted across the maze-like streets; merchants seemed to have come from far and wide for the discussion conference, knowing how many wealthy cultivators would be here to play the part of unwitting
client. From the first hundred steps of the stairs and to the bottom of the town, calls came to him from smiling vendors, asking if he should like to taste this liquor or delicacy, to touch the soft fabric of this or that winter cloak and buy it for the winter. Wei Wuxian was not in enough of a daze that day not to feel awed at being treated with such civility.

A scent was all it took, then. If a hint of sweetness had clung to him, none of those people would be smiling or speaking to him. If the smell of honey had still followed in his footsteps, not a smile would be directed his way. It was almost enough to make him wish he still looked and felt to them all the part what he truly was. To see their kind eyes turn hostile, to give him incentive to curse each and every one of them.

If his scent had not gone away with the loss of his golden core, then perhaps the sickly feeling in his chest would not be there. Perhaps he would sleep at night rather than spend hours pushing memories away, and perhaps Zhu Yuansu would still live in the Lotus Pier.

So taken was Wei Wuxian with those thoughts that he did not notice the person who stumbled against him.

He had walked away from the broader streets and on to narrow alleyways. He would not have thought anything of the haggard woman who knocked into him as she walked, if the scent of persimmon had not reached him and made his entire body still.

"Sorry," she said; and she stumbled on thin air, weak and helpless as he had never seen her before, until he reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder.

It was the wrong thing to do.

She cried out and struggled against him in violence, shaking, wild with the need to escape him. Her head nearly knocked into a wall of the alley. Wei Wuxian let go of her with his heart pushed so far up his throat that not even nausea could be felt anymore, and he called her name in anguish—"Wen Qing."

Wen Qing froze, her very wide eyes finding his at last.

Wei Wuxian could find nothing at all to say. He stared at her in a haze, noticing the pallor of her skin, the dirt smeared over her face and clothes, the bruises purpling around her eyes where something or someone must have struck her.

"Wei Ying," she whispered in shock.

Wei Wuxian forced open his mouth. "Yes," he said, "yes, it's me."

"Wei Wuxian," she called again, and she was the one this time to grab onto him fiercely.

Her fingers were so thin, it felt as though skin had gone from her entirely, and those were bones digging into the meat of his forearm. Her face was carved out of any layer of fat and muscle. Her cheeks were sunken in, her lips cracked and bloodless.

"What are you doing here?" Wei Wuxian asked. He held onto her hand, finding it as cold as ice, as dry as scorched earth. "What happened to you? Where is Wen Ning?"

"Wei Wuxian," Wen Qing said again breathlessly.

And she burst into sobs.
As if all strength had fled her, she fell to the ground, taking him with her. Wei Wuxian could only think to cushion the back of her head with one hand and prevent it from hitting the corner of a house fence, and then again she did not seem to notice; then again all she did was cling to him and cry, so unlike the cold and fearless woman he had asked to do the impossible. Wei Wuxian sat wordlessly onto the dirt path, allowing her to hold onto him painfully, not knowing how to comfort her.

"Please," she begged, "please, you have to help me, you have to—"

She could hardly speak at all. Her own words died, cut out of existence by her halted breathing, by just how quickly air came and went out of her. He called her name again when her eyes rolled backward and she slumped against him. He laid her onto the ground, holding her hand tightly, wishing that anyone were here to tell him what to do.

"Wen Qing," he called over and over again. "Wen Qing, please, wake up."

It took such a long time for her to do so. In that time Wei Wuxian lifted her unconscious body and walked away from the entrance of the alley, far off to the back of it where fewer people risked seeing them. He found a patch of untouched grass there to lay her upon; he folded his outer robes underneath her head to make the touch of ground a little kinder. Even so, an eternity seemed to pass before she moved again. She breathed in harshly, coughing, unresisting when he pulled her to her side to free the way out of her lungs in case she started vomiting.

She did not, but her face was as pale as death. Her hand in his grew damp and cold with sweat. Her eyes flickered weakly to his as she regained her bearings, and he was not surprised when she did not answer his smile with one of her own.

"Wei Wuxian," she said in such a broken voice that the sound alone felt painful.

"I'm here," he replied.

She looked so frail. Seeing her like this, after only knowing her in the shadow of the Lotus Pier, confronting him head-on, tearing the spirituality out of him with her bare hands, heedless of his screaming…

Wei Wuxian felt like something had knocked the air out of his chest.

"A-Ning," she told him. Tears once more shone in her eyes as she held tightly to his hand and tried to rise up. "You have to help him."

"What happened to Wen Ning?" Wei Wuxian asked her, though dread was already digging in him a hole in the shape of her answer.

Since he had fallen to the Burial Mounds, he had believed her and her brother safe and far away from harm.

He had thought she would flee with him. He had believed that once her promise to him was fulfilled —once she had fooled Jiang Cheng into thinking she was the sage Baoshan Sanren and had rebuilt his core—she would go far away with Wen Ning and never set foot near the Wen clan again.

But he had seen the camp at the foot of the mountain; he had glimpsed, from high above, the shape of scurrying people followed around by Jin sect guards on horses.

He had smelled the unmasked scent on her body.

"What happened to him?" he asked again with his heart in his throat.
Wen Qing dug her nails into his hand and told him.

If asked about Wei Wuxian decades after the events that were took place, most of the cultivation world would recall the discussion conference of Lanling as the day the Yiling Patriarch, the thief omega of the Burial Mounds, Jiang Cheng’s traitor of a sect-brother, lost his sanity.

Accounts would differ as to what exactly went down. For a few years after the fact, it would rather feel like the truth: that Wei Wuxian had come in drenched by the rain and with dirt over his clothes; that he had threatened Jin Guangshan and Jin Zixun; that he had left the calls of his sect leader unheeded, and that his eyes had glowed red with the awful energy he dispersed. That corpses had crawled over the widest hall of Golden Carp Tower and left behind trails of dirt, of rotten flesh, of powdered bones.

Some would even remember how Jin Zixun had reacted to his accusations. That he had called him scorned and unfit for marriage, had called into question his virtue and his acts of war, had mockingly told his sect leader that Wei Wuxian was proof of why omegakind should live away from the world. And that Wei Wuxian, upon hearing those words, had stepped onto the man's throat until he grew purple with lack of air, and said coldly: "Tell me where you took him."

"Wei Wuxian!" Jin Guangshan had called in fury and outrage. He had risen from the dais where his table was set in the terrified silence, his dumbstruck son by his side, and declared, "You are a guest of my house, and you dare lay a hand on a member of my family?"

"I dare," Wei Wuxian had answered.

Of all the esteemed guests lining the golden walls, none had known how to act. All had looked in fear upon the haunting silhouettes of dead bodies crawling in from the shadows.

Jiang Cheng of Yunmeng had risen as well; and perhaps for a while, for a few days or weeks, a fraction of those present would recall that he had begged his sect-brother to stand down.

None but one would remember, however, that Wei Wuxian had looked at him with apology in his eyes before he refused him.

"Sect leader Jin," Wei Wuxian said into the miasmic silence, as his puppets poisoned the air and as Jin Zixun choked and whimpered beneath his foot. "Why should I not dare to lay a hand on this man after what he did? Is loyalty only reserved for blood? Should I not avenge my own kind?

"Are all of you here above blame, then, for every person you presumed to call yours?"

Jin Zixun grabbed at his leg and ankle and begged for his life, promising to tell Wei Wuxian what he wanted to know.

There would the recollections fall apart and start veering into fantasy, as many would say that Wei Wuxian then called upon monsters and divine beasts, or that he had killed Jin Zixun in front of so many eyes, and Jin Guangshan, and Jin Zixuan, and then went on to rampage and pillage the Tower.

If asked about that day in Lanling, Wei Wuxian would say that he did not remember much.

He remembered Jiang Cheng telling him, "Stop it, let's talk about this," and refusing to abide.
He remembered declaring to whole assembly, "I would rather take them all from you, whether they be your children or your siblings or your spouses, before I allow a single one of you to touch them again."

And he remembered Wen Ning.

The place that Jin Zixun had given him the name to was a path snaked between the sides of two mountains. The rain that had started falling as Wen Qing told him everything beat down more harshly here than anywhere else, dribbling from the thickly-clouded sky and from the torrents and slopes of the two neighboring peaks. He and Wen Qing trod through mud up to the knee under the moonless night. They fell and cut open their hands on slick rocks. They searched for hours until their voices grew dim and painful, until the very name they were calling ceased to feel like a name at all.

And Wen Ning was laid upon a flat rock where the path dipped to the other flank of the mountain, a Qishanwen flag pierced through his belly, his clothes hastily put over his corpse in a parody of modesty.

"No!" Wen Qing screamed at the sight of him.

Her voice cracked and bled, and it sounded the same as if the sky had opened above them and struck the earth with lightning.

Wei Wuxian remained knee-deep into the mud. He watched her weep and sob and cradle Wen Ning's body in her arms, rocking back and forth under the pouring rain as if she could will him back into a child. As if she could will him back to life.

He would remember this forever.

"Wen Qing," he called in misery.

It hurt too much to look at Wen Ning and to read upon his face the loneliness and terror he must have felt as he was left to die. Wei Wuxian looked at her instead, knowing that this would be another thing to haunt his sleepless night, that the sight of her starved and ravaged with grief would never leave his heart again.

"Loquats," Wen Qing cried. Her fingers shook as she ran them through her brother's drenched hair, as she petted his face as if to comfort him. She looked at Wei Wuxian and said, "When he was small, he smelled of loquats."

Wei Wuxian remembered when he was the one begging her for the impossible. Promising to bring her brother back from the dead was only the right way to repay her.

The rain had rendered Chenqing slick and useless, but Wei Wuxian had no need for it. Not with Wen Qing so hollowed by loss that the spirit of her brother must be tied down to earth with her regret alone.

He let Wen Ning's woken corpse loose onto the encampment of Wen prisoners at the foot of the mountain. The starved and exhausted people there looked on in faint terror as Wen Ning killed each of the guards surrounding them, and most of them were old and weary. They did not protest at all when Wei Wuxian ordered them to mount the horses and follow him.

Jiang Cheng found them as they rode southward. He flew above and beyond them and touched ground before Wei Wuxian, surprising his horse into stopping and drawing back, frightening the men and women behind him who were so very scared that this was just another trap they were being led to.
"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng pleaded.

He was soaking too, his uniform gone black with wet, his sword glistening with rivulets of water.

"What are you doing?" he asked in despair. "Where are you going?"

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said, the way he used to say his name to comfort him when they were both children.

Jiang Cheng's face twisted with anger. "Why did you do this?" he bellowed. His unarmed hand pointed to the Wen sect prisoners, to Wen Qing on her horse who held her brother's corpse against her. "What is wrong with you!? Don't you realize what you've done, don't you know how many grudges you've sown tonight?"

"Jiang Cheng, get out of my way."

"I won't!"

He was breathless after saying it, shocked by his own words. For a second speechlessness struck him silent and pale; then his slippery hold on Sandu tightened, and he once more bared his teeth.

"I will not," he repeated harshly. "Not until you come down from that horse and go home with me."

"I'm not going home," Wei Wuxian replied.

The reality of it had not solidified for him until he said it so plainly. It did so then, pulling heavily at his heart, unable for all of his regrets to make him change his mind.

He laughed. He felt like crying. "Jiang Cheng, you can't understand," he told his shidi. "You'll never be able to understand. Please, just—let it go. Let me go."

"I can," Jiang Cheng said, looking as brave and foolish as he did on the day he had first asked Wei Wuxian for tips in archery, on the first day their sparrs had ended in his victory, on the first day they had seen each other after Wei Wuxian became mature. "I can understand if you just tell me."

But this was no trick to split an arrow in two; this was no training to pull each other up from afterward, and no heartfelt reunion in the shape of awkward sideways touches.

"Say goodbye to the kids for me, please," Wei Wuxian told him.

He kicked into his horse's side to hurry it forward, calling for the others to follow, ignoring the cry of his name that split the sky behind them as surely as wind and rain did.

The Wen sect remnants followed him through the hills of the Burial Mounds with fear haunting their every steps. They huddled close together, alpha and beta scents gone sour with fright, all of them old enough to have seen another generation grow and take power.

None of them knew what they were doing here; only that Wen Qing had taken the lead from them and told them that they were now safe. So the twenty-odd people walked among dead land, scared of the crows perched on tombstones along their way, wary of the scentless man in black who was guiding them forth.
Wei Wuxian took them to the cave he had inhabited after his fall. They crepted together for warmth once he built a fire, and the twenty of them found sleep at some point or another.

Wen Qing was the only one he showed to the deep end of the cave, where a bloodpool had grown out of all the spirits haunting the hills.

"How can we even breathe here?" she asked as he set Wen Ning's body down by another fire.

Wei Wuxian had no talisman paper on him that was not turned to wet paste by the rain, but the ground was smooth enough. He cut his thumb with Suibian's edge, bowing when the strength of the sword's spirit pulled at his coreless body, and drew an array twice as big as himself upon the floor. Thrice more did he have to reopen the cut in order to finish the design; by the time he was done, he was panting with effort.

"Wei Wuxian, we can't stay here," Wen Qing told him again.

"I'll keep the spirits at bay," he replied to her. His side ached. "Come, help me put him there."

Wen Qing was still weak and shaking with grief, but she obeyed. She held her brother's feet while he carried him by the shoulders and head, and together they placed him as exactly as they could within the blood circle.

He fell over when they were done. Wen Qing hurried to his side, ignoring his protests as she opened his collar and checked the center of his neck and chest with her fingers.

"The energy in your body is all over the place," she told him after a few seconds of silence. Her fingers left his skin and came to rest on his shoulder, trembling badly.

"You knew that," Wei Wuxian replied weakly. "You know why."

"I can barely even feel your pulse, Wei Wuxian, every vein in you is so thick with resentful energy. You've lost too much weight as well."

"You should tell me about losing weight, Wen Qing."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," she snapped at him.

It silenced any answer he could have given her.

Wind blew in from the far-off entrance of the cave, making the firelight shiver and shadows creep over Wen Ning's still body. Wen Qing left Wei Wuxian's side to kneel by her brother's. She fixed the bloody clothing on him so that it aligned once more neatly with his shoulders and arms.

Wei Wuxian looked away when her breathing hitched painfully; when her hands seized Wen Ning's cold ones and she once more shook with sobs.

"I said I'd bring him back," he told her after she quieted.

The way the light shivered told him that she must have nodded. It wasn't a minute later that she rose again to her feet, her face free of tear tracks, looking almost like the woman who had once yelled at him for kneeling.

Wei Wuxian rose shakily. All the strength in his body had left after the horse ride and the trek up the hills, after using Suibian for the first time without a golden core for the sword to latch on to. He was not surprised to feel light-headed and see black spots before him, or to have to stumble to the edge of
the poisoned pool in order to retch there.

He was surprised, however, to feel Wen Qing follow him and put a hand over his forehead. For a terrible second, he feared that he would cry and hold her as he did Jiang Yanli.

"You're feverish," she told him. Her touch left him before he could indulge in such childish, selfish needs; Wei Wuxian rose again and leaned against the wall, and hoped that none of his heartache showed on his face.

"I've been sick for a while," he replied haltingly. "Ever since you operated on me."

Even breathing exhausted him. He had to take in air slowly and carefully after speaking so that his head felt a little less dizzy.

"How sick?" Wen Qing asked with a frown.

"Not much. It's only my body getting used to the loss of the core."

She did not look as certain as he was, but Wei Wuxian had no desire to explain to her how little he cared about his own body, in the face of everything.

They sat next to each other in the light of the fire, watching the array around Wen Ning's body, as Wei Wuxian told her of how he hoped to bring the young man's spirit back. *I can't give him a life back*, he told her. *It will not be the same.*

He did not tell her of how little faith he had in his own success; Wen Qing must be able to read it off of him, and either way, all she seemed to care about was the possibility of her brother opening his eyes and looking at her with his own spirit back to him.

"What will you do now?" she asked him in the small hours of morning.

Rustling noises had started coming to them from the entrance of the cave, where the twenty prisoners of Lanling had started waking up. Daylight shimmered at the curve of the tunnel, reflected onto walls by the bloodpool at the far back.

"Wei Wuxian," she called. "What will you do? You've made many enemies last night. Jin Guangshan will not be happy with you, even if you let that wretched man live."

He had let Jin Zixun live because Wen Qing had asked him to; because if he had killed an heir to Jin Guangshan in full view of the man and his allies, they would have all been murdered before they could leave the city.

It did not change how deeply he wanted to have crushed Jin Zixun's throat under his foot until the man stopped squirming.

"I'll do as I told them I would," he said.

He stood up. He walked to the front of the tunnel, to the place where it opened into a wider cave and he had let the prisoners rest together. They looked at him in exhaustion and weakness, all of them pale with lack of food and shaking over the ground. Many bore bruises, like Wen Qing did. Some more had blood seeping through their clothing; Wen Qing gave an affronted noise at the sight.

Outside, Yiling's Burial Mounds shone out of a different light than the one he had known when he had been forced to live here. With Chenqing as an anchor to keep the vile haunts and creatures away, sunlight did pierce through the cover of clouds and fall upon the dry earth. The ragged and naked
trees bordering every path cast long and twisted shadows, and the cold stream where Wei Wuxian had once quenched his thirst now sparkled with freshwater.

He could live here, he realized.

All of them could live here.

"I'll take them," Wei Wuxian said. "Their omega. I told them I would, and that's what I'll do."

Wen Qing grabbed his sleeve weakly. "It won't be that simple," she replied. "Most of them... They won't take your offer as kindness, Wei Wuxian. You don't know what it's like for those of us who have never set foot outside."

"I do know."

Zhu Yuansu's face was still burned into his eyes. His voice still rang through him ceaselessly.

"But those who want to come, those who want to escape," he said, "I'll take them. Even if I have to fend off a thousand angry spouses. If even one of them wants to be free, then that's enough for me."

If there was another Wen Yueying out there whose fate he could change, then his life would not have been worthless.

Meng Yao's quarters at the Golden Carp Tower were nowhere as elegant as the rest of the palace, but there was a sophistication to them that Lan Xichen greatly enjoyed. Whenever he visited, Meng Yao would have some new book of spells or ancient songs to show him or ask him about. He would be shown to the room at the back where Meng Yao collected paintings of great beauty and elegance. He would be made to taste teas imported from far and wide as they sat on either end of the centerpiece table and discussed clan affairs.

Always, A-Yao's comforting scent basked the space around him with such homeliness that Lan Xichen felt just as comfortable as he did in the hanshi. Candles and incense meshed well with this woodsiness, and often, he thought of the rainy days in Gusu; of the pale light of morning above damp grassy paths, and the petrichor smell he had loved since he was a child.

By his side, Wangji sat still and silent, his whole body thrumming with unease.

This was the lone reason Xichen did not feel so content, even when Meng Yao handed him his gift of the day; a stack of talismans as old as the Jin sect itself whose ink had blurred and weeped in places.

Meng Yao was always rather good at picking up on Xichen's quiet brother's moods. "Wangji," he called kindly, "would you like for me to close the window? The day has been quite cold."

Wangji shook his head and took his tea in hand, though he did not drink it.

Meng Yao closed the window anyway. Each time Lan Xichen saw him, he seemed to wear finer clothes than the previous, as his standing with Jin Guangshan seemed to rise. Xichen regretted that Meng Yao should never be recognized as the man's child, but at least his sworn brother seemed to live comfortably and happily.
"I asked the two of you to come here because sect leader Jin will not be long in asking you again for permission to install watchtowers at Gusu's border," he said once he was sat again. "I know your uncle was firm in his refusal the last time, but I was wondering if he may have changed his mind."

It was as Lan Xichen had expected.

Meng Yao must want for more than a simple opinion, if he had asked for Wangji to come rather than simply Xichen. Although the both of them had shared the duties of sect leader since their father's death, as their uncle thought Wangji to still be too young to inherit the position in full, Xichen held, in truth, very little power.

He traveled between the sects to deliver messages and gifts. He received in Wangji's place when his brother was busy. But any decisive power he held had to run first through his uncle, then through his brother; and then, Wangji was the one whose word the other sect leaders asked for in order to conclude dealings of any kind.

Seeing as Wangji seemed in no state to speak now, Xichen answered for him. He already knew the answer to this question. "Our uncle still disagrees with your father's plans," he said. "I fear the memory of Wen Xu's attack is still heavy on his mind. He is loathe to give so much control to any one sect and risk another Sunshot Campaign."

"This is what I said as well," Meng Yao replied, sorrowful.

He went on to explain to them why his father thought those watchtowers of his to be so essential—for the general peace and protection of people, and because they would allow for any sect to be warned of dangerous spiritual activity even in the most remote of places. But his tone was clipped and hurried, and Lan Xichen could tell that those were Jin Guangshan's words and not Meng Yao's.

Still, he entertained them. He discussed the pros and cons. He kept himself from agreeing to anything, smiling when ought to and nodding seriously when the discussion called for it. He kept an eye on Wangji all the while, worried for how wordless he had been since they both arrived at the foot of the tower.

Although, perhaps the reason for his silence was not so difficult to guess at. Lan Xichen had come and gone many times between Lanling and Gusu in the past three and a half months, and still he could not look upon the entrance hall of the Tower without remembering Wei Wuxian's terrible anger.

As luck or lack thereof would have it, they crossed paths with Jin Zixun while leaving Meng Yao's quarters.

"Ah, Zixun," Meng Yao said agreeably. "What brings you here?"

Jin Zixun froze at the sight of them. His face paled; his fingers clutched the front of his winter cloak until it closed tightly over his neck, almost chokingly so.

Considering the accusations leveled against him by Wei Wuxian, it was not a very good look.

Xichen bowed to him anyway in greeting. Wangji did not. When Xichen looked at his brother, he found him staring at Jin Zixun with such thinly-veiled disgust that all around should have been able to read it off of him.

Obviously, Jin Zixun was not yet this clever. "Meng Yao," he muttered, heedless of Wangji's burning hatred. "I need a word."
"Of course," Meng Yao replied. "Let me just see my guests out—"

"Now, you bastard."

If possible, the cold thickened around them all.

Meng Yao never showed so much as a hint of offense, however. He bowed his head with a smile, saying, "Very well. Er-ge, Wangji, I'm afraid I have to leave the both of you now."

"I look forward to seeing you again soon, A-Yao," Xichen replied, bowing in kind. "Take care."

Wangji did nod at Meng Yao, albeit very curtly. Jin Zixun spared him one furious glare before stomping loudly away, apparently expecting his cousin to follow in his steps unquestioningly.

Their walk out of the Tower was uneventful, after that. Wangji said nothing at all until they were far from the city and flying through icy winds; he shivered, however, which prompted Xichen into offering that they make a stop on their way back home and spend the night in Yiling.

Wangji seemed a little shocked at his words. Lan Xichen only understood why once they set foot onto the ground again and his eyes landed upon the cart of a vendor in the street, which bore many unsightly paintings of a man.

*The Yiling Patriarch*, each of the pictures read.

Of course. Yiling was where Wei Wuxian had elected to live after running away from his sect.

The portraits looked nothing like Wei Wuxian at all—they showed many variations of a same untoward design, when Lan Xichen had never known Wei Wuxian to be less than handsome, even after the war when he had looked so ill. The merchant who sold them was in the middle of telling tales of the Yiling Patriarch to a ground of children; he seemed to be under the impression that Wei Wuxian was of a different status as well.

"He builds himself a court of stolen omega; they say his palace runs with them, that he comes and steals them from under their spouses' noses so he can marry them all instead…"

"Ridiculous," said Wangji through clenched teeth.

He left, turning his back to the spectacle entirely. Lan Xichen followed behind him a little more measuredly, but then Wangji was speaking up again, saying, "I'll go back to the Cloud Recesses now."

"Very well," Lan Xichen replied. "I feel tired, I shall rest here for the night, but I'll see you and Uncle tomorrow, Wangji."

Wangji nodded and mounted Bichen anew. The white glare of the blade vanished near-instantly against the blinding clouds, and the sandalwoodscents of him lingered only long enough for Xichen to breathe in and out once.

It was not difficult to guess why his brother would have wanted to flee such a place.

For the past three and a half months, such rumors had crawled over all the cultivation sects like a disease: Wei Wuxian is fomenting evil plots of overtaking the sects. Wei Wuxian has holed himself within the legendary Burial Mounds of Yiling. Wei Wuxian is roaming the lands and breaking open omega houses, stealing their inhabitants unscrupulously, taking away from the riches of many clans and villages.
Lan Xichen had no idea what to make of it all. The only thing he knew for sure was just how upset Wangji had been after the discussion conference; how sick he had looked with anger and grief, when after Wei Wuxian had left and taken a camp of Wen sect prisoners with him, Jin Zixun had called upon all present to 'put an end to this ill-bred omega'.

He had felt no sympathy for Jin Zixun then, even with the purpling bruises at his throat. Though he knew not if Wei Wuxian had told the truth when he accused Jin Zixun of raping an omega, there was no mistaking Wei Wuxian's own hatred for a deception. Wei Wuxian whole-heartedly believed in what he was saying at the time.

The village they were in was small, spread only over two streets and a handful of faraway houses. Winter this year had been a cold and unforgiving affair, and even so near the end of it, all who walked outside were wound in all manners of cloaks and hats. They advanced through the frozen air hunched forward to ward it off.

No doubt this was the reason Lan Xichen took no notice of yet another hunched figure by a grey wall—at least until he walked by it and a familiar voice called, "Lan Zhan?"

He stilled. He turned to the man who had just called his brother's name. He thought faintly that it must be a play of words on the cold wind, or that his thoughts had been plagued by Wei Wuxian enough to make him mistake another voice for his.

But it was Wei Wuxian. Pale and sickly and with bruises under his eyes twice the size of those he sported the last time they met, but it was him, leaned onto a house wall, clutching a bag full of vegetables to his middle.

Wei Wuxian seemed only to recognize him after Xichen regained enough of a mind to speak. "Zewu-Jun," he said, straightening his back.

His eyes seemed unfocused. He blinked once, twice, till they finally met Xichen's in full.

"Young master Wei," Lan Xichen greeted belatedly.

An odd smile twisted Wei Wuxian's mouth. "Are you here to kill me, then?" he asked in such a light voice that at first, Xichen did not understand his words at all.

Before he could even think of answering him, Wei Wuxian changed the topic completely. "I thought I'd seen Lan Zhan pass by a little while ago," he said. "I suppose the two of you look very similar from afar."

"My brother was here only a few minutes ago, but he's gone ahead to Gusu," Lan Xichen replied. And then, "Young master Wei, what happened to you?" he asked, unable not to let worry slip in-between his words.

It was even clearer, now that Wei Wuxian was no longer hunched in on himself—he looked ill. Not simply sick and too-thin as he had in Lanling or at the end of the war, but ill, with fever-sweat running down his temples and tremors shaking through the bag he kept held against himself tightly. He hardly seem to even notice those tremors; he hardly seem to notice Xichen at all, what with the way his eyes opened and closed and looked around blearily.

"Are you here to kill me?" Wei Wuxian asked again.

His tone was so odd when he said it that Xichen could not help but shiver. "No," he replied in shock. "No, I—I was only passing by. I had no idea that you were here."
"Haven't you heard," Wei Wuxian said dryly. "All of Yiling is mine, now."

He sounded like he was in pain.

There was no injury that Xichen could see on him, not even so much as a scrape, nothing at all but how deathly pale he was. But Wei Wuxian's voice came with the same quality that those in agony exuded. His arms squeezed the bag he was holding so tightly that Lan Xichen knew, without needing to ask, that it was taking all of his strength not to cry out.

He stepped closer. "Young master Wei," he murmured insistently, "is anyone here with you?"

"Why should I tell you, Lan Xichen," Wei Wuxian let out.

It gave Xichen pause for a moment. Wei Wuxian had never addressed him so rudely before, not even once, not even when Xichen had known his uncle to be targeting him in class and done nothing to stop him. It was only too easy to notice, however, just how Wei Wuxian was cringing by the wall again—just how quick and whistling his breathing had become.

For some reason, he did not want Xichen to be helping him with whatever was wrong with him.

Xichen sighed. "I will leave as soon as I can ascertain that you are not about to die, young master Wei," he told him. "It's quite obvious that you're unwell."

Wei Wuxian said nothing.

"I only wish to know if you have someone with you to help. Is there a doctor in this town, someone who could—"

Before he could finish, Wei Wuxian's legs gave from under him.

"Young master Wei!" Lan Xichen called, crouching by him in the muddy snow.

It seemed he had simply slid with his back against the wet wall rather than fallen outright; but even so, a grunt of unmistakable pain escaped him and made Xichen's heart shake with worry. He put a hand just shy of touching Wei Wuxian's nose in order to feel him breathe. He called him again and again, going so far as to touch his shoulder and shake it slightly in spite of his own shame, as to call his name in full—"Wei Wuxian, Wei Ying, can you hear me?"

But there was no answer. Wei Wuxian sloped against the wall and looked like a corpse himself, and then Lan Xichen looked down and saw that blood had stained the snow that he was sat upon, and a taste like iron weeped over his tongue acridly.

"I'm sorry," Lan Xichen whispered, pushing the words out in spite of everything.

He was thinking both of Wei Wuxian's status and of his own upbringing.

You must never touch them.

He picked the unconscious Wei Wuxian up by his back and the crook of his knees. Even if worry and fear were not eating him alive, he would have found the man terribly light, and lighter still when the bag he had held against him all this time fell abandoned by his feet.

Wei Wuxian regained consciousness as Lan Xichen was carrying him around the village, out of view of the people who braved the winter wind to go about their daily activities. He shook with a terrible tremor, and then tensed so tightly that Xichen's hold on him nearly slipped.
"What," he slurred. "Who—"

He seemed to recall their meeting, then; or perhaps he simply saw Xichen's face above him, and the sight was enough to make him push against him in a rage.

Lan Xichen thought he must have said something, too lowly and furious for him to decipher, but then Wei Wuxian was on the ground again and retching painfully. When Xichen crouched by him, Wei Wuxian kicked him away.

"Get away from me," he said, crazed-looking, saliva dripping from his open lips above the spot of snow he had tainted with clear bile.

Lan Xichen could hardly care that his uniform would be stained with water and mud. He could not look away from the sight of this pale-faced and terrified Wei Wuxian, and it did not even occur to him that the place where he had been kicked was now throbbing with pain.

"Young master Wei," he tried to say.

Wei Wuxian recoiled as if hit, his bare hands slipping against melted snow. "Get away from me!" he roared.

"You're sick, I can't leave you here—"

"I would rather die," Wei Wuxian spat at him, "than let another alpha touch me."

*I am not alpha,* Lan Xichen thought hazily; but he saw the terror writ so starkly over Wei Wuxian's face, and he remembered the hatred which had suffused the wide hall of Golden Carp Tower months ago, when Wei Wuxian had come in wrought in shadows and called Jin Zixun a rapist.

Whoever Wei Wuxian was seeing now, whatever memory of his was cutting his body apart with fear, it was not Lan Xichen's doing.

Xichen realized that his own air was coming in thinly. That an ache had developed below his throat and constricted his lungs. He breathed in shakily, slowly, and said, "Let me help you. Please."

For a second, he thought Wei Wuxian may attack him. His grey eyes were swallowed in black, unseeing. His frostbitten hands were pulled into fists by his sides, red and dried by the cold snow. He stared at Lan Xichen like a wild animal about to jump at his own predator in a last try for escape.

Then, he breathed. His mouth opened laxly, his hands loosened, his back bowed unto itself. He slid sideways onto the snowy ground, curled in on himself like a child, and pain was the only thing anymore that could be read off of his face.

"Wen Qing," he said. His eyes closed against another ache of his body, no doubt, before he found the strength to continue: "She came with me. She said she'd wait for me at the inn."

"I'll take you there," Lan Xichen promised.

He had no idea how Wei Wuxian knew Wen Qing, the famous doctor of Qishan, but if she was here—if she was someone that Wei Wuxian felt safe enough to allow to examine him—then Xichen would not look a gift horse in the mouth. He approached the man slowly and carefully, making sure at all times to keep both hands far from the sword at his hip.

"Can you walk by yourself, young master Wei?" he asked once he was but a step or two away.
Wei Wuxian shook his head, eyes closed. His lips looked almost as pale as the snow he was laid upon.

This time, Lan Xichen did not apologize as he touched his arm. He slid it above his shoulders and rose slowly, pulling Wei Wuxian's weight up with him. Despite how thin he was, he felt heavy now against Xichen's side as they struggled through mud and snow in direction of the village's only inn. Wei Wuxian said nothing at all to him, though his body occasionally shook greatly.

There was an alpha woman waiting in the dining room of the establishment. She was wide-eyed and tall, the pepper-like scent of her almost warm after the freezing cold outside, and when she saw the both of them enter, she dropped the tea she had been drinking.

Her chair creaked against the wooden floor when she rose. "Wei Wuxian," she called, all but forgetting Xichen's own existence as she rushed to their side.

She took Wei Wuxian from him with no ceremony. In spite of his earlier words, Wei Wuxian showed no reluctance to be assisted by her up the stairs and to the bedroom he must have bought for the night, and even went so far as to grab her by the wrist after she laid him upon the bed.

"Wen Qing," he called weakly.

"What happened?" she asked. "Were you attacked?"

"He collapsed," Lan Xichen told her.

She turned to him in faint surprise, having forgotten that he was here at all.

Lan Xichen told himself not to stare at the pathetic slump of Wei Wuxian's body over the bedsheets. He looked at her instead, bowing quickly at the shoulders in greeting. "I met him by chance outside," he said. "He looked to be in pain. He's been vomiting as well, and I saw blood—"

He interrupted himself.

"Where?" Wen Qing asked him. "Where was he bleeding?"

"I'm—I'm not certain."

But he knew, did he not? He knew where that blood had come from.

Wen Qing must have seen something on his face, or perhaps she was simply that good of a physician, for she immediately started stripping Wei Wuxian down.

Lan Xichen turned away from them with blood rushing up his face hotly. It was not enough to mask the sound of struggle behind him, as Wei Wuxian held her back and said, "Don't look," with the voice of a man who knew exactly what was wrong with him.

"Why didn't you tell me," Wen Qing moaned. "Why on earth didn't you tell me—"

Lan Xichen left the room.

He did not leave the inn. He did not even leave the hallway beyond the door; his legs shook under his weight the second the panel closed behind him, and he had only the strength to drag himself to a wooden chair sitting by an unlit candle before he was the one to collapse.

A few minutes later, Wen Qing came out of the room as well. She hurried past him and down the stairs, coming back up a moment later with two buckets full of steaming water and a pile of clean
sheets, and Lan Xichen did not make the mistake of looking at her face or asking her any questions.

What voice could he have asked them with anyway? His throat felt swollen and clogged, and it was all he could do to breathe at all.

His left hand was stained with blood.

Wen Qing did not ask for his help in any way as she worked, and Lan Xichen did not offer it to her. He felt that night had fallen, though there were no windows in the corridor—only the candle which a tenant had lit when he had come upstairs earlier. He felt that only a few hours had passed between the second he had seen Wei Wuxian and the second he heard what he had to.

The fog-like haze that he had been under broke at the sound of crying; and Lan Xichen suddenly breathed, the way one did after breaking out from underwater—greedily and sobbingly—and bent over his own knees till his hands could press against his own forehead and temple. Till he felt the ribbon there twist and loosen under the strength of his grip.

He closed his eyes so tightly that his jaw ached, and still he could not stop seeing Wei Wuxian's face oversnow; still he could not stop thinking of Wangji and feeling grief tear through him like nausea.

Wen Qing found him like this when she exited the bedroom. The awful sound from within had ceased some while ago whilst Lan Xichen's mind had gone. She sat on the floor beside his chair with a thump. Her legs and hands became visible to him through the gap between his own thigh and elbow, and he saw that they were stained with blood, too.

Lan Xichen wondered if ever he would look at his own palms again and feel that they were clean.

"He would never believe me," Wen Qing said, breaking apart the silence. "But for his sake, I am not above kneeling."

"Do not," Lan Xichen replied.

His own voice felt foreign to him.

"I will never speak of what I saw here today," he went on after a shuddering breath. "Not to anyone."

"He never wants to see you again."

Xichen let his hands fall away from his face. He knew that his skin would be red where he had pressed onto it, trying and failing to push the knowledge of the past few hours so deeply within him that they would be forgot.

"Then he won't see me," he said. "And if he does, if it can't be avoided, I will not speak to him."

Wen Qing nodded her head slowly. "Thank you," she whispered. "I will not forget this, Zewu-Jun."

The thought of being owed by her—by Wei Wuxian—for this made him feel sick again. He said nothing of the kind to her, not knowing how she would take it, but he knew he would never call upon that debt. Not even if his life depended on it.

He rose from the chair. His whole body felt tense and sore, as if he had trained with the sword for days rather than sat upon hardwood and waited for time to pass. Wen Qing did not stand to bid him goodbye, and he held her in no resentment for it, knowing how tired she must be.
Xichen tried to say, "I'll pay for your stay—"

"No," she interrupted, curt and heavy. "No, master Lan, I think you should just leave and forget about us."

She rested her head against the wall at her back. The flickering candlelight dug shadows out of her skin, out of the dip of her neck, where somehow blood had also found a way to stain her.

Finally, when he could not stand it anymore, Lan Xichen asked: "Who was it?"

Wen Qing laughed.

Lan Xichen suffered in silence the sight of her shaking above the floorboards of the inn, the jumping of her chest and shoulders which could have looked like sobs to anyone standing further away.

"Does it matters?" she asked him after she had caught her breath. "Does it matter who did it? It was all of them. Every single one of them. It's all of you every time one of you does it, and when it happens to one of us, it happens to all of us."

She said, "This is the only true difference between us all."

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to get thru these chapters as fast as possible because I want to go back to present time and healing but lord it is not easy. Not easy to write at all.

Anyway!! Can you believe this story hit 3000 kudos. Holy shit. I can't do fanart or anything so fancy but I did make a playlist for the fic in celebration. Thank you all.
Chapter 20

Wei Wuxian woke up. He woke up to winter-light through the blinds of the bedroom window. He woke up to the awful feeling of sweat having cooled over his skin and made his hair greasy, like waking after a night breaking out of a fever. He moved one hand under the hot and heavy blanket spread over his body, and found that even this much effort was enough to shake him. He woke up to dryness between his legs, where blood and other fluid had crusted as he slept, and to echoes of great pain through all of his back and pelvis.

He opened his eyes to the bleak and shadowed room, only traversed by daylight in lines of white over black wood. He breathed in the smell of persimmon and understood that the warmth around his unmoved hand was caused by someone else holding it.

He tried to ask, "Why are you not hiding?"

Except for that time in Lanling, Wen Qing had never not hidden her scent around him. She had brewed again the drugs she used for this purpose as soon as Wei Wuxian had taken her to safety, and distributed it to those in the Burial Mounds who, like her, desperately wished to hide. Her running out of the strong-smelling tonic had been the reason she and Wen Ning were discovered by Jin Zixun in the first place; Wei Wuxian could not imagine that she ever wanted to be out in the open again.

Wei Wuxian tried to ask her, but his voice was weak and his tongue very dry. The words vanished into thin air. His hand in Wen Qing’s warmed again when she squeezed it. Without a word, she brought to his lips a little cup of water, and helped him lift his head off of the hard pillow when he could not do it by himself.

The water helped. Wei Wuxian felt a little less like any word he uttered would pull the whole breath out of him after he drank it.

Her hand lowered his head again slowly. Even this much movement ached through all of him, and Wei Wuxian grunted out a short breath. Wetness once more ran down the inside of his thighs.

"Your scent," he said more succinctly.

Wen Qing put the empty cup down on the table by the bed. "I thought you might prefer it, right now," she replied. "I'll hide again in a moment."

There was another scent in the room, one still new and unsettled, and yet to Wei Wuxian, it felt like
air itself had ripened with it. He was very glad indeed for Wen Qing's sweetness by his side.

Wen Qing shifted on her chair. She said, "I don't suppose you want me to tell you anything about..."

"I don't," Wei Wuxian replied. "I don't want to know."

She nodded. She did not scold him or lecture him, as he expected; she did not even look surprised.

Wei Wuxian tried to take his hand back from her. He saw her forehead wrinkle miserably before she let it go, and the warmth of her skin was missed as soon as he left it behind.

He still left it behind. Too much of this, of her kindness, and he felt that whatever was left of him to crumble would do so at last.

"You must think me very foolish," he told her in as even a voice as he could make it. He looked at the blurry ceiling above which was striped with grey light. "For not saying anything."

He could faintly recall that she had cried out such words the night before as she looked at his body. Or was it two or three nights ago? His own skin felt so far from him, so tender and weak, that Wei Wuxian would not have been surprised to learn that he had slept a whole month of his life away.

"I always think you're foolish," Wen Qing replied, "but even if you had hidden it from me by choice, I would not have the heart to blame you."

He almost laughed. "You should."

"Wei Ying. I could tell by the state of your body. I know you had no idea."

He said nothing in answer.

Wen Qing sighed. She put her hands in her lap, where her fingers linked together so tightly that her skin turned bloodless. "I've delivered many children of the Wen sect," she said. The very words dug at him and made him want to hide away, to press his face into the pillow so that she would see him no longer; he clenched his teeth and stayed still. "I know of such cases, when the body refuses to admit to itself what it is going through. You couldn't have known, not while this was happening. You were barely even showing."

"I knew a few days ago," he retorted. "I could have told you then."

And even then it had not been knowledge so much as panic; even then it had been nothing more than the slow acknowledgment of pain, of fear encroaching to his heart and making his chest weigh twice as much as before.

He had woken up in the bloodpool cave one morning and known; and he had left the Burial Mounds with Wen Qing immediately in search of another house, of new people to set free. He had walked aimlessly with her through the region while she asked again and again where he was planning to go. He had refused every ache in his body until he had fallen before Lan Xichen's eyes and been forced to accept them.

Wen Qing's forearms still bore the marks of his nails digging into her skin as he begged her not to let it happen. *I don't want it; take it away.*

"*I don't have a choice,*" she had said, miserable, her hands already dirtied with his blood. "*There's nothing I can do to stop it now.*"
Now, Wen Qing told him: "I will not cast blame on you for this, so stop antagonizing me."

At that moment, a short and hiccuping breath echoed through the room. Wei Wuxian had only enough time to feel his heart leap up his throat before cries crawled out of a nest of sheets pushed into a corner, as far from himself as could be.

His body seized with pain when he threw himself aside, when he tore the blanket off of his body for lack of something else to throw away. He felt sickening wetness over the sheets at his hips, and heard Wen Qing's call of his name as he tumbled from the bed and into the narrow space between mattress and wall. It hurt terribly, and made blood seep again out of the dressing she had wound over his lower half, but he could hardly care. He could hardly feel it.

"Make it stop," he yelled at her.

Each cry out of newborn lungs seemed to tear through him bodily. It was not like his perpetual nausea, and not either like the taste of grass on his tongue whenever something set off the memories of that day, but it was worse. It made all of his skin run with shivers, as if some small animal were scurrying over him and pecking him with its claws and teeth.

Wen Qing stood frozen a moment longer, halfway bent over him to assist him; but she must know, or guess, that she could be of no help now. She disappeared from his sight when she walked around the bed.

Wei Wuxian did not move from the floor between bed and wall until those cries softened into hiccups, then fast little breaths. His own blood pumped past his ears and neck so loudly that he could not even hear the sound of her steps above creaking wood.

He calmed down eventually. He found enough strength to grab onto the sheets and crawl again atop the covers, and lay there panting for a while before daring to look aside.

Wen Qing had her back turned to him. She was holding—she was holding it, and rocking her arms back and forth. Another cabinet stood at this end of the room, and she had put over it a bowl of goat milk, in which she dipped a piece of cloth for it to suck on.

Wei Wuxian wanted to retch. He wanted to be the one crying.

Instead, he slowly gathered his clothes, left in a pile by the bed after Wen Qing had stripped him. He dressed himself with weak and shaking hands. He ignored how painful each twist of his spine was, huddling close to the gap in him where the golden core once lived. He grew cold. He felt over his skin the familiar shiver of resentful energy.

"What are you doing?"

Wei Wuxian lifted his head slowly.

Wen Qing had put it back into the nest of sheets, out of view of all who did not stood directly by it. She was looking at him with wide eyes.

"We're leaving," Wei Wuxian replied.

At last, she became angry. "Are you mad!?" she yelled at him. "Do you imagine I'll let you ride like this? You almost died last night!"

"I'm fine, Wen Qing."
"You're not!"

Her voice broke over the words. Though the blinds were still closed and the light dim and diffuse, he saw that her eyes were shining with tears.

But a Wen Qing in tears was not a sight he could stand even on the best of days; and thus he turned away from her and said, "We need to leave. We can't afford another night here anyway. And if we stay, the people who own this place will start to suspect something."

They must already know. Wei Wuxian had noticed the woman down the stairs who had not stopped staring at him the day before, her nostrils flaring ever-so-often in search of a hint of his status.

They must have seen the cultivator in white who brought him in last evening while he was bleeding and confused. They must have heard—

A deep tremor ran up the length of his body and made his whole head ring. He lowered it between his shaking hands, pressing harshly onto his own skin in hope of feeling a little less as if it were about to tear from him entirely.

"Please," he begged. He strained the neck to meet her eyes again. "I can't stay here a minute longer," he said, hoping that she would understand. "If I stay here any longer, I'll—"

*I'll suffocate. I'll die.*

Wen Qing looked almost like a painting of a person. A ray of light filtered by the wooden blinds fell diagonally across her face, shadowing her nose and one of her round eyes, stroking a spot of dark at her exposed neck where his own blood must have crusted. She touched it then as if noticing it for the first time—scratching at it until it fell under her nails, until her own skin reddened with friction.

"Please," Wei Wuxian said again.

Her resolve broke. "Fine," she expelled. "Fine, but if I notice you getting worse, we're stopping. You've lost too much blood."

He nodded.

Wen Qing took a deep breath. "And I need to know what you want to do with…"

She gestured to the bundle of sheets in the corner of the room.

The ringing was in his head again. His skin pricked and shivered under the tiny claws of a beast. "I don't care," he said. "I just want to leave."

In a way, Wei Wuxian was thankful for how messy and muddy his memories of the past night were. Everything from the moment he had met Lan Xichen and until his eyes had opened the morning after was like mist: the shame of Zewu-Jun knowing, the begging he had done to Wen Qing, the pain and exhaustion that had followed. He was forced to ride sideways on his horse, so deeply did he ache, but this too was faraway. Everything was, except for the cries which sometimes rang through the silence and made Wen Qing stop to feed and clean up her burden.

Every single time, Wei Wuxian dismounted his horse and walked as far away as he could without collapsing, as far away as was needed till he could hear nothing.

She did not abandon it at the door of a house or at the gate of a village for someone to pick up. Wei Wuxian wished that she had, though he knew that it would not survive the night in such a cold
weather.

"He won't tell anyone," Wen Qing told him one night, after she had made him lie on a patch of damp grass, knowing that he was in too much pain to ride on.

Still, she did not scold him. She cleaned him and dressed him and made him swallow medicine, and she never spent a second of ire on him.

"You can't know that," Wei Wuxian replied weakly.

"You didn't speak to him that night, Wei Ying. Lan Xichen is known for his wisdom and kindness through all the sects. He will not betray you."

"If he does," Wei Wuxian said, turning over to his side in spite of how much he ached, "I'll kill him."

Wen Qing remained silent for the rest of the evening.

Wei Wuxian breathed in the smell of wet grass, the smoke from the fire she had built within the little cave they had found on the way. He smelled the soup she was making out of the vegetables they had bought. He smelled, also, the third scent around them which had settled as its owner settled to life: petrichor so vivid and strong, so warm and humid, he felt as though summer rain were plundering his skin.

Wei Wuxian knew not if he would have felt differently, had it been omega; but it was not.

*Your last victory over me, Wen Chao,* he thought.

It took them days to ride to the Burial Mounds. Wen Qing had to be slow for what she was holding, and he had to be slow for the terrible pain. When they did reach the haunted hills, his protective arrays had already weakened. Crows and lizards had come to the edge of half-built houses and started pillaging food reserves. The Wen sect people were frightened, but not more so than the dozen other folk Wei Wuxian had gathered in the months since the discussion conference of Lanling.

He ignored their welcoming and relieved calls when he arrived. He stepped down from his horse and went to work on fixing the barriers he had built so that the people here could live without being poisoned. Meanwhile, the omega gathered around Wen Qing curiously, asking about what she held and where it had come from.

"We found him," Wen Qing said simply.

"This is a newborn," a woman whispered. Wei Wuxian had taken her out of a lavish house at the border of Yunmeng, after she had looked at him with empty eyes, entirely unable to speak. Even weeks later, her voice was rough with lack of use. "It's a miracle he didn't die in this cold."

And other such things from the rest of the group, even from the old Wen sect members, after they had enough courage to approach.

This was an interesting dynamic, he wondered often: how the beta and alpha people he had taken with him from Lanling hesitated to come wherever the omega were. How the omega had avoided them at first, and looked at the ground shamefully each time one of them was near. How, little by little, those boundaries had thinned.

How Wei Wuxian had placed a haunted corpse at the separation of their encampments every night for weeks until the omega themselves had asked him to stop.
The Wens still cowered before him, afraid of the looks he gave them. Frankly, Wei Wuxian wished to be rid of them; if not for the debt he owed Wen Qing, he would have left them at the edge of the Burial Mounds to die.

Wen Qing's voice became quieter. "I will need some of you to care for him…"

Wei Wuxian walked away.

No one stopped him. No one even called for his name. He reached the opening of the bloodpool cave without hitch, tired again with the effort of fixing the arrays, aching and bleeding and a second away, he felt, from turning into dust. He walked until he could sit on a small cushion by Wen Ning's preserved body.

"You need to wake up soon, Wen Ning," he said uselessly.

The many talismans stuck to Wen Ning glowed and glimmered.

He spent a very long time in the cave, hearing the soft cooing of the omega outside, hearing, once, another bout of awful crying before it was taken away. Recalling Lan Xichen's ashen face as he had fallen before him, and his expression when Wen Qing had opened Wei Wuxian's robes and seen the truth he was hiding. When he understood.

He wondered for a brief second whether this expression would have graced Lan Wangji's face, too. If Lan Wangji had found him and not Lan Xichen, and Wei Wuxian once more disgraced him in the worst of ways, would he have still kneeled in silence? Would he have had enough?

He felt detached from even the cold by the time Wen Qing joined him. She cursed to see him sitting there without a fire to warm him, but he could not hear her words, or the cracking flame she started with a flick of her wrist. There were no shivers on his skin at all.

He let himself be laid onto the floor. He let Wen Qing cover him with a woolen cloak. He felt her grab his hand, and heard very faintly that she was calling his name, again and again.

Her hand was shaking.

With difficulty, Wei Wuxian squeezed it. He breathed in all at once, feeling cold air rush through him in spite of the warm fire. Goosebumps erupted on his skin as he regained the ability to feel them, and he shuddered.

"Wei Ying," Wen Qing said in a strangled voice.

"Yes," was all he could manage to answer.

She bent over him and took him in her arms.

He was so tired, he realized. Rid of even the strength to tense or push her away, pained through the hips and back and in-between his legs, emptied out and hollow. What he had feared would come out of her touching him like this finally broke true: his very skin turned to dust under her touch, his awkward skeleton rendered bare by how little life kept it together, and he wanted nothing more than to vanish and nothing less than to cling to her forever.

"Please," she said, her wet face sticking his hair to the skin of his neck; "Please, let me have this."

It was the most terrible embrace he had ever suffered, much more terrible than Jiang Yanli's, who had not known what she was comforting him for. Wen Qing held him as if she could hold Wen Ning
through him. Wei Wuxian let her, and felt not human at all.

He could not have told how long it lasted, only that it did. At least until he told her, "Let me go," because he knew that a second longer in her arms would kill him.

So Wen Qing let go. She let him rest again upon the cold and hard floor, with only a thin cushion below his hips to minimize his pain. She wiped her face and tried to find her voice.

She said, "Grandmother said she'd take care of him."

'Grandmother' was not any grandmother of hers, but an old omega woman.

She had been the first that Wei Wuxian brought with him to the Burial Mounds. He had found her nary a week after the discussion conference, in an old and dusty house at the far-end of the village below the hills. She was ugly, he supposed, for having been left here all of her life. She must have seen others come and go before her, more beautiful or well-educated than her. She had watched him open the oakwood door and squinted her eyes at daylight. When Wei Wuxian had asked her if she wanted to leave, she had said, *I've always wanted to live under the sun.*

"I told everyone that he was an orphan we found. No one suspects anything."

"Just keep it away from me," Wei Wuxian said.

Wen Qing nodded to him curtly. She seemed to have recovered herself, and was now looking in the direction of her brother's body. There were no more tears in her eyes.

"I'll bring him back," he told her again.

He saw her jaw tense slightly. "I know," she replied. "I trust you."

"I promised that I would, even if it takes me years."

"I know, Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian's mouth felt dry. His words as heavy as mountains. "I want moonless tea," he said.

Wen Qing said nothing at all, but her next look was full of pity.

He pushed himself up with both hands until he could sit. She made as if to help him, but he kept her hands away; only when he was certain that he would not fall or cringe from pain did he speak again.

"I can't risk… this, happening again," he forced out. "I didn't even notice that I was—even when—"

He could not say the words, but he knew she would understand what he meant. He had not even known he was fevered when Wen Chao had found him that day.

"The loss of your golden core threw your body upside-down," she said. "I could feel it, even on the first day after I operated you. You didn't smell of anything anymore, and I had a feeling… I thought, perhaps you wouldn't even go into heat again. Perhaps you weren't omega anymore."

*But then what would I be?* he thought.

"My father," Wen Qing told him. Longing washed over her face, forcing her to take a breath before she could go on. "He used to say that there was no difference between any of us. He came from a long line of doctors just like him, who hid themselves in plain sight and were never found out. A-Ning doesn't remember him, but I do. And I've seen enough bodies of all statuses, enough people of
all walks of life, that I can believe him now."

"And yet omega houses exist," Wei Wuxian said evenly.

"Yes," she replied. "They exist."

For a moment, he thought she would remain silent. That she would sit by his side and watch her brother's corpse, and he would once more slip away unseen through the webbed tendrils of his mind.

But Wen Qing said, "You're doing the right thing."

She took his hand again. She grabbed his arm until he felt the shape of her fingers through the cold and stiffness.

"No one ever dared to do it before, but it is the right thing, Wei Ying," she said. "And for this, even if you could not bring A-Ning back, I would still follow you. I would still be right beside you. Do not ever doubt it."

Her voice was absolute.

In the months that followed, Wei Wuxian freed over fifty omega.

He would have freed more if he could; if angry spouses and families did not march upon the edges of the Burial Mounds, frightened but angry, and claim that he was robbing them. If the protective barriers he put there for the people inside not to be bothered did not necessitate regular care.

They were difficult to find. When he did find them, not all of them wished to be let free, as Wen Qing had warned him. The youngest and oldest were those to came with him more readily: the young for the excitement of novelty, the old for they knew how their remaining days would be spent otherwise. But those in-between, those of still marriageable age who had never known anything else—they almost always refused him. They almost always looked at him as if he were a heretic come to shatter their lives.

And then there were those who came to him by themselves.

It did not happen until six months had gone by since that loathsome winter day. Wei Wuxian was fetched out of the cave by a girl a year or two younger than he called Luo Fanghua, who was tall and gnarly like a tree, and whom he had found chained to a wall of her omega house. Luo Fanghua told him that someone had come again to the narrow path down the hill. Her words were clipped and severe because she still resented herself for the decision to flee.

So Wei Wuxian went to the bottom of the hill and found a man waiting for him. A man broad and short and with a mason's hands, whose scent was frosty, and who bowed to him with all of his back.

That night, many were regaled with tales of the man's life. He spoke long and wide of his journey and his trade. He showed Wen Qing the drug he was using to hide himself—one which had come from his omega mother and was different than the one she knew. One, it turned out, which was much easier to brew for those among them who wished to mask their scents.

The man did not stay. He had a life and a family, and had only come out of curiosity for the rumors.
He was happy, he said, to see so many of his kind out of bonds. By the time he had made his mind to leave, night had fallen, and the scent of him had sweetened again.

He was not the last. Three more came to meet with Wei Wuxian, one of whom decided to stay. All of them bowed to him with the kind of respect he did not feel he deserved. All of them shed a tear at some point or another.

Once, it was one of Wei Wuxian's own who decided to leave. She packed her meager belongings; she learned to brew the drugs from Wen Qing; she said she wished to travel, and that she would visit again whenever she could.

Two months after that day in winter, Wen Qing figured out how to grow the white flowers that moonless tea were made of. Their attempts to plant them into the soil of the Burial Mounds were all unsuccessful, for the flowers were fragile and exiging, even if they did sprout all year long. Wei Wuxian brought in entire carts of dirt from outside. Two elderly men of the Wen sect built wide pots out of clay to hold it in. At last, in the cool air of the cave, the flowers bloomed.

After that, Wei Wuxian never spent a day without drinking the tea.

So life went on. Wei Wuxian spent little time in the Mounds, preferring to roam the lands in search of little houses with heavy doors. His people in Yiling grew used to seeing him arrive week after week with another person or two, and sometimes with no one. They welcomed the newcomers warmly. They squeezed all together in a group of makeshift houses. They learned to grow their own food, and those who knew other crafts such as sewing or embroidery made a trade with the village down the hills. Oftentimes, money was short, and they had to tighten their belts. Oftentimes, the elders of the Wen sect had to stand guard behind the barrier on the path and throw stones and dry branches at unwelcome visitors asking for their omega back.

And the child in the widest of the houses where Grandmother lived remained out of his sight. Sometimes Wei Wuxian heard it cry, or smelled petrichor on a dry day, and froze. Sometimes, Wen Qing had to lead him away from this misfit group of people he had assembled but knew not how to speak to, because she saw that his mind had gone from his body. Some wondered why he so disliked the sound of a baby crying; others figured that he was simply mad, no doubt.

But he only saw it once between the day Wen Qing pulled it out of him and the day of Lanling's hunting competition. And for almost half of the nights he spent watching Wen Ning's dead body absorb the remnants of its own spirit, or sleeping under stars as he searched for prisoners to free, he could pretend that it did not exist at all.

Seasons passed one after the other. Spring was well underway on the day Wen Qing walked into the cave and told him, "Sect leader Jiang is here."

Wei Wuxian had been in the middle of tinkering with compasses on the floor of the cave, sweating under his clothes beside the hot fire. Red light gleamed out of the bloodpool and shone upon the barrels of liquor he had put here to brew in peace.

"Wei Ying," she snapped when he gave no answer.

"Yes, I heard you," he replied. "Just tell him to go away."
It was not the first time Jiang Cheng had tried to talk to him, and it would certainly not be the last.

Wen Qing sighed loudly. The sound of her steps echoed less now that all walls of the cave were covered in items of all kinds—talismans and papers, crates full of seeds or necessities, pots wide enough for two adults to sit in where the moonless flowers grew. Cloaks and robes made by Luo Fanghua, who had proven herself to be a wonderful seamstress.

She crouched by Wei Wuxian's side and pulled the compass out of his hands.

Wei Wuxian looked at her at last.

"He came with his sister," she said. Her face was serious, devoid of any mockery. "The two of them alone."

"Why should I care?" he asked.

"She was crying and begging me to let her see you."

He saw her eyes look above his head and to the back of the cave, where Wen Ning still lay where they had first put him, preserved by the blood array around him.

"Wei Ying," she said softly, "they just miss you."

It felt like an eternity later that Wei Wuxian pushed himself to his feet.

The day was fresh and wet still with the night's dew. Wei Wuxian had not slept, and did not know if the morning was still young, but either way people already went to their occupations. He saw the backs of a few working the vegetable garden; he saw Luo Fanghua by the door of her shack, pulling needle and thread through cloth with unshaking fingers. Most who saw him paused to greet him with bows. Wei Wuxian wished he had something he wanted to tell them other than to stop doing it.

Then he went down the narrow path in the hills; he walked out of the barriers and into the cold, resentful air of the Mounds; he smelled Jiang Cheng before he could even see him—overturned earth and stormy air, like his mother and father at once. The aftermath of a landslide.

It was not Jiang Cheng who called his name first, however, but Jiang Yanli.

"A-Xian!" she cried at the very first sight of him.

He was not even yet past the last of his talismans. Jiang Yanli still ran ahead, threatening to shock herself with the barrier if he did not cross it first, and so he did; and she mistook this for a welcoming sign, and took him in her arms.

Wei Wuxian stilled deathly. He did not return the gesture, only tensed and tensed as she tried to soften him with her embrace. He met Jiang Cheng's eyes over the top of her head—saw the anger laid into them as it had been when they last spoke—and looked away.

Jiang Yanli pulled away from him and called his name again. He tried to smile to her.

Her answering smile was feeble. "A-Xian," she repeated. Her hand crawled from his back to his shoulder and squeezed it. "Oh, you're so thin…"

Wei Wuxian finally managed to speak. "I'm fine, shijie," he said, dislodging her hand. Her face fell in unhappiness. "What are you two doing here?"

"We came to see you, of course," she replied.
Judging by Jiang Cheng's face, and by the cultivators of the Jiang sect he had taken with him for each of his previous attempts to enter the Burial Mounds, there was more to it than that.

"Have you been eating well?" Jiang Yanli asked, taking him by the arm again to lead him further away from the path. There was a high-raised, crooked root at the base of a bare tree; she made him sit on it beside her and took both of his hands in hers. "You look so pale! Have you been sick again?"

Wei Wuxian's stomach twisted at the memory of vomiting behind the kitchen of the Lotus Pier. "I'm just fine," he replied.

"It's been so long since we saw you, why won't you…"

In front of them, Jiang Cheng clicked his tongue angrily. Jiang Yanli reared back slightly, cutting off her own words in the making.

"It's his problem if he prefers to stay here rather than live in his own home," Jiang Cheng declared. "He knows there's a room waiting for him there if he decides to show some shame, he just refuses to."

They were the first words he had spoken to Wei Wuxian in months, and they were delivered frostily. So Wei Wuxian replied in kind, "Glad to know we are on the same page."

It only served to make Jiang Cheng's fist clench around Sandu's pommel.

"You are so ungrateful," he spat at Wei Wuxian; his own rage made him shake in place, taking away any hint of the relief Wei Wuxian had glimpsed on his face when he came around the winding path a minute ago. "Don't you know what people are saying about you? Don't you know how much of my time I have to spend defending you, apologizing for your constant stealing!?"

"A-Cheng—"

"Don't defend him, sister," Jiang Cheng snapped at her.

Jiang Cheng had never spoken to his sister so. It was enough to have Wei Wuxian stand again and place himself before her, so that she would be spared his awful mood and awful words.

"What is it I am stealing, Jiang Cheng?" Wei Wuxian asked. "What is it that people think I owe them?"

Jiang Cheng's face flushed violently. "You know what!" he exclaimed. "Everyone knows what you've been doing—it's all every sect within hundreds of miles of here can talk about!"

"And you believe them?"

"I don't know what I should believe anymore!"

Jiang Yanli had risen too, and her hand had fisted into Wei Wuxian's sleeve. She looked at the edge of tears again; if Jiang Cheng had stood sufficiently close, she would have grabbed him, too.

Wei Wuxian pulled away from her, heedless of the mournful, "A-Xian," she begged him with. "I'll tell you what to believe," he said coldly. "I'll tell you to believe this: that a day before the discussion conference in Lanling, Jin Zixun noticed two omega siblings hidden in the group of Wen sect prisoners he was in charge of. That he attacked them, and managed to drag away one of the two to do with as he saw fit."
Jiang Cheng looked mortified. "You say this," he muttered, "but you hate Jin Zixun, don't you? Shijie told me how you two met—"

"Should I call Wen Qing here, then?" Wei Wuxian cut him off harshly. "Should I bring her here so she and I can tell you in what state we found her brother's body? Do you have so little faith in me, Jiang Cheng, that you think I would go around saying such lies just because I dislike one person?"

"I've met Wen Ning before," Jiang Cheng spoke back. "He's not even an omega!"

"He was hiding! Wen Ning and Wen Qing have hidden themselves their whole lives, because they knew what they risked if they were ever found out!"

Jiang Cheng threw his head to the side as if to avoid a blow, red in the cheeks and pale everywhere else, in that peculiar ugly way of blushing he only ever sported when he was truly embarrassed.

Through all his life, Wei Wuxian had avoided embarrassing him with this.

He had known. Even when they were just children, even when Jiang Cheng pushed past his own upbringing in order to grace him with a friendly shove, with a pat to the shoulder, he knew how Jiang Cheng felt about the topic of statuses. About the topic of Wei Wuxian's status. Jiang Cheng had never even uttered it if he could avoid it; he had never thought of Wei Wuxian as omega as long as people did not remind him of it, and the anger he displayed for those occurrences, the prideful words he said, were all in his own defense.

**Wei Wuxian is a disciple of the Jiang sect. Wei Wuxian is a skilled archer.**

There was a time when Wei Wuxian welcomed this, when he took this as a reason for pride, as proof of his difference from others who shared his status, but he was no such child anymore.

He did not wish to be apart from his own kind and remain alienated from them and their lives. He did not wish to go on living blindly. The reluctance Jiang Cheng still showed for acknowledging who he was felt only puerile now.

"This is what happens," he told his once-shidi, "when they are found out. This is what happens to those of them who try to escape being locked up for life. Can you look me in the eye and tell me you blame them, Jiang Cheng?"

"A-Xian, we would never let this happen to you," Jiang Yanli said with tears in her eyes. "You know we would never let it happen to you."

"It doesn't matter," Wei Wuxian replied, tearing away once more from the grip of her fingers on his sleeve. He spoke to her next, willing her to understand even as he knew she would not. "Shijie, it doesn't matter who it happens to. I can't just stand here and leave things as they are. I can't. I'm sorry."

And he was; he was sorry for her tears, sorry for the anger and confusion on Jiang Cheng's face, sorry for the long-lost days of their youth in the Lotus Pier. He was sorry for how forlorn she must be without him to walk by the river with her. He was sorry for the empty space at Jiang Cheng's right side, where he had once promised he would always be.

The great sorrow in him was only matched by fatigue. "I owe these people," he told the both of them. "I owe it to them to do whatever I can to help them."

"And what about what you owe our clan?" Jiang Cheng asked him.
The red blood in his face had not receded, but he still looked angry. He still looked the same as he did when he was young and his dogs were taken away from him—when his helplessness turned to tears and screams of rage, and he locked Wei Wuxian out of his room for three nights.

"I helped you avenge Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu," Wei Wuxian said tiredly. "I helped you win the war. I killed Wen Chao." He ignored the guilty whisper through his chest and belly, which said: *You avenged yourself.* "I will not get in the way of Yunmengjiang. I won't cause you trouble or defy you in public, I still…"

*I still consider you my family.*

But Wei Wuxian had lost the right to those words on the day the Lotus Pier burned. "I just want to be left alone," he said instead. "Me and all the people who live here. We just want to be left in peace."

"You won't be left alone for long if you keep taking them."


Wei Wuxian thought of Grandmother, locked within the same four walls all of her life, who would have died without walking into the sun like that man in the Lotus Pier if Wei Wuxian had not come. He thought of Luo Fanghua, whose ankle bore permanent bruises from the chain that had been wound around it for years. He thought of Wen Ning who had risked his whole life to help him only because Wei Wuxian had been of his kind.

But appealing to such kinship to Jiang Cheng was a fool's dream, he knew; so he replied, "You wouldn't understand."

And like every single time he had said it before, Jiang Cheng's face closed off with anger.

Still, he did not seem inclined to pursue the matter further. "They want to come after you, Wei Wuxian," he said warningly. "Don't think I haven't noticed that you have been avoiding the greater sects' territories during those trips of yours. They're staying quiet for now, but the minor sects…"

"Let them come," Wei Wuxian sneered. "You think I'm scared of a few mediocre cultivators?"

"A-Xian, we're just worried," Jiang Yanli pleaded. She did not try to touch him again, and only stood by his side with her wide eyes turned to him. "You don't know what A-Cheng's had to go through since you left, everyone accuses him of using you to conspire against them."

"Sister," Jiang Cheng tried to interrupt; but Jiang Yanli, in a rare show of defiance, raised a hand to silence him.

"They say that *he* is the one to steal their omega," she went on. "Or that you are a loose weapon, and proof that he cannot control his own sect. He has started being isolated from the rest of the clans."

Wei Wuxian could believe it.

Even if he did not believe Jiang Yanli incapable of lying to him, he would have seen the truth of her words over Jiang Cheng's face; his former shidi grew red and ugly once more, shamed and grieved with the knowledge of his own failure, disgusted to have to ask him for help.

He did not reject Jiang Yanli this time when she once more touched his arm. "We came here to see
"you," she said quietly. "This is true before anything else, A-Xian, and we will not force you to do anything."

"Because we can't," Jiang Cheng spat out.

Jiang Yanli ignored his input. "But your absence has caused a lot of troubles to our sect," she continued placatingly. "People have been talking. You haven't been seen publicly in almost a year, and those who did see you have so little good to say. If they do not see you with us, if they imagine that you fell from under our protection, or that A-Cheng fell from yours…"

Wei Wuxian needn't hear her say more to understand what she meant.

He was silent as she nodded to her brother, as Jiang Cheng pulled from within his belt a rolled piece of paper. Wei Wuxian took it when Jiang Cheng handed it to him. He recognized Lanlingjin's seal in wax, already broken through when Jiang Cheng read the missive.

It was an invitation to a hunting competition. Green ink sloped over paper in many a flowery idiom, asking for the master cultivators to come and enjoy the festivities, to show off their skills. Jin Guangshan's signature was burned to the page at its bottom, looking no different than it had been over a year ago, as he had asked for the three Wen omega to be returned to him as well-deserved spoils of war.

"I should believe," Wei Wuxian said softly, "that Jin Guangshan wants to see me, after the last time we met?"

"He sent an invitation to us," Jiang Yanli replied. "He knew we'd ask you to come."

"Then let me ask you differently, shijie; should I want to see Jin Guangshan, considering that he threatened me?"

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng said exasperately. "Won't you think of someone not yourself for once? If not for us, then at least be smart enough to realize that the—the people you've taken also need as much protection as they can get!"

"I know this," Wei Wuxian snapped.

"Then come," Jiang Yanli said. Her hand squeezed around his arm, and he saw and felt her worry at finding it so skinny. She did not linger on it again, however. "Please, come with us. Show them that you are too powerful to risk messing with. Show that you still consider us your family, and that A-Cheng and you both benefit from each other's protection."

He should refuse, he thought, looking into her pleading eyes.

Lanling was not so close, and the competition would last days. Those days would have to be spent without him to strengthen the barriers surrounding the Burial Mounds that kept fierce spirits at bay, or to chase away angry families come to steal what they should have never possessed. Wen Qing was becoming apt at keeping the barriers, and a few of the Wen sect people could fight, Wei Wuxian knew; but it would still be dangerous.

If he came, he would probably have to see Jin Zixun again and prevent himself from killing him. Or perhaps he would have to deal with Jin Guangshan himself rather than his nephew; or even his son Jin Zixuan, who had never missed a chance to make an nuisance of himself to Wei Wuxian through the years.

If he didn't go…
He licked his dry lips. "Fine," he conceded. "I'll go with you."

Jiang Yanli's face brightened so vividly, it looked as if the sun had pierced the heavy cover of clouds to fall onto her eyes and lips.

Wei Wuxian accepted her embrace more readily this time. It still pulled heavily at his heart and made him feel thick-skinned, unbending, tough. Like the standing bark of a tree giving the illusion that its insides remained, even after they were eaten through by rot. If Wen Qing had been there, she would have put a hand on his shoulder and guided him away from the source of his unease.

He could not even feel anything for Jiang Yanli being the source of his unease, now. Not sorrow and not shame.

"You should visit us, A-Xian," she said as she released him. He could tell that his stiffness had worried her, and that she wished to cry again. "A-Ying and A-Qian have grown so much, and they miss you terribly..."

Wei Wuxian turned his back to her.

He stepped up the path that winded up and down the hills. He passed Jiang Cheng silently, knowing how many questions and words of anger burned on the man's tongue, unable to answer any of them. "I'll join you in Lanling in two months," he said simply; then he crossed the first of his barriers and felt sound and rotten air clear from around him.

Wen Qing was waiting for him at the top of the path when he reached it. So were a few of the omega, the more curious ones who always awaited an occasion to speak with him for some reason. "Don't worry," he told them, "Jiang Cheng was only here to ask me for something. He's not going to attack us."

"Is it true what they say," said a man of thirty, delicate and pretty-faced, one of the rare few of that age and appearance whom Wei Wuxian could convince to leave their houses. "That you are this sect leader's shixiong?"

The others did not move away either. Some exchanged looks of awe or disapproval; most stared at Wei Wuxian with an odd glint in their eyes.

"I suppose so," Wei Wuxian replied. He knew not if he should still call himself any such thing. "Jiang Cheng is... we grew up together. Yes, he was my shidi."

His shidi and his brother, who pulled him out of the mud and cried when Wei Wuxian got the both of them lost in the woods. Who embraced him, once, in the darkness of an abandoned fort, and begged him not to die.

"Excuse me," he told the group around him.

None of them tried to stop him as he left.

The bloodpool cave was as he had left it: cool and fire-lit and as silent as a tomb. Wen Ning's body lay unchanged, its spirit absorbed slowly, still so far away from waking.

"They just want to know more about you."

Wei Wuxian looked over his shoulder.

Wen Qing did not fear the sight of the cave so much now. She had become used to Wen Ning's
preserved state and never shied away from sitting by him, holding his cold hands, whispering to him. She was looking at Wei Wuxian now with a small smile on her severe face.

"You hardly ever speak to them," she said. "All they know is what you tell them when you free them, and then what they can get out of me with bribes."

"I don't know what to say to them," Wei Wuxian replied.

The omega were sometimes quick to speak to each other, sometimes not. Some went so far as to be friendly with the alpha and beta of the Wen sect who shared three houses between them all at one end of the budding village; others remained isolated and silent, like Luo Fanghua who sat by her house every day and sewed clothing together.

But she sat out in daylight, no matter how cold or hot the weather was. She stopped her work sometimes to let sunlight bathe over her face, closing her eyes to feel it more clearly, showing such deep emotion that Wei Wuxian always needed to turn away from the sight.

Wen Qing joined his side. She said curtly, "They are not your enemy. They just couldn't believe that you were raised in such a way until they saw you with sect leader Jiang earlier."

"So you were all spying on us, then."

"They just peeked. We couldn't hear any word you two or the young lady said."

It tore a smile out of him; his very mouth ached at pulling in such a way, so long had it been since he gave any.

"Jiang Cheng and shijie asked me to come to Lanlingjin's hunting competition in two months," he told her, handing over the invitation he was still holding in one hand. It had crumpled badly when he clenched his fist earlier. "I said I would."

"I don't think it's a bad idea," Wen Qing replied. "You could stand to make a show of yourself once in a while, remind them not to mess with us."

"Who knows. Maybe Jin Guangshan will finally have me killed while I'm there."

Wen Qing did not share his humor with the topic. She read over the letter quickly, frowning, her fingers touching the jade pendant at her hip in the shape of a twisted snake. "I'll take care of protection while you're gone," she told him, rolling up the paper again.

"I know," Wei Wuxian said.

As he walked her to the opening of the cave at the end of the day—as the sun set over the hills bloodily and turned grey stone to gold—he called again, "Wen Qing."

She paused ahead of him.

Already the inhabitants of this hastily-put-together village were preparing for the night. Luo Fanghua sat by her house with tea in hand, always eager to feel the sunrays over her until they vanished beyond the mountains, always alone and unspeaking. The pretty man who had questioned Wei Wuxian earlier had dressed a wide table for about a dozen to dine on.

Grandmother sat at one end, rocking gently in place, holding a squirming child against her. Its black hair swayed in the evening breeze. One tiny hand raised from between their bodies and grabbed her collar awkwardly.
Wei Wuxian looked away, and his heart beat so strongly at the hollow of his throat that his skin felt a second away from splitting open under its blows.

"If I die," Wei Wuxian said in spite of the shaking in him which she must have noticed. "If I die—you have to take care of them."

"Don't speak like this." Wen Qing snapped at him.

"Please, just promise me."

He knew what she must see when she looked at him: how skinny and sleepless he was, how sick food and water made him, how he was shaking now with proximity to his greatest and deepest wound. He knew she must be thinking of all the times she had to ply him into resting, of all the times he spent out of his own mind, standing or sitting in place and waiting to feel again.

Her eyes shone. "I will," she said shakily. "But you're not allowed to die, Wei Wuxian!"

"I'm not planning on it."

"I won't let you die."

Wei Wuxian looked at her and thought that he had never had a friend like her; and that should they be separated one day, by death or other things, he never again would.

If Wei Wuxian had more meat on his bones on the day of Lanlingjin's hunting competition, perhaps he would have been as burdened by the heat as some of the cultivators there seemed to be. Those dressed for hunting fared slightly better than the rest, who scurried in-between shaded spots to avoid the worst of it, but only Meng Yao, who was nevertheless wearing a full set of golden robes, looked well-rested and dry-skinned.

Then Wei Wuxian saw Lan Xichen standing at another end of the wide and flat promontory where the stone path had emerged, and not even the scorching heat could have warmed him any.

He heard Jiang Cheng call his name angrily as he left him and Jin Zixuan behind. He walked far to the border of the woods where the hunt was to take place, trying not to look in direction of the Gusu delegation, failing every time. He never met Lan Xichen's eyes, who looked for all intents and purposes as if he had not noticed his presence, but it hardly mattered.

Every time he blinked, Wei Wuxian could see him kneeling before him. The ghostly image of that day in the snow followed and haunted him, and he felt that if he were to breathe in with his nose, all he would smell would be the frosty scent of the man as he carried him sideways.

He should not have come. He should have known to expect this, and should have known better than to think he could handle it with any elegance.

Wei Wuxian ignored the dark looks he could feel following him around. He resisted the need to let his forehead touch the cool bark of a tree, or to fist a hand into his outer robe, level with his stomach, in hope of chasing away the twisting and shaking he felt there. It would not do to show weakness in front of so many.
"So they did bring you," said a voice behind him. "The Jiang clan has truly gone rotten."

Jin Zixun stood there with an arrogant and spiteful look to his face. The bruises at his throat from where Wei Wuxian had stepped were long gone, but he still grabbed his collar with one hand when Wei Wuxian looked down to it. The veins of his forehead bulged under his sweaty skin.

When he was certain that a good amount of fear had darkened the man's confidence, Wei Wuxian said coldly, "If you value your life, Jin Zixun, you will stay far away from me. I spared you a year ago on the orders of a friend, but she is not here now."

"You mad bitch," Jin Zixun spat in outrage. "Do you know how many people here want your head? You'll be lucky to escape with your life."

Wei Wuxian knew the names of the sects he had stolen from, knew that some of them were here, their representatives burning with hatred at the sight of him. He didn't care. He stared down Jin Zixun, allowing himself the pleasure of imagining his head speared at the end of a sword.

"You had better watch yourself in those woods, Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixun said despite his growing and visible fear. He took a step backwards, looking quickly around them, noticing too late that no one was within easy distance to help. "People like you have no place in our world."

"Is that what you told Wen Ning when you left him to die?" Wei Wuxian asked softly.

Jin Zixun's red face grew entirely white. He made a frightened and choked sound, looking at Wei Wuxian's hand, which had taken a piece of black iron out of his sleeve. One half of the Stygian Tiger Seal.

"I could walk around blindfolded and not be threatened by you or any of your ilk," Wei Wuxian said, lifting the half-Seal up, watching Jin Zixun step away again. "You think you have what it takes you kill me, senior Jin? Go ahead and try."

"Wei Wuxian," the man cried, as hateful as he was terrified. "You dare threaten my life—"

"What is the problem here, cousin?"

Jin Zixun jumped as if the very ground had shaken under him. He turned to face the newcomer: Meng Yao and his pleasant smile, who still looked fresh-faced despite the heat and constant walking around.

"Bastard," he greeted him in an uneven voice.

Meng Yao went so far as to nod to him again, both of his hands clasped together before him. "The hunt will be starting soon," he said. "I have been tasked by sect leader Jin to gather all the competitors, so that we may proceed. You should head back to your Uncle's tent, Zixun."

Jin Zixun looked between the both of them—Meng Yao and Wei Wuxian—and, as he was wont to, turned away from them in a huff of displeasure. At least his hands still shakily grabbed at his own collar, Wei Wuxian noticed.

He hid the half of the Seal again. When he looked at Meng Yao, he found the man's eyes lingering in direction of his hands.

"I won't use it," Wei Wuxian told him.

Meng Yao's face lightened with surprise before smoothing over. "I'm certain most of the guests here
would prefer if you did not, young master Wei," he replied.

"It couldn't be called a competition at all if I used it."

"Indeed."

Wei Wuxian frowned.

He studied Meng Yao from the corner of his eyes as they walked back to the wide tents which the Jin clan had set up for shade. He was a short man, pleasantly-scented in spite of his alpha status, with thin hands and gentle eyes. He carried no sword that Wei Wuxian could see, but there were calluses between the index and thumb of his right hand. The same that Wei Wuxian had once sported, when he still used Suibian.

As if sensing that Wei Wuxian was looking at them, Meng Yao linked his hands behind his back. "We're here, young master Wei," he said.

They had reached the thin line of paper talismans keeping the forest sealed. Before Wei Wuxian could say a thing, Meng Yao nodded and declared, "I wish you the best of luck."

He left without waiting for an answer.

Wei Wuxian stood in the middle of all those sects and cultivators, in the midst of people he had once called allies or friends or at the very least, trusted to have in mind the same ambitions. Nie Huaisang was there in his grey-and-green robes; Ouyang Zhi stood not far, his head resolutely turned away; Lan Wangji was with his brother, whose eyes met Wei Wuxian's in something like accident and made his belly turn to ice.

Lan Xichen looked away quickly. He did not bow as he once had in the Nightless City, offering Wei Wuxian the first congratulatory words he had heard in over a year. Wei Wuxian let the sickness wash over him until he felt numb again.

None of these people were friends or allies of his, he thought. Not even those he could recognize but not name, those who had been trapped with the Xuanwu of Slaughter and fled while he faced the beast alone.

Wei Wuxian made his way into the woods with Chenqing in hand and split immediately from the group. He thought he heard a call of his name through the haze, but he did not heed it; whoever wanted to see him now, out of all those people, could not have anything good to say.

Jiang Cheng had remained with the sect leaders outside. Jiang Yanli was strolling with Madam Jin, who no doubt wished to speak to her again of her once-engagement to Jin Zixuan.

This was no competition to Wei Wuxian even without the use of the Stygian Tiger Seal. The cadavers walked to him with one note of the dizi, following blindly to wherever he pointed, and where he pointed was always the same: to a group of cultivators in Yunneng robes whose names he had never learned. The boys and girls were astonished to find so many targets on their way. Wei Wuxian saw them struggle from a height to capture the corpses, hesitant and new still despite the months since Jiang Cheng had recruited them.

He felt nothing at all, not even a shadow of pride, for these strangers. When he had still lived at the Pier, none of them had so much as spoken a word to him.

He remembered a time when his shidi used to play with him with their feet in the water.
He was bored. He was angry. He was unnerved by the possibility of seeing white robes appear behind the wide trunk of a tree and finding himself once more in front of the Lan clan's elder child. Even the prospect of meeting Lan Wangji, whom he was always at least happy to greet, could not diminish this fear.

The sight of that squirming child in Grandmother's frail arms had not left him at all. Wei Wuxian moved about the woods as if expecting that great pain to strike him again and make him realize that he had never escaped. That his nails, crusted with dirt, had never pulled him away; that the taste of grass in his mouth may never vanish.

So was it that he was found almost an hour later—reaching the edge of a clearing where a narrow stream ran, feeling moss and grass under his feet rather than hot, cracked earth, and hearing his own name called: "Wei Wuxian!"

Wei Wuxian's hand grabbed Chenqing again, but it was only Jin Zixuan. He emerged from above a row of thick and tangled bushes, the branches of which caught at the fine training uniform he wore and made him curse loudly.

"What do you want?" Wei Wuxian asked him.

The Jin Zixuan he had known as a child had been mostly harmless, but Wei Wuxian had heard of his exploits during the war. If he was here to demand reparation for his cousin's pride, perhaps things would, at last, come to a fight.

Jin Zixuan untangled himself from the bushes. He crossed his half of the clearing breathlessly, red in the face as if he had run for minutes on end, his sword Suixia gleaming sharply in the sunlight. When he arrived before Wei Wuxian—only a few steps away—he stopped. Reddened even more. Asked in a strangled voice: "Was it you who took away all the targets? I could hear the sound of a flute from below the mountain."

Wei Wuxian dearly wanted to roll his eyes, or perhaps to hit him again as he had done when he was but fifteen. "If your lot had been faster, then perhaps I wouldn't have been able to," he replied curtly. "I left a few. If you run some more you'll catch them."

He turned away, well-intent on leaving, but Jin Zixuan's voice came again hurriedly: "Wait! Wait, please. I wish to speak with you."

It was how polite the request was, Wei Wuxian supposed, that made him abide it. This or the lost expression on Jin Zixuan's face which made him look like a child again. He faced the man once more and replied, "Then speak."

Jin Zixuan moved oddly. His sword hand rose and fell twice, and he licked his lips. He seemed at a loss despite his earlier words; Wei Wuxian considered leaving anyway, when Jin Zixuan finally blurted out, "How did you like Golden Carp Tower?"

Either he realized for himself how his words could be taken, or he saw Wei Wuxian's face darken with the awful memories, for he went back on his words hastily.

"No, I meant... I meant the place. The Tower. Did you like it?"

Wei Wuxian stared at him without answering for a long second. "I suppose so," he said at last.

His one and only visit at the Tower only ever came back to him in painful images of rain and blood, in the sound of Jiang Cheng's voice trying to hold him back, in Wen Qing's scent of persimmon. But he had liked the town well enough, hadn't he? He had found the stairs beautiful. He had admired the
golden halls before he tainted them with resentful energy.

"The view was beautiful," he said, recalling the little bluff of stone where he and Lan Wangji had met and he had watched over the open land. He could still picture how the light had stroked Lan Wangji's face, so high up in the mountains, with so little distance between him and the sky. As if it were painted on him. "I wish I'd had the chance to visit the famed gardens," Wei Wuxian added, figuring that Jin Zixuan was looking for such compliments.

Jin Zixuan's lips curved into a smile. "Yes," he replied, his voice thin and breathless. "Yes, they're beautiful. You would love them. I remember, you like flowers."

Do I? Wei Wuxian wondered.

Perhaps he did. He had loved the lotuses of the Pier, loved picking them and watching them grow, loved planting them with the peasants who cultivated them along the river, when they would allow him too. He liked, also, to take care of the white flowers in the cave in Yiling; Wen Qing had made such a comment to him, telling him that he seemed more at peace with his hands full of water and dirt.

"Why are you asking me if I liked Golden Carp Tower?" Wei Wuxian asked Jin Zixuan, whose breathing had quieted but whose face remained red. "It's not like I'll ever set foot there again, considering how your father and I left things last time."

"But if you could," Jin Zixuan said. He did not protest the rude mention of his father. "If… If there was a way, and you could go back there. If you could live there. Would you like it?"

"Why would I want to live in Lanling?" Wei Wuxian replied curtly. "Are you asking me if I'd like to come nicely and give myself up for my crimes, Jin Zixuan?"

The Jin sect heir may look as flustered before him as he had been every time they interacted before, but Wei Wuxian could already feel unease overcome even the confusion in him.

Had Jin Zixuan come to demand reparation for his clan? Should he truly ready himself for a fight?

But: "No," Jin Zixuan said empathetically.

He looked Wei Wuxian in the eyes. His face twisted into something pained and vulnerable. He took a step forward, and Wei Wuxian realized, between that second and the next, just how wide he had become.

How the delicate appearance of his youth, held in place by Wei Wuxian's memories, had gone. How war had scarred his temple and hardened his face, how much space his shoulders and back occupied, draped in those golden clothes. How the scent of him swelled through the clearing and trees as if to become one with them, like a harsher and bitterer echo of his half-brother Meng Yao's.

Wei Wuxian could not remember ever noticing this peculiar alpha-scent before, this smell of warm and bitter pine trees, but now, he could. Now ice gathered up his chest and pain tightened in his throat. It was all he could do not to walk away.

"No," Jin Zixuan was saying, wide-eyed and flushed, a childish expression on the visage of a man. "Of course not, I would never… If I were allowed to—"

"What do you want," Wei Wuxian cut him off.

Silence shivered between them. Jin Zixuan's hand lowered; it was only when it did that Wei Wuxian
noticed it had risen at all.

"Do you remember the first time we met?" he asked softly.

But even if Wei Wuxian had remembered, he could not have told him so. No words could have pulled themselves out of him now, while his lungs filled with such icy air that it felt like water. That it felt like drowning.

It could not be, he thought over and over again. The idea alone was preposterous, was wrong. Surely, it could not be.

"I was sent to the Lotus Pier to spend time with the young lady Jiang," Jin Zixuan said. "I was only thirteen, and you must have been fourteen or so. I was sat with miss Jiang over the docks, and you…" Jin Zixuan paused to swallow. He paused to smile lovingly. "You got angry at me for some reason or another," he told Wei Wuxian. "You pushed me into the water, using a piece of wood because Jiang Wanyin had told you that you would get in trouble if you touched me. It all ended in terrible scandal, and my father was quite angry. I will never forget how he scolded me for letting you approach me."

Wei Wuxian watched him as if through a smokescreen. He could not say anything.

Jin Zixuan stepped closer again. His voice swelled with emotion. "But all I could remember was you," he said. "All I could think about was you, in that pond, smiling in the sunlight… How bright you were. How bright you always were."

"Stop," Wei Wuxian managed roughly. The breath felt caught below his tongue entirely. "Stop talking now."

Jin Zixuan did hesitate. Wei Wuxian saw it even with the bright panic making color wash away from his sight—Jin Zixuan stopped speaking, stop stepping toward him, drew away the hand he had lifted again.

But it only lasted a moment.

"I can't," Jin Zixuan said. "I have to tell you."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Each word was difficult to form and difficult to speak, but Wei Wuxian did it anyway. This could not be happening. "Jin Zixuan, you're mad," he said. "You've always hated me, you've always found me disgraceful—"

"I never did," Jin Zixuan cut him off, and he took another step forth, so that he stood in front of Wei Wuxian like so many times before with only the thinnest of respectable distances between them.

Wei Wuxian had never minded before. He had never been frightened of it before. But every breath he took in smelled of bitter trees, and everywhere he looked showed nothing but grass, but soil; nothing but places for his body to be pushed down onto if he should fail in his escape.

"I never found you disgraceful. I admit that I am awkward, I often say the wrong thing, but I always found you—"

"Stop talking," Wei Wuxian snapped at him.

Fear seized him once again when the heel of his boot touched a root, when he realized that a tree stood behind him and cut away his only safe route.
"I will not," Jin Zixuan replied. Already he had crossed through that added distance to stand once more before him. "Please, listen to me."

And then his hand which had not stopped rising and falling reached forth and grabbed Wei Wuxian's.

Wei Wuxian would have liked to say that he pushed him away and fled; that he kept enough of his mind to avoid the mess that was sure to follow, or even to beat Jin Zixuan to the ground and walk away unsathed, but he did not. His head rang with the sound of cries. His skin shifted and moved about his bones, and he stilled entirely, his heart and his lungs gone icy with terror.

Jin Zixuan's hand was warm, but he could not feel it. It cradled his clenched fingers, it opened them one by one to separate his nails from where they dug into his own skin. It slid palm-to-palm against his, a little damp from the hot day.

Wei Wuxian could not feel it at all.

"My father tried to reason with me so many times," Jin Zixuan said in nothing more than a whisper. "I tried to reason with myself so many times, too, but you…"

Wei Wuxian swallowed and said, "Jin Zixuan."

"You were always so much, you were always… You tormented me. I could not stop thinking about you. For years I tried to tell myself that my father would never agree, and I knew all the rumors about Jiang Fengmian, about how he refused everyone so much as an audience with you."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I do," Jin Zixuan protested. His warm and unfelt hand squeezed around Wei Wuxian's, more terrible somehow than if he had taken him by the wrist and pinned him to the ground. "When miss Jiang came to get us that day—when I saw my cousin try to buy you in secret, I discovered rage like I had never felt before. When I thought you were dead after the Lotus Pier fell, I did not sleep for three days. I had no sword anymore to fly, but I wanted to run there for you. My father had to lock up all the horses so that I would not flee."

His relentless words halted, but only because Wei Wuxian had raised his other hand and pushed it over his brow as if it could ease the ringing ache under his skin. As if it could put any sort of a barrier between them. "You were engaged," he breathed, mortified. Nausea fitted snugly to the hollow of his throat. "To my shijie. To my sister."

"How could anyone look at Jiang Yanli when you stand next to her?"

Wei Wuxian dug his fingers a little more into the thin of his forehead. He pushed them into skin until he felt warm blood spill under his fingernails.

Jin Zixuan made a small sound, something worried and kind, and released his hand. He held the other instead, pulling it from Wei Wuxian's face, and Wei Wuxian could not look at him in the eye when he appeared again into his line of sight. He could only look at his hand; at Jin Zixuan's hand pressing it to his own chest, covering the back of it wholly.

He bowed like this as he had a long time ago: the only difference being that Wei Wuxian's hand was there between his own and the white peony sewn to his chest, and that if he had the ability to, he would have felt Jin Zixuan's heartbeats right at the hollow of his palm.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan said. His other hand touched the cut skin of Wei Wuxian's forehead,
wiping blood off tenderly. It was shaking as badly as the one holding him to his heart. He called again, hesitantly: "Wei Ying."

"Don't call me that," Wei Wuxian said. His own voice was so thin and faraway, he could barely even hear it. "You don't know me. You never even liked me."

"I love you," Jin Zixuan replied, and Wei Wuxian's whole chest felt like an empty, gaping void. He wanted to cringe and curl up on the ground, to smother himself down to nothing, to never be seen again. "I've loved you since we were children. I want to marry you… No, there's no one in the world I could marry but you."

His fingers touched down from forehead to cheek, to the emaciated curve of bone under Wei Wuxian's skin, and Wei Wuxian heard him breathe again, felt the air move over his lips, and wondered if he would dare.

He wondered if Jin Zixuan would try; he wondered if the alpha before him would survive the call for death already rumbling through Wei Wuxian and slithering into his sleeves, into the hearts of the Stygian Tiger Seal. If he would even come close enough to touch before the life was torn from him savagely.

But Jin Zixuan had more restraint than Wen Chao. He had better manners than Jin Zixun. His fingers left Wei Wuxian's face, and he pulled back and away, Wei Wuxian's hand still held in his.

"Marry me," he said again earnestly. "I'll never lock you up. I'll speak to my father, I'll take over the sect now if I have to. I'll never prevent you from being you, Wei Ying, I promise you this."

Wei Wuxian felt a breath away from imploding, fear pulsing up his throat and resentful energy shaking at his fingertips. He wanted nothing more than to reduce the man before him to ashes. He wanted nothing more than to disappear.

Then the sound came to him of a branch snapping underfoot; of someone running away unseen, carrying with them the unbearable knowledge of what had just transpired, and he shoved Jin Zixuan away.

Jin Zixuan stumbled upon another root and nearly fell. His voice when he called, "Wei Ying," longed for more than what Wei Wuxian could name.

"Do not ever," Wei Wuxian told him, "speak to me again. If you approach me again, If you…" He swallowed back bitter bile, so much bitterer than the scent over the air which clung stickily to the skin of his hands and face. "I'll kill you," he rasped out. "I'll kill you before you can say another word."

Jin Zixuan looked at him with an open face, an open heart, with grief so evident in his eyes and mouth that Wei Wuxian felt the echo of it at his throat.

He ran into the woods.

The person who had spied on them was long gone, leaving behind themselves only a short trail of broken leaves. They must have taken flight when they were far enough and rejoined their clan. Wei Wuxian still looked and looked, shaking through all of his body, uprooting stones and bushes in his search for any clue. Perhaps the witness had left one of their belongs behind; perhaps a piece of cloth hung from one of those gnarly little branches that had torn into Jin Zixuan's uniform—

He heard a breath beside him and turned on his feet, enraged, Chenqing brandished before him like a sword; and the hand that grasped its other end was pale and thin-fingered, callused by the sword and
guqin.

Lit by a light of its own, poured directly from the sky. As if it were painted upon it.

Chapter End Notes

I've been nicknaming Jin Zixuan "Mr Darcy" for weeks to cope with this specific scene but I'm still depressed... I hate when my ship sinks :( 
Lan Wangji stood in the green shadows, flecked with pieces of golden light, immaculate as always. His hold on Chenqing loosened immediately after parrying the blow it would have taken at his body.

"Wei Ying," he said quietly. He looked surprised.

Wei Wuxian had no mind to examine his tone, however. He drew back into the thick shadow of trees with his heart beating at his throat, and asked, "Was it you?"

Had Lan Wangji been the one to see? Would Wei Wuxian have to threaten him, too, the way he had threatened Jin Zixuan? Would Lan Wangji think he was—

"You're not breathing," said Lan Wangji, and Wei Wuxian saw then that he looked confused and worried, that the creasing at his forehead and around his lips was directed only at what was in front of him now: Wei Wuxian, still-breathed and shaken, standing and holding his flute as if it were a sword. Tendrils of resentful energy stroking the exposed skin of his hands and wrists and neck and suffocating him.

He tried to breathe in; but it was as though his lungs had to try and take in as much air as they could, suddenly, and there was no quieting them anymore. Wei Wuxian grew light-headed, and black-and-grey spots replaced all the color he could see—all the greens and browns of the forest around, all the immaculate white of Lan Wangji's uniform—and he heaved and gasped as if he had just spent minutes in apnea.

He grabbed onto the bark of a tree with his hand. His legs shook under his own weight and made his shoulder hit into the trunk with enough strength that he thought, in a burst of panicked hilarity, of what Wen Qing would say once she saw the bruise there. He felt that Lan Wangji was calling his name and coming to his side.

He should push him away. He ought to ride again the fear that Jin Zixuan's touch and words had dragged out of his guts, to kick him as he had kicked Lan Xichen months ago. But although Lan Wangji touched his shoulder and helped his back against the tree, although his fingers came to the hollow of Wei Wuxian's neck to measure his heartbeats, Wei Wuxian found no strength or desire too.

He remembered when he had been the one to touch Lan Wangji like this while the man had been wounded and choked by grief. Finding the areas of stress and congestion in his neck and his chest and trying to push away the bad blood.
Wei Wuxian coughed. Slick blood filled his mouth and dribbled down his chin, no doubt staining Lan Wangji's own hands. At last, when his lungs shuddered again, the air came to him without making him want to shake.

He closed his eyes when those fingers left his skin. Although summer was hot and dry upon them, he shivered. He listened to the sound of Lan Wangji's own breathing next to him, quiet and full, and found his own matching the pace of it unthinkingly.

Jin Zixuan's words rang through his head ceaselessly. His own hands and face itched where the man had touched him. He tasted bitter grass and dirt under the slick, nauseating blood.

When he was certain that his words would not falter, he asked, "Did you see?"

A breath again, one which Wei Wuxian could not help but breathe in too. Only when he was done expelling it in full—when Wei Wuxian was done doing the very same—did Lan Wangji reply, "Did I see what?"

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes. He blinked quickly under sunlight.

Lan Wangji did not look the picture of someone lying or deceiving him. If anything, he looked to be the one full of questions, and to be holding them back for Wei Wuxian's sake. His oddly sonorous breathing had not ceased.

Wei Wuxian realized that this was for his sake, too; that Lan Wangji must be breathing like this as a way of helping him find his own air.

If he had the heart to smile then, he would have. "Nothing," he said instead. "I must apologize to you again, Lan Zhan. It seems I can't stop embarrassing you every time we meet."

Lan Wangji looked away and replied, "Not embarrassing."

It was a lie, of course, for Lan Wangji was much like his brother: the kind of person to hold back instead of asking, and to offer apologies for a touch even in circumstances where touch was unavoidable.

He always was.

"Where is your brother?" Wei Wuxian asked weakly.

He watched Lan Wangji blink. Even this sort of subdued surprise was beautiful on him, even this much made light catch onto his eyelashes and spread shadows over his cheeks in fine little tendrils. "He has remained with our uncle," he replied. "He did not wish to enter the competition."

"I see."

This part of the forest was thick, much thicker than the small clearing where Jin Zixuan had cornered Wei Wuxian. Trees had grown so close next to one another that only the faintest of sunrays pierced through the canopy of leaves above, and then again, those rays were ephemerous. Wei Wuxian saw them flicker in and out of life over his legs and hands. He breathed in the cool shadows, listened to the buzzing of small insects, watched a bee circle around Lan Wangji's arm, attracted by the bright white of his hunting robes.

He wondered faintly if Jin Zixuan would run after him and try to find him again in spite of his threats. His chest grew cold at the idea; Wei Wuxian's eyes ran again over the space all around him, searching for a spot of gold and white over the green, grey, brown.
Lan Wangji's breathing had gone quiet again, now that Wei Wuxian's resembled something like evenness. He kneeled very properly upon the dirt and grass. His white sword Bichen swept dust when he turned to look back at Wei Wuxian.

He said, "Your body is ill."

"You said so before," Wei Wuxian replied.

He had no wish to be having this argument again.

"You told me that demonic cultivation would harm me. But I am not sick, and I will not renounce it. This… I'm only tired, Lan Zhan."

There was a child-like expression on Lan Wangji's face, something very near a pout. It washed away quickly. "I will not ask you to," he said. "But I have been—"

His words paused. The tips of his ears grew so endearingly red under the delicate line of his forehead ribbon that for a second, Wei Wuxian was speechless.

Lan Wangji made himself speak again painstakingly. "I have… researched the books in the Cloud Recesses. I have found sheets of music. To help."

"To help with what?"

Another moment of struggle, quiet and tense. Wei Wuxian spent it observing the man next to him and breathing in his warm scent of sandalwood, overlaid thinly over the woods, familiar and oddly soothing.

"Quiet the spirit," Lan Wangji murmured eventually. "Calm the heart."

Why? Wei Wuxian wanted to ask. Why would Lan Wangji do such a thing for him?

For a second the nerves still set alight by Jin Zuxian's presence got the better of him, and fear left its tanguy taste on his tongue again. He tensed over the dry soil, one hand clenched around Chenqing and the other spread overground, ready to lift his weight if he should feel the need to leave. He could not ask what he wanted to know for fear of the answer, and he could not look away either from the sight of Lan Wangji sat on the dirt, staining his pristine clothes for no valuable reason that he could think of.

Lan Wangji was looking back, too. Pale-eyed and statuesque in spite of how ridiculous it was for him—for the both of them—to be in such a position. He had never shied away from looking Wei Wuxian in the eye; never shied, either, from speaking to him or calling him by name. Lan Wangji was not the one Wei Wuxian had struck, once, for insulting his status.

He was the one Wei Wuxian had sought in that moonlit cold spring when he had first been shaken by how the world viewed him.

Lan Wangji said, "I did not bring them with me. I did not know you would be here."

"I like to keep things surprising," Wei Wuxian replied. The words were slow to come to him, yet each of them was easier than the previous. Each intake of care a little fresher and fuller. "But, you're right," he sighed, "I should not have come here. Jiang Cheng asked me to, but I should have better, after what I have been doing."
Lan Wangji's lips thinned. He looked unhappy for a moment, perhaps because he was remembering just why Wei Wuxian's presence made his peers so angry. Light caught onto the tips of one red ear as the leaves above them shifted; and it showed as well the deep breath he took in, the way that his shoulders straightened under the strict line of his uniform, as he readied himself to speak.

As he lifted his head and opened his mouth, Wei Wuxian said bluntly, "Play them to me."

Lan Wangji fell silent, the very first syllable of Wei Wuxian's name vanishing upon his lips. The shadows of his eyelashes moved and shuddered when he blinked.

Wei Wuxian's heart was once again beating right below his throat. His chest felt tight, constricted. "Those songs," he forced out. "For the spirit. Play them to me."

He did not know what Lan Wangji meant to tell him just then—only that he did not want to hear it at all.

Perhaps Lan Wangji understood this. Or more likely, perhaps he at least sensed that Wei Wuxian had no desire to speak at all just then. He looked away, his serious face dipping in shadow, and replied, "I do not have Wangji with me."

Then he sucked in a breath of surprise, for Wei Wuxian had lifted Chenqing toward him.

"Just play," Wei Wuxian said, eyes closed, head resting heavily against the bark of the tree at his back. It was better than looking at every shadow around and fitting the shape of Jin Zixuan's body to it, or that of the mysterious spy who must now be telling tales to all of what they had seen in that clearing.

For just a moment, for just one single moment, he wanted not to think of anything at all. Not the spy now ruining his reputation further, not Jin Zixuan's face as he said Marry me, not the people in Yiling whose survival and freedom were his responsibility.

"Just play, Lan Zhan," he begged.

Lan Wangji said nothing, but Chenqing slid out of Wei Wuxian's grasp slowly, delicately. As if the very touch of black bamboo on skin should hurt if he took it too hastily.

Wei Wuxian did not move even to breathe until the first note of the flute caressed the air. It was an old song that Lan Wangji played first, something aged down to the structure of sentences, barely more than a few alignment of high notes infused with spirituality. He had not doubted that Lan Wangji could play the dizi well, and did not doubt either that should he still have a golden core to be appeased, the spell would have worked to perfection.

This, still was enough: the earthly smells of the forest and Lan Wangji's sandalwood scent, and above them the sound of Chenqing playing songs from Gusu as if it were meant for them. Wei Wuxian's back loosened against the arch of the tree rather than lean tensely upon it. His hand over the dirt became lax, curving up and away so that his palm did not touch it anymore. His eyelids stopped twitching and allowing in specks of light.

He did not know how many songs Lan Wangji played to him, or for how long. His awareness of anything aside from the sound of the dizi became so thin that it felt like unconsciousness. Memories tugged at him slowly when Lan Wangji played one more, one he could recall hearing in the midst of heat, one he could remember singing to.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun had started setting behind the mountain. Shadows crepied from all over and made the air feel like night already. He blinked slowly, feeling well-rested for the
first time in recent memory, and wondering why the sound of the flute had ceased.

Lan Wangji was looking at him. A faint red mark shone below his lips, where the bamboo had pressed for what must be hours.

"The Jin clan has just signaled the end of the competition," he said softly.

He must have heard the sound of the horn calling the cultivators back.

Wei Wuxian was slow to bring himself to his feet. He did not stumble, although his head felt misty and his body languid, but the pull of muscles alone had him shaking. He was hungry, he realized, and weak for it like he was in his youth after hours of running. He could not remember the last time he had experienced hunger not swallowed by sickness.

"We should go, then," he told Lan Wangji, who was still sat on the ground, watching him.

His face had not rid itself of this complicated and hesitant look, but the sight of it did not frighten Wei Wuxian now. He took Chenqing back when the man handed it to him and tied it back to his waist; then he paused.

What little daylight remained around them shone out of Lan Wangji's eyes when Wei Wuxian extended a hand to him.

A foolish gesture it may be, and no doubt one Lan Wangji would reject as he had rejected Wei Wuxian's touch so many times before. Yet he did not blush furiously at the sight of it, like he had on the day Wei Wuxian had jokingly offered to carry him on his back. Instead he grabbed Wei Wuxian's wrist over cloth and not skin and allowed him to help him up.

Chenqing had been skin-warm when Wei Wuxian took it back. He found that same warmth at the crook of Lan Wangji's wrist and in the seconds it took for him to be up and release him. Only long enough to feel a few heartbeats against his fingertips.

"Thank you," Wei Wuxian said. "For everything."

For not trying to attack him, whether with words or with something else. Wei Wuxian had always thought that a day would come when the tip of Bichen's blade would find its way to his neck or his belly, but he was suddenly glad that this was not that day.

The night was deep by the time they reached the edges of the wood. What awaited Wei Wuxian there was not a world of shame, as he expected, but rather Jin Guangshan's lofty accusations of cheating, and a series of rude demands.

That Wei Wuxian should apologize to all the sects present for his hoarding the targets. That he should have handed over the Stygian Tiger Seal, which he surely must have used in underhanded ways. He did not make any mention of anything more untoward, although several times the topic of his monologue threatened to veer in direction of the omega in Yiling.

Whoever the spy who saw Jin Zixuan grab Wei Wuxian's hand and profess his love to him was, they had not yet decided to tell anyone.

It should have been a relief, but Wei Wuxian felt only tenser for it. Jin Zixuan himself was standing by his father's side in a daze; his eyes met Wei Wuxian's only once before he turned away, his face twisted with dark feelings.

It was easy to slip into the absent-mindedness that Wen Qing oft had to shake him out of. The calm
that Lan Wangji's flute-playing had procured was close enough to it, in a way.

"Why don't you tell me what you really want, sect leader Jin?" he asked boredly.

He could not even tell anymore which of these men and women was speaking, or in what way. None of them mattered. Jiang Yanli was not even here, having been taken away by Madam Jin before Wei Wuxian even made it out of the woods. Jiang Cheng had not addressed a word to him after seeing him walk out of the woods with Lan Wangji in his steps.

"I want you," Jin Guangshan said, incensed upon his thickly-cushioned seat, "to go back to your sect, Wei Wuxian. I should like to see you grovel to Jiang Cheng so that the boy will accept you, and you learn once and for all what your rightful place is."

"Sect leader Jin," Jiang Cheng spoke then. Fury had colored his face, and Wei Wuxian could see just how tense his jaw was under his skin. "Wei Wuxian will not accept orders from you, or anyone else. I dare appeal to my father's long friendship with you and ask you to let the Jiang clan handle this alone."

"Oh, your father," said Jin Guangshan. He laughed, or at least looked the part of it. "Yes, let's talk about Jiang Fengmian. How many times did I tell him that this folly of his would lead only to madness? It wasn't enough that he was infatuated with that Cangse Sanren, no, he just had to try and revive the thrice-damned memory of her with that boy. And now we see the result standing before us!"

He pointed to Wei Wuxian for all to see, going so far as to stand so that not a soul around could miss who he was talking about.

In the shocked silence that followed, he grew bolder. His weak chin shivered into a smile, his arrogance thickened into the nightly air. He walked around the dais where his precious behind had sat all afternoon, coming out of torchlight and into the same wavering shadow that all here were wrought in.

He stood before Wei Wuxian, taller than him by an inch, his thin body comfortably wound in rich and airy cloth to parry the summer heat. "It would not have surprised me," he said melodiously, "if Jiang Fengmian had ended up marrying the boy himself. In fact, I have long suspected that he was raising him this way for that purpose. If he could not have the mother, then why not have her son?"

"Father!" came Jin Zixuan's voice. It seemed he had been shocked into speaking out at last.

Jiang Cheng must have reacted the same outside of Wei Wuxian's narrowed eyesight, outside of the red sheen that the world had taken in-between him and Jin Guangshan, but he did not hear it. He could not hear anything but the slow, heavy beating of his own blood.

Jin Guangshan sneered. He smiled in self-satisfaction. "At least this time around Jiang Fengmian could not be blamed for lack of taste," he said. "Be grateful that you were born with some beauty, Wei Wuxian. Your mother was no better sight than the pigs in the barns of the Meishanyu sect."

The crowd around them stilled and shivered, far too many among them failing to hide their interest, and although this time Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan found incentive to move, Wei Wuxian had enough.

He crossed the last step separating him from Jin Guangshan and spat in the man's face.

He would have done it again, too, if only Jiang Cheng had not reached his side then and pulled him back. Meng Yao and Jin Zixun were similarly busy with Jin Guangshan, tugging him away by both
arms as if he were suffering a much graver wound than some spittle on his cheek and a bruised ego. Alpha and beta of the Jin sect and others slid their swords out of their sheaths in outrage, and Wei Wuxian only looked once at Jin Zixuan's panicked expression before letting the two halves of the Stygian Tiger Seal fall out of his sleeves.

He elbowed Jiang Cheng away from him. He took each half of the Seal in hand and pieced them together. Cold air slithered over every bit of his exposed skin, and the array in which the prey of the competition were kept broke open. Corpses surrounded the dozens of cultivators, once again under his command, and made them still with sword in hand.

"Wei Wuxian," Jin Guangshan raged, held in place by his rapist of a nephew and his bastard son; but Wei Wuxian had quite enough of listening to him.

"I think it's time some rules were put in place," he said.

The corpses around them were still fresh, lacking the gruesome decomposition that some of Wei Wuxian's worst summonings during the war exposed, but the effect remained the same. Those who had witnessed him then cowered, and the rest followed suit.

In the very far back, away from the direct line of the spell, Lan Wangji stood next to his brother and uncle. His eyes met Wei Wuxian's.

Wei Wuxian's blood stopped being quite so loud into his head. He heard instead an echo of the flute, a familiar melody pulled from bowstrings and bleeding fingers, as he fought for consciousness in the lair of a beast.

"The people I took from your houses are free now," he said, still staring in direction of Lan Wangji. It almost ached in him, how necessary this exchange of looks felt, when his stomach quivered at the thought of glimpsing just to the left and meeting Lan Xichen's eyes instead. Wei Wuxian turned his head back toward Jin Guangshan rather than risk it. "They are not yours to reclaim. They were never yours to have in the first place. I will not allow a single one of you to see them unless they indicate otherwise, and I will not suffer your demands in any way. Those are the terms."

"You're nothing but a mad thief," Jin Guangshan screamed at him. His finger shook, this time, when he pointed it Wei Wuxian's way. "Who do you think you're speaking to!? 'Terms'? You think I'll negotiate with you, after everything you—"

"Did you know not a single one of them wanted to stay?"

Jin Guangshan gagged visibly, whether for the surprise of being interrupted or because the sight of Wei Wuxian disgusted him enough to.

"You must have noticed that I left some of them behind," Wei Wuxian went on coldly. "Those were the few who wished to remain where they were. I did not take a single person with me who did not wish to be taken."

"Liar," spat Jin Zixun.

"You wouldn't know even if I was," Wei Wuxian replied, glancing fleetingly at him. "You're not in the habit of asking before taking."

Jin Zixun reddened and remained, thankfully, silent.

"My point is that perhaps all of you should be asking yourselves why these people fear the words of a mad thief less than they do the thought of remaining where they are. Although," he added,
"perhaps that's asking too much out of any of you."

He looked over them all. He took in the anger and disbelief, the despair in Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng.

"Those are my terms," he repeated. "I will not give them back. They are free to do as they wish now, and if they wish to remain with me, then I will protect them from you."

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng called helplessly.

Wei Wuxian did not look at him, but at Jin Guangshan, who was wiping again with his sleeve the place where saliva had sullied him. "And I am no longer part of the Yunmengjiang sect," he said. "I came here today only as a courtesy to my former sect leader. From now on, he and I are not affiliated in any way."

"Wei Wuxian!"

But the ranks of the hundred corpses narrowed, and Jiang Cheng found himself stuck behind two of them, no longer close enough to reach for Wei Wuxian's arm. His sword Sandu gleamed into the nightly air, slashing at the corpse nearest to him, cutting off its head sharply. It did not stop blocking him or fall from under the influence of the Seal.

Still, Jiang Cheng clenched his teeth. Still he yelled, "Don't you go deciding this on your own! I—"

"Have some decorum," Wei Wuxian cut him off.

Jiang Cheng could not afford to show him attachment now, in front of so many eyes; and he seemed to realize it as well, for his face grew angry. Red blood flushed his cheeks and washed out of everywhere else.

"I'll be leaving now," Wei Wuxian said to the cultivators before him. Many had tried and failed like Jiang Cheng to cut down the Seal-controlled corpses before them. "The spell will lift when I am far enough, and you'll be free to go. But if you follow me—" and the air grew colder still, almost icy over all of them, "—then you will only have yourselves to blame for dying."

To Jiang Cheng, he did not say anything.

He felt the spell break before an hour of riding had gone.

No doubt, people would be riding swords after him now, and perhaps some were already above his head, looking for him in the dark. Wei Wuxian spared not the horse he had taken—one of those he had stolen from the encampment of Wen prisoners ages ago and kept for many of his trips—even when the animal whinnied under the kicks he gave its flanks. He was glad for the cover of darkness, and glad also for the incompetence of those people, who had him under their eyes for so long but dared not lay a finger on him.

This taboo, he often felt, was like a double-edged sword. Keep omega from harm and human proximity on one end, for rumors of hurting one was such a blow to one's reputation. On the other was the madness that took so many alpha and beta when they were given opportunity; the sense of ownership, of possessiveness, which had driven Wen Chao to pinning him to the ground and Jin
Zixun to stab Wen Ning through the belly.

For two days he rode with no rest, stopping only when his horse was too weak to go on, keeping the Stygian Tiger Seal in one hand and Chenqing in the other. He would have raised corpses on his way for protection, if he did not fear that their presence would slow him down and give him away.

He did not know whether his being caught would go one way or the other, after all: whether he would be talked to death by some fool in rich clothing or find himself once more at the wrong end of their entitlement.

Wei Wuxian came back to the Burial Mounds under rain and thunder. He was greeted first by Luo Fanghua, who was sewing clothing under the spilling roof of her house even in the storm. She stopped at the sight of him and ushered him inside, kindling the fire there wordlessly, giving him dry robes to change into. Wei Wuxian did not even think of shame as he undressed before her. He felt her eyes upon his bare torso—felt, for a moment, as if each scar there was an anchor for her gaze to latch onto.

The Qishanwen insignia burned into his skin, the marks of Zidian at his back. The vertical line under his ribs which Wen Qing had once opened and sewn shut. The white patch below his right shoulder where Suibian had pierced him, and the rest, the worst of them perhaps, spread like cobwebs under his belly button. The evidence of skin laying misshapen over him.

But Luo Fanghua was not one for gossip. She was never amongst the group who sometimes liked to ask Wen Qing about Wei Wuxian. She stood there as he dressed into the warm clothing, looking severe as always.

"I will fetch maiden Wen," she said curtly.

She did just so while Wei Wuxian sat into a rough-made chair by a rough-made table. They must have been built like so many other items and walls here by the pair of masons from the Wen sect he had brought with him all this time ago.

Wen Qing was fussier than Luo Fanghua, her fingers finding the side of his neck almost as soon as she stepped into the shack, and Wei Wuxian had no mind at all to refuse her, even if he knew—she knew—whatever she found there would be nothing either of them could fix.

"How long has it been since you slept?" she asked him.

"I don't know," Wei Wuxian mumbled.

He could not remember.

Wen Qing sighed. She thanked Luo Fanghua for keeping him warm and dry, although she scolded her for sitting outside in such a heavy storm. She pulled Wei Wuxian upright and walked by his side until they reached the deepest part of the bloodpool cave.

There, he told her of Jin Guangshan's words and how they had been received and encouraged by all. She fed him pieces of some leftover meal in the meantime, heated overfire so that the aroma spread through the bleak space around them. Wei Wuxian grew nauseous at the smell, but he remembered how hunger had felt after Lan Wangji played for him. He ate.

At the end of his retelling, Wen Qing sat silently. She watched over the never-moving body of her brother without seeing him. "Well, you did show them not to mess with us," she said.

"I did," he replied. "And Jin Guangshan wants my head for it."
"I wish I'd been there to see you spit in his face."

A shadow of a smile tugged at his lips; she answered it in kind, her shoulders loosening.

Then she said: "You're not telling me everything."

Wei Wuxian put his half-empty bowl by his feet. He watched the flickering firelight over the walls, the disorganized scrolls and talismans he had written, the wide clay pots full of little white flowers. He thought of the barrels pushed to the deepest end of the cave, where the air was ever-cool, and how long it would be until the liquor there finished macerating.

"Wei Ying—"

"I received an offer," he interrupted. "But it doesn't matter."

He did not precise what kind of offer. Wen Qing was too smart not to guess the nature of it on her own.

"Lan Zhan showed me some music," he told her a while later, as they both once more cleaned and remade the array that Wen Ning was laid onto.

"What music?"

"To calm the heart. He said he'd been researching the Library Pavillion of the Cloud Recesses and wanted to give them to me."

When the darker hours of evening came, the bloodpool cave could only be lit by fire. Wen Qing stood by it with his blood on her hands—he always refused to let her cut herself for the sake of the array—and looked at him with a frown.

"I didn't know you were close to the Lan sect heir," she said slowly.

"I'm not," he replied. He did not know why he turned away from her scrutiny then.

"He just dislikes my way of cultivation. He's trying to make me stop."

"So does everyone else. So do I, even if I know you don't have a choice. What makes him so special?"

Nothing, Wei Wuxian thought.

Nothing but for how the sight and presence of him was not nearly as aggravating to Wei Wuxian as others'; nothing but for how easy it had been for Wei Wuxian to disarm himself, and allow Lan Wangji to once again play him songs while he was vulnerable.

Wen Qing sometimes played on a short wooden flute. Hers was not meant for cultivation, only for music, but either way the songs which Lan Wangji had played him had not had the effect that they were meant to have, only those that relaxation gave. If he could just hear them again, perhaps he could once more feel hungry without feeling sick.

"I'll show them to you," he said. He felt strangely like he wanted to curve the back and turn away from her again, to hide his face as he spoke. "Will you…"

Wen Qing was silent for a moment. "I'm not as good a musician as you or the famous Lan Wangji
are," she replied at last. "But, yes. I'll play them for you. If you want me to."

"Thank you."

So Wei Wuxian showed her the music that Lan Wangji had shown him. Some of the songs became mangled by his poor memory, and others, he could not manage to produce as beautifully on Chenqing as Lan Wangji had while holding it. But Wen Qing listened into the long hours of night, copying him with her short flute, until at last their two playing became a little less awkward. Until his body loosened with fatigue and slumber finally took over him.

He did not show her the song Lan Wangji had played for him in the Xuanwu's cave years ago, though the memory of it was fresh now, and more exact than he could have made it on his own. If he were to think about it, Wei Wuxian would have known this to be more deliberate than he liked to believe, but he did not.

When he succumbed to a handful of hours of sleep that night, he dreamed of hands holding his hands in the tepid shadow of woods. He felt the stroke of a finger at his forehead, collecting blood where his own nails had dragged it out. But he did not feel the crushing fear that he had when Jin Zixuan did it; and those hands were not his blunt ones, but rather the same ones that had broken his fall and cleared his neck and chest of blood.

He woke up gasping before dawn had come; he lay panting over his bedding, sweating heavily through his clothes, guilt laid like nausea at the inside of his lips.

By the time he stood up and went to check on Wen Ning's state, the dream was forgotten.

---

The villagers at the bottom of the hills did not know who they were.

They heard rumors, of course. They saw the cultivators who came on horseback or by flying on swords and spent the night in their inns, drinking and bellowing for Wei Wuxian's head, for the capture and punishment of the omega thief of Yiling.

The heard of the Yiling Patriarch who lived among tombstones.

But they did not know who he was. Whenever he took the time to walk down the path and in direction of the little houses, Wei Wuxian hardly cared to make his name or status known. He knew as well that the sentiment was shared, and that Wen Qing had to brew many drugs for the days that the omega wished to leave the Burial Mounds—either forever or simply for a stroll—so that they would not be recognized.

So the villagers did not know him when he made business with them, and oft took him for a traveling merchant of some kind. Some were intrigued by his lack of a scent; most were smart enough to put this past themselves and deal in money instead.

The old beta man that Wei Wuxian sold Luo Fanghua's clothing to was such a person. He had been the one to come to Wei Wuxian himself in the first place, years ago, and to comment upon the robes he was wearing.

"That sewing girl of yours could do much better," the beta man was saying now, unfolding and examining the clothes, looking satisfied. "Get her better fabrics. These have been selling very well,
even the next town over."

"This is all you'll get," Wei Wuxian replied evenly.

"You do not have the mind for business, boy."

Maybe not. But Wei Wuxian did have the mind to know prudence.

"Young master," said the Wen man who had accompanied him down the sloping path. "Perhaps that man is right, and we should get miss Luo better fabrics."

He was carrying the fruit of their spending that day within a wide basket; seeds for the ever-expanding vegetable garden, stashes of cloth for sewing, tools for the claymakers of the Wen clan. Wei Wuxian looked over the basket rather than look at his face. "No," he replied. "Let's go back now."

The man bowed the head and muttered an apology. Wei Wuxian did not know how long it had been since he expected anger or threats from him or any of his kin.

They never were angry at him, or at any of the people he brought with him month after month.

"How is that liquor of yours going?" the man asked jovially as they started their ascension.

*Shut up,* Wei Wuxian thought, but by now the words were more habitual than true. "It should be ready in a few weeks," he replied instead. "Don't expect it to taste any good, I've never done this before."

"I'm sure it'll be lovely, young master Wei. It has been quite a while since any of us drank any, and the young ones will not know what to expect at all."

The young ones. This was how he and his clansmen always called the eighty-odd omega now living in the Burial Mounds, never mind that some of them were old enough to be their parents.

Wei Wuxian remained silent for the rest of the journey home.

Luo Fanghua did not thank him for the fabrics, and he did not expect her to, but she did frown. She shot a look at the man who had accompanied Wei Wuxian to the village, heedless of the people now gathered around them and picking their orders from the basket at the man's back.

"I tried," said the man—Uncle Four was what Wen Qing called him. "The young master won't hear of it, miss Luo."

"You should've just taken a young one with you, Uncle," laughed another Wen clan alpha. "The young master can't say no to them."

"What are you two talking about?" Wei Wuxian asked rather snappily.

Two years ago, this would have been enough to shave the smile off their faces entirely. They had been scared of him then, troubled by his scentlessness and the spirits and corpses he made do his bidding. Now neither of them stopped smiling. Their harsh scents laid over the gathering and did not startle any of the others.

Grandmother was here too, weighing the seeds he had brought back, putting a handful of them to her face to see them better in daylight. Wei Wuxian looked around her quickly to make sure she had not brought her burden with her.
He stared again at the two alpha who did not fear him anymore. They were teasing Luo Fanghua still, and the young and severe woman did not cringe from their words or show any other sign of being uncomfortable with their presence.

She met his eyes suddenly. She lifted the pile of fabric his way and said, "I'd like better ones."

"Oh." The tense line of his shoulders fell. "All right," he replied. "Make me a list next time."

For the first time since he had met her, her lips twisted into a smile.

Laughter echoed around them. It seemed the dozen people who had come for their share of the groceries were now shaking as one, looking slyly at one another, elbowing each other playfully.

"See?" the second Wen man said in humor as Wei Wuxian stared at them all wordlessly. He laughed again, once and brightly. "The little master won't say no to them."

"It's no good, no good," replied Uncle Four. "You'll be ruined soon with this lot, young master Wei."

He patted Luo Fanghua's shoulder gently.

He must have said another thing, for his mouth was moving, and she was nodding too, but Wei Wuxian did not hear it. The world around vanished into shadow as he stared at his hand—the muddy garden paths where radishes were grown, the first and oldest of the houses, much shabbier than those built later on by the Wen sect masons, the yellow leaves on trees which had regained the ability to live after he banished the spirits.

Wei Wuxian watched the man's fingers on Luo Fanghua's shoulder. He saw how they tightened and released and left nary a crease on her robes. He felt the world blur around him, sounds and smells and visions alike, as rage tightened in his belly and made blood-taste drown his tongue.

Then there was a hand around his wrist, and the smell of pepper; and Wen Qing's voice said in his ear, "Calm down."

Wei Wuxian gasped in a breath.

Her fingers did not leave him. He focused on that touch in stead of anything else as she spoke, ordering the laughing crowd to disperse, asking such and such person not to dally all day. They left until only Wen Qing and Grandmother remained, and then Wen Qing told her, "You should go rest now. I know you've been tired."

"I am not so young now," said the old woman gently. "But I like to see the young master come back and be with everyone."

Wei Wuxian knew he should say something in answer when her kind eyes rested on him, but he could not think of even one word.

Grandmother smiled at him. "I should find A-Yuan," she said, turning away from them, leaning heavily on the cane that one of the masons must have made her. "Ah, I wonder where he's gone to now…"

Wen Qing's hold loosened. Wei Wuxian took his hand back from her and started walking in direction of the cave. "I'll wait for you before I draw the talismans," he said.

"Wei Wuxian—"
"Later."

He had an idea how frustrated she must be with his silence—how unhappy she always was when he shut in on himself like this, no matter how many times he did so—but he had no wish to suffer her questions now. She had no need of his words to understand what had happened.

She called his name again. She called it twice, in fact, before someone else must have asked for her instead. Wen Qing was more in charge of the gathering of people here than Wei Wuxian ever would be, no matter how many chose to call him young master rather than his name; she left him alone ruefully and went to see what the issue was.

She was the one they went to for help. She handled their finances, said 'no' where it ought to be said, unlike Wei Wuxian. All he ever did was bring them here and then leave again, moved by a force that felt as necessary as it was exhausting.

Wen Qing knew their names.

The cave had an odd-shaped wall in one end, where the rock had dipped and then flattened like a table, leaving room under a wide plateau. Wei Wuxian had used that space as a surface for work for as long as he had been here. He sat there now into a chair, looking unseeingly at the papers left half-written.

There was an array there, drawn and annotated wildly, that he did not want Wen Qing to see. A spell whose idea came to him in that half-awake state where the hours passed like seconds and the seconds like hours. A way to bring Wen Ning back, if all else should fail.

The sound of steps came to him from the mouth of the cave. He shoved the array under another pile of papers—under bright ideas and bitter failures—and called, "I said later, Wen Qing."

Wen Qing did not answer.

Wei Wuxian looked at the firelit tunnel. No air came in at this time of day to make the light waver, to shake the hundreds of talismans stuck to Wen Ning's body, but he felt cold all the same.

"Wen Qing?" he asked, rising.

But there was no trace of her at the entrance or in the tunnel beyond. No hint of her scent or shadow in the opening where already daylight was darkening. Wei Wuxian went back on his steps, feeling tense and queasy without knowing the reason why; and when he reached the edge of the bloodpool, the sound of shattering clay echoed against the worn-smooth walls. It came from the shelves where he kept seeds and cultivating tools for the moonless flowers.

There was a child there with another pot of seeds in hands, looking dejectedly at the one that had broken around his feet.

Wei Wuxian's steps halted.

The child tried to put the pot back onto its shelf. His hands were small and his fingers chubby, and he could not reach the height of it while pushing up the clay as easily as he must have while tugging it down. The sound of his hurried breathing echoed through the deadly-silent cave; every time he moved, half of his body hid behind the bed on which Wen Ning lay.

He cried, eventually. Little whimpers escaped him as he tried again and again to put the pot back where it came from. His arms shook under the weight of it. His feet stepped onto the seeds already spilled overground, crushing them into dust, rendering them useless. His face grew red and damp by
the tall firelight.

"I know you're sulking, Wei Wuxian, but we need to talk about how to control your…"

Wen Qing stopped at the mouth of the cave, her words faltering down, as before her the child trembled with his heavy burden; as Wei Wuxian stood still and silent as a statue between the both of them.

"A-Yuan!" she called harshly.

The child jumped in fright. He let go of the pot in his hands, which did not shatter like the previous but spilled its content everywhere anyway. His tearful face lifted in Wen Qing’s direction, and he cried, "I'm sorry."

The very sound of it ran over Wei Wuxian's skin like the clawed little feet of a bird. Tearing it off piece by piece to expose his insides.

Wen Qing was approaching now. She was grabbing Wei Wuxian by the arm and pushing him out of the way gently, speaking to the child again, "You know you're not supposed to be here. Come on, come here."

"Auntie," the child cried, buried to the ankles in flower seeds. His grey eyes caught to light like moths caught to a flame. "Broke it."


But the child did not heed her; he looked once more at the mess over the floor and started wailing loudly.

Wen Qing looked at Wei Wuxian, the weight of her worry like a burn against his face, but even this did not burn as much as her touch or as the sound of crying.

He tugged away her hand on his shoulder. He turned his back to her and to the sobbing child. The very fabric of him felt so thin and hollow, a wisp of wind could have carried him away; still he found enough strength for his voice to come out when he told her, "Just get him out of here."

Thinly, so thinly, like talisman paper tearing under the brush. Each cry and each hiccup pulling at him until his fibers came apart.

Wen Qing went about comforting the child in hushed murmurs, quieting him as best she could, carrying him in her arms into the start of the tunnel. But Grandmother had come too, attracted by the sound of the child's sobs, and she 'oh'-ed at the sight of them and took him in her own arms.

She rocked and swayed with him, trying to ease away his tears.

"You're not allowed to come here, A-Yuan," she said in her rough and gravelly voice. "You know you're not allowed. You can't bother the young master."

It was unclear whether the child understood a word of it, but he nodded anyway. His swollen face shuddered when he blink, exhausted after so much crying.

To Wei Wuxian's horror, she faced him next across the cave, holding the child his way. "Young master, I'm sorry," she said, smiling. The child opened his eyes to him again; Wei Wuxian felt his throat burn with the need to retch. "A-Yuan is a very curious boy, he's been going off on his own
since he learned to walk—"

"Grandmother," Wen Qing interrupted urgently. "I think A-Yuan should go to sleep now, don't you?"

As if on cue, the boy yawned widely. Grandmother hushed him again as she lowered him to the ground, but she did not leave yet. Instead she ordered, "Say sorry to the young master."

Wei Wuxian wanted dearly to look away, to be buried in stone or laid upon a wooden bed as Wen Ning was, to be unconscious to the world. But he could not tear his eyes from the child's wax-like face; from those grey eyes he had last seen in a mirror's reflection.

"That's not necessary," Wen Qing tried again. "A-Yuan didn't mean to bother anyone, I'm certain."

"Miss Wen, how will he become a good man if he doesn't learn to apologize for what he did wrong?"

Get him away, Wei Wuxian thought. Get him away from me.

There was nothing on his lips, however, save for the urge to throw up.

The boy had to be told again what to do. His weary eyes washed over the dim-lit room, stopping once on Wen Ning's body, once on Wei Wuxian. He dropped the hand with which the old woman was holding his and bowed with all of his back, slurring out a quiet, "Sorry."

Every inch of the room reeked of petrichor after he and Grandmother left.

Wen Qing immediately went to the broken clay pot, picking up the pieces of it, sweeping seeds up with her bare hands to deposit into the one the child had simply overturned. She was pale even with the awkward light of the cave, and her voice was unsteady. "He didn't crush too many," she said. "Not more than we would have lost to frost this year anyway."

"Good, then," Wei Wuxian replied blankly.

She shuddered visibly. She picked up the pot and put it back on the lowest shelf. She spared another second of tidying, sweeping dust away with her sleeve, obviously steeling herself for something.

Wei Wuxian sat on the chair and cut in, "Forget it."

Her lips thinned and whitened. "Fine," she said unhappily. "Then tell me instead why you were a second away from murdering Uncle Four earlier."

"I was not."

"I could feel the resentful energy on you. I'm sure if I touched you now, your veins would be swollen with it."

"Then don't touch me," he spat at her. "This shouldn't be such a hard thing for you to do."

As if he could stand the touch of anyone right then, with his skin moving about him and being picked at by crows. He did not think he could even handle touching himself—if it were at all possible, he would choose not to have skin to touch at all.

But Wen Qing's face softened. Her brow eased out of anger. Wei Wuxian had only a moment to regret that she once again elected not to scream at him in rage.
"I know you don't like them," she said. "I understand. I do."

He turned his back to her, planting his elbow atop the stone table.

"But things have been changing here. One of my family members touching one of the others like this—it's not a rare thing. He didn't mean anything by it, and Luo Fanghua didn't mind. It's natural for them to want for closeness."

"I get it," he breathed.

He didn't need her to tell him how lonely life here was, cut from the rest of the world, watching them leave one by one for hope of a better future. There was no such future for him.

"Wei Ying," Wen Qing called quietly.

He did not tense only because she made sure to step loudly upon stone and straw, to make her clothes shuffle as she walked, to hit a nail to the white jade tassel she always wore at her waist.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "They just want to know you," she said. "The omega, but my family as well. None of them know more than your name and the fact that you saved their lives."

"There's nothing to know about me," he replied.

But he leaned back into her hand. He allowed it to tighten over cloth and skin, almost enough for him to feel its warmth.

"You don't let people know you," she retorted. He felt her look over the trinkets and spells he worked on during each sleepless night he spent here—as few of them as he could afford to, when so many more people waited, hidden, to be set free. "I know this wasn't always the case, that there was a time you would have loved to know them too. I remember when A-Ning first met you, and couldn't stop talking to me about the omega cultivator from Yunmeng who tried to defend him in public."

He shuddered. Her hold on him tightened. "But now you avoid all of them," she went on. "All of us. I know how important everything here is to you, but they don't. Some of them are scared that you're doing this on a whim, that you'll send them back to their houses as soon as you're done."

"Two years is a lot time spent on a whim."

"They don't know that. None of them had ever set a foot outside unsupervised before you broke open their door and asked them to come with you."

And so many refused, too. Even those who had heard rumor of him through their masters, even the few who had expected him to come, who clung to their housemates in fear of him. They looked at him as if were there to eat them, and they refused fearfully.

"Time is an odd thing to experience when you can't see the sun set and rise," Wen Qing said mournfully. "And now they can, but you will not show yourself to them. You will not accept anything, not even their gratitude."

"They shouldn't feel grateful to me."

She did not deny his words. But her hand left his shoulder, and she laughed briefly. He heard her turn around to look at her still-slumbering brother.
That part of the bloodpool cave was so full of his spirit, of his soul, hovering just shy of touching his
body; he knew that Wen Qing felt as if she could reach out and grasp it bare-handed if she tried.

"I want this place to be somewhere A-Ning will be happy to live," she said.

So Wei Wuxian nodded. He told her, "I'll try."

Her smile was wordless and tired, but it was a smile nonetheless.

Wei Wuxian hesitated. The guts in him knotted and squeezed together, he felt. "As for…" He forced
out, "As for him. A-Yuan."

He could not look at her now, though he felt her scrutiny deeply. "I'll make sure he knows not to
bother you," she said. "It's like Grandmother said. He was just curious because we all told him not to
come here."

Wei Wuxian suffered a second of agonizing muteness. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth
like a last rampart against sickness. "What's his—"

He bit the side of his tongue when his teeth snapped closed; iron-taste spread through his dry mouth.

"Wen Yuan," Wen Qing replied after a moment. "That is his name."

Wei Wuxian's stomach turned. His hand lifted and lowered aimlessly, and he scratched the skin of
his own wrist harshly. "Why?" he let out at last.

"It was more or less a common decision. They said that he should wear my name, since I'm the one
who brought him back. Did you want—"

"No," he cut her off. "I don't want anything to do with him."

Wen Qing's eyes shone. "I understand."

Wei Wuxian breathed in. He tried to chase away the taste over his tongue and lips, the feel of dirt
and grass imprinted upon him. "And I—I suppose it is fitting," he said. "Considering."

He massaged with his hand the clammy skin of his nape, where once a man had panted and groaned
and left him damp with spit. Where a great weight hung over him to this day.

This is your place, Wei Wuxian.

Wen Qing's silence felt like a speech of its own. He did not move when she came closer to him,
though he was glad that she did not try to reach for him this time.

"You never told me who it was," she said at last.

Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"And I won't ask you either. I don't need to know, I don't even want to know. If you tell me that you
never want to speak of it again, then I won't ever mention it."

It was the sincerity in her, the blunt and austere way that she always made promises, he thought.
Those were the things that had made him trust her touch when his back was torn open by Zidian's
lashings; when he had lost everything, and thought he was going to lose more, still, as Jiang Cheng
slumbered endlessly.
Those were the things that made him tell her, "It was Wen Chao."

Only Wen Qing's face could look so kind and so severe at the same time; only she could reach for him like this and pull out not his entrails or heart, but his livid, breathing soul.

The fall season this year ended in frost and snow.

The trees and bushes of the Burial Mounds lost again the leaves and flowers they had regained after so long. White flakes spilled from the sky endlessly, forcing many of the people living here to spread cloth over the vegetable gardens for protection. Luo Fanghua kept sewing on her doorstep until the day Uncle Four scolded her, telling her that she was courting death; then, looking as ruffled as a bothered bird, she instead started sewing inside.

"She has the habits of an old woman, this one," Uncle Four said fondly. "You'd think she was fifty and not twenty."

Wei Wuxian knew then that his relationship to Luo Fanghua was a quiet and comfortable friendship. That if ever he put a hand on her young shoulder, it was only to convey warmth to her. He never looked at him again and wished to separate his head from his body.

It became more difficult for him to find new people to free. The freezing cold had made much of the land impossible to ride on without risking his horse's health. Many of the houses he did find were empty as well, as if word had gone around at last that the clans' and villages' property should not be left alone for him to steal. He heard no word and no whisper of the great sects in those months, although a fool or three sometimes fancied themselves saviors and tried to walk up the hillpath.

Before that time—when fall was still warm and easy on them—Wei Wuxian opened the first of the barrels of wine he kept in the cool and dark of the bloodpool cave.

He had not expected this to be made into a celebration, though he should have. Wen Qing at least seemed to delight in his stupor when he was made to carry one more of the barrels outside, to the wide tables they had dressed under setting sunlight. He was ordered to sit by several of the omega; he was told not to move at all and simply wait to be served food and wine.

"We cooked all afternoon for this," said a man Wei Wuxian remembered skinny and underfed in his house near Qinghe. His face had filled and become pink with the sun.

"Here, try this," said another, whom Wei Wuxian had freed among the very first, whom he expected to see leave any day now, but who never did.

They drank in his honor. They talked and laughed around him into the deep hours of night, with only torchlight beside them to light up their frail hands. A few grew tipsy with the sweet liquor and started yelling, and Grandmother spoke once to shush them for the sleeping child's sake, spreading cold over Wei Wuxian's skin.

But it was the only time that day that he felt less than fine. And the liquor was good and mellow, and burned pleasantly as it went down his parched throat.

There were no stars above them. They could have believed themselves lost to the endless dark.
In those months, life came to an uneasy balance. The omega he could find were rare, but the people who bothered him were rarer. The reserves of food they had grown the year over were enough to sate every stomach and more, and whatever they lacked in the manner of necessities, they could buy with Luo Fanghua's skills as a seamstress. People from the village started ordering for their clothes to be made by her. Her name became that of a renown craftsman there, although she never set foot down the hill herself. She seemed proud of it too, as much as she could show it anyway, with how severe her young face always was.

Then Wei Wuxian woke up one chilly morning, in the deepest of winter, with cold sweat stuck to his skin. He shoved away the blanket laid over his body. He blinked against the haze of unrest that felt always like steel bar behind his eyes.

He looked to the dying fire by his side and met a pair of white eyes.

Shadows shifted over the walls. Whispers of wind crawled in through the opening of the cave, where some weeks ago Wen Qing and he had put up a curtain of thick furs to parry off the cold. The white eyes stared at him unblinkingly as he recalled how to breathe.

"Wen Ning," he said weakly.

There was no response from the man himself, but it felt as though a barrage had broken.

"Wen Ning!"

He crawled into the space of the array, staining his knees with crusted blood, grabbing the pale and black-veined hand hanging out from the side of the wooden bed.

It was cold, it had no pulse, but it moved. It clenched around his own fingers. The heavy spirit that had hovered there for months was gone, absorbed at last by the body it belonged to.

"Wen Ning," Wei Wuxian said over and over again, pushing brown hair out of Wen Ning's lax face with one shaking hand, holding him with the other. Each call of his name seemed to bring a little more life to Wen Ning's now-pale eyes."Can you speak? Do you recognize me?"

He knew not how long he spent kneeling there, asking the same questions, calling the same name. But light had filtered under the furs suspended by the entrance; the fire had died and left only smoking embers; and Wen Ning's mouth opened, and his voice came out like the rasping of wind into deep mountain gorges.

"Young master Wei," he said. Surprised and child-like as he had been in Qishan years ago.

Tears came to Wei Wuxian's eyes for the first time in years, but they were not sorrowful. They fell down his cheeks and nose and landed saltily on his lips, where the stretch of a smile pulled widely at him.

"Yes," Wei Wuxian said roughly. His voice shook over the next few words, shook as the sound of footsteps reached him, as Wen Qing's voice called for his name in the tunnel leading here. He held Wen Ning's hands tightly enough to hurt; he promised him, "I'm here."

Chapter End Notes

This is a ""short"" transition chapter before we get back to Big Angst... hold on tight
I'll try to get us out of the despair zone as fast as possible. I miss Jin Ling so much.

Also I'm going back on meds so IDK if I'll go through another of those adjustment periods when I can't write because my brain is upside-down so... please be nice to me if I take a little while. I'm really not doing so good IRL at the moment. It sucks a bit (lot).
Wen Qing wepted for the longest time.

She was a silent crier. Wei Wuxian had known this during the one and only embrace she had given him, when the weight of her grief seemed to have surpassed his, and they lay entangled together in the bleak depths of the bloodpool cave as she tried to crush out his own distant misery. She did much the same then, hiccuping noiselessly against Wen Ning's cold shoulder. The newly awakened Wen Ning did not seem to know how to show emotion anymore; he had no heartbeat, no pumping blood to keep his body warm or convey the biology of feeling, but his spirit was the same.

He held her back. His stiff face tensed into a smile. He nodded again and again for every trembling, "A-Ning," she called him by. Wen Qing seemed not to want for more than this—for him to be aware and alive to a point, for the movement of his arms as he embraced her febrile body.

When she released him, she looked at Wei Wuxian. Her tear-streaked face glowed wetly under the light of fire. She did not let go of her brother, choosing to hold his hand now rather than the breadth of him in full, but she looked at him; she rose awkwardly to her feet.

She bowed with all of her back and said, "Thank you."

Wei Wuxian had stepped away so that the both of them could reunited, unhindered by his presence. His own back stiffened at the sight of her acting in such a way, so used was he to her unbendingness, so clear the memory was of her scolding him the one and only time he had bowed to her instead.

But she smiled. Her skin lit up with joy and gratitude. And he realized as the fear dissipated that it had been here at all: that all along he had believed she would leave him after she got what she wanted, and that he was a fool to take her friendship for something temporary. Wen Qing dragged her confused brother by the hand until she stood by Wei Wuxian's side, and she embraced him too. She softened his shoulders and his arms. She warmed the center of his chest with gratitude and loyalty.

Wen Ning took to life in the Burial Mounds quietly and uneasily. If the others were scared at first of his appearance, and thought Wei Wuxian was once more trying to guard their sleeping quarters and separate them from the Wen sect remnants, Wei Wuxian did not know. Wen Qing took care of any explaining in his and her brother's stead. A few weeks later, one would have believed Wen Ning to have always been part of the landscape in the dead hills. Not a single person there so much as looked at him in askance.

Wen Ning himself spoke very little: his demeanor was much the same as it had been every time he and Wei Wuxian met in the past, but his words were quieter and rougher. Born thinly out of a throat
that no air came naturally through. Perhaps this was the reason he was so few-worded anymore; or perhaps, as Wei Wuxian had feared in the lonely nights of waiting, the violence that had taken him out of the world of the living remained stuck to his skin as it did to Wei Wuxian's.

He shared not his worries with either of the siblings. Instead he looked from afar as Wen Ning got to know of what had happened since the day he died; as he discovered with wide and whitened eyes the near-hundred of his kind who now lived out of cultivating the earth and sewing clothes together. Wei Wuxian spent the most time he ever would with them all during this period—watching Wen Ning adapt to life and the omega adapt to him; watching Wen Ning come to know Luo Fanghua, Grandmother, Uncle Four; watching him be acquainted with the young Wen Yuan.

Wen Ning loved the child.

He seemed to find Wen Yuan's presence more soothing than the rest, than even his sister's at times. He played often with him into the dark hours of evening, his lax face showing more lightness of heart while in the child's presence than anyone else's. Wei Wuxian discovered this as he came back from the very edge of Gusu territory once, with a forty-year-old woman in tow who had begged him on her knees to take her away from the lonely room she was trapped in all her life.

It was not the first time he came back to the Burial Mounds and found the child running awkwardly around, although usually Grandmother or Wen Qing were quick to take Wen Yuan away so that he could walk through. Even Luo Fanghua now looked between Wen Yuan and Wei Wuxian in worry on the rare occasion the two stood within watching distance, and although she disliked such displays of touching or affection, she took Wen Yuan in her arms and took him out of Wei Wuxian's sight.

But on that day, she was not around. Her fever time must have come while Wei Wuxian was away, for this was the only thing that ever kept her inside rather than out. So Wei Wuxian halted at the wider end of the hillpath and watched, frozen, as Wen Ning carried the child on his back and smiled stiffly at his high-pitched laughter.

Round and round he walked and ran, tireless, voiceless. And Wen Yuan laughed as loudly as he cried, and the sound of it lodged within Wei Wuxian's throat and made it hard to breathe.

Wen Ning stopped when he noticed his presence. "Young master Wei," he called softly, despite the many times Wei Wuxian had asked him not to be so formal.

He stepped toward him leisurely. Wen Yuan on his shoulders was flushed with laughter; as Wei Wuxian stared at him and felt his body grow distant from himself, the child turned curious grey eyes his way.

"A-Ning."

Wen Ning's steps halted. From behind him his sister came, looking once at Wei Wuxian before turning to him. "I need to speak with Wei Wuxian for a bit," she said kindly. She always seemed so kind, so tender with pain and love, when she looked at her brother. "You should take A-Yuan back to Grandmother."


The child moaned and pouted at being asked to walk on his own, but he followed obediently, his hand held delicately in Wen Ning's own.

The woman by Wei Wuxian's side had been tense through the whole journey, unwilling to believe him when he had told her that the moonless tea would prevent her from being fevered as they
traveled, or that none could guess her true status with the tonic Wen Qing brewed. Now, she relaxed. Her handsome face peered distantly at Wen Ning's back.

Wei Wuxian expected her to ask about the grey quality of Wen Ning's skin, the white veil over his eyes, the black veins running up his neck so evidently; instead she said, "So there are children here," with relief weighing on her voice.

"Welcome," Wen Qing told her briskly. "I imagine you'd like to rest now—I'll take you to Grandmother while we figure out where you'll sleep. There is a new house being built by my uncles, you'll probably live there once it's finished, but for now…"

She was so very good at this despite her unfriendly appearance and bitter scent. The woman followed her in slow steps, exhausted from the three-day journey on horseback after so many years of stillness, but she looked trusting. Like the others before her, and no matter how desperate she had been to flee, she seemed afraid that a step further would have her scolded or punished harshly. Wen Qing's presence always seemed to do away with such worries.

Wei Wuxian led the tired horses back to the stable. The cold was still sharp on his skin despite the winter sun shining over them. He did not experience such physicality anymore, not for a long time, but his back braced for shivers all the same. Uncle Three manned the stables most of the time, as he was too old to participate in the more strenuous kind of manual work; he took the animals from Wei Wuxian with a bright, aged greeting, his suntanned face so wrinkled by time that his eyes were buried under folds of skin.

Wei Wuxian visited Luo Fanghua next.

She lived still in one of the earliest of the houses. As such, it was small, and only three others lived there with her, sharing two beds between them. Her ripe scent of berries was riper still after he pushed open the door, after hearing her call for him to enter; and Luo Fanghua herself was sat by a wall at the other end, sewing by candlelight. She had not been idle while her fever lasted: clothes of all kinds were strewn over tables and chairs, and piled onto one of the two beds.

"You should be resting," Wei Wuxian told her.

He put the needles and thread she had requested he buy while he was away on a chair by her side. She took them immediately, testing the sharpness of a needle on her thumb in precise hands. A thin drop of blood beaded out of the prick like a tiny ruby; she sucked it dry and nodded to him.

Luo Fanghua looked very poised in spite of her heat. Sweat made light shine off of her face, and she blinked groggily once in a while, but she looked otherwise unbothered. Her fingers were nimble as she knotted thread to fabric too quickly for him to see.

"You were away for long," she said breezily.

Wei Wuxian had been ready to leave her to her task right then—he paused at the sound of her tired voice.

"Only ten days," he replied. "I've been away longer before."

"Cultivators came three days ago."

"The barriers are strong enough to resist them even if I should be outside for weeks. Were you afraid they'd get in?"

She shook her head, staring at him ruefully for the accusation. It was almost enough to make him
smile.

She must have been afraid, if she was fevered already when it happened. But Luo Fanghua was as stubborn and rueful as he was—she did not like to speak or show her thoughts in any way if she could avoid it, and her smiles were precious and rare.

Looking at her now, flushed and uncomfortable and still putting on such an appearance for him, Wei Wuxian was reminded of Lan Wangji.

He blinked. He breathed in her fever-sweet scent and the burned smell of the candle. "How is your foot?" he asked, taking another step toward her.

Luo Fanghua took the time to finish her row of stitches before she put her work down on the other chair. She bent over her own knees; took the boot off her left foot; raised her leg a bit so he could see better, and only Wei Wuxian's quick reflexes allowed him to grab her calf before her balance faltered. He crouched so that the height may be less straining for her to handle.

There was a ring of blue and black around her thin ankle. He did not touch it, although he knew from Wen Qing's words that it was not painful anymore. His eyes still ran over it carefully, burning the shape and color of it to memory.

Every second spend thusly made hatred swarm what was left of his heart.

"You know you only have to say the word," he told her, carrying her leg back to the floor.

It touched upon wood carefully, as if she were still ready for it to hurt as it had on that day. When he had found her laid in silk and near-unresponsive, an iron chain linking her foot to the wall of her omega house, with only enough give to it to allow her to reach the water room.

She had to crawl to go there, she had told Wen Qing. Her foot ached too much to bear her weight anymore.

"If you would like me to take revenge for you, you can ask me to. For this, they do not deserve to live."

"No," Luo Fanghua said, as she had every time he had given her the choice.

How he wished that she would say yes. Perhaps he would find satisfaction in punishing her tormentors, if he could not find it in punishing his.

Luo Fanghua's face was more flushed now than it had been a moment ago. She pushed away his hands and put her boot back on. She patted the robe over her thighs and sides until he rested once more creaseless upon her.

Wei Wuxian stared at her for another moment, crouched over the floor, before he rose. She avoided his eyes all the while.

"Then I'll leave you now," he said. "You should stop working and rest."

"I do not like being idle," she replied stubbornly.

Her forehead wrinkled in unhappiness. The image of Lan Wangji struggling with his frustration once more superposed itself to her, and Wei Wuxian's lips lifted through no will of his.

"You do not..." Luo Fanghua's words halted. She brought her work to her lap again as if to
strengthen herself. "You don't bring so many anymore," she said.

He could not find them anymore.

So many of the houses now lay empty. Wei Wuxian would have believed this to be chance if he were more naïve, if he had not seen the hostility on the faces of those who were present on Phoenix Mountain. As it was, he knew that the omega were being kept from him deliberately. That the greater sects had grown complacent; that the small villages and families whose houses he could find entry to were now keeping them somewhere else.

He had an idea where, and he had an idea of the consequences if he tried to go after them.

But Luo Fanghua only looked worried. She had suffered so much already, and was only now beginning to smile and accept to rest and preserve her efforts. Wei Wuxian knew why she worked so hard for all of them, and he knew that no amount of reassuring would convince her heart that he would not one day send her back whence she came if the mood struck him.

"Will you dine with us tonight?" she asked him as he was about to leave, and Wei Wuxian had not the heart to tell her no.

So he ate with a group of them, far from the Wen sect people who did not need to be asked to know that they should stay away when one of the omega was fevered. He listened without speaking to the cheer of conversation. He did not manage to answer the smiles around him, or to do more than stay by Wen Qing's side and watch Wen Ning play with the child near Grandmother's front door.

He cleaned the dishes they had used side by side with two elderly men. He tried to drown the scent of petrichor with water and oil.

That night, Wen Qing said, "I haven't told him."

She was sitting by his side with a bowl full of tea in her hands. The furs she was wrapped in hid her face to the cheeks, and although she was not shivering, she kept her naked hands close to the heat of her drink. She gave him frowns from time to time, worried that he would catch a cold with so little on him.

But Wei Wuxian did not feel cold, or heat, anymore. Weather had no grasp on him now.

"I figured," he told her.

Wen Qing sighed. She shifted closer to him, almost close enough that her cloak stuck to his own side. "A-Ning hasn't asked anything," she said. "But I can tell that he wants to know why you avoid him now."

"It is not him I avoid," Wei Wuxian retorted.

"I know this. A-Ning doesn't, however."

He remained silent.

"You think he will change his attitude toward you," Wen Qing went on softly. "But I know my brother better than anyone in the world, even better than I know you. He has adored you since the first time you two met. Telling him would not change anything."

"I'm not worried about this."
Wei Wuxian had also liked the Wen Ning he met in the Nightless City. Even when he had thought him to be beta, even when Wen Ning's own shyness had gotten the better of him and proven Wei Wuxian's bravado wrong in the eyes of so many, he had never resented him. What Wen Ning had done to help him after the Lotus Pier burned, after Jiang Cheng lost his golden core... Wei Wuxian could never repay such a debt.

And yet it was not this selfless act he thought of when affection squeezed his chest as he looked at the man, but another; one much more delicate and private, when Wen Ning had told Wei Wuxian the truth of who he was and allowed him to sob and weep with no judgment.

Wei Wuxian could not help but fear that learning of Wen Yuan's situation would draw a gap between himself and Wen Ning, now that the boy was so attached to him. But it was not all.

"He's doing so well," he said.

Wen Ning had sat upon the ground with Wen Yuan before him, caught in the middle of a hand game of sorts that the child must be teaching him. His face was stiff and unexpressive as ever, but still there was peace to be found there. His slow and careful hands, which did not know their own strength anymore, allowed Wen Yuan's to guide and mold them as they wished.

Wei Wuxian looked away. He rose from the wooden bench he and Wen Qing occupied. "If he doesn't remember how he died, then I won't be the one to remind him," he told her. "I won't be the one to put those thoughts through his head."

"Through his or yours, Wei Ying?" Wen Qing replied.

His jaw tensed in anger. It was all he could do, suddenly, not to turn to her again and look for a way to make her unending calm break open on rage at last.

But Wen Qing said, "Forgive me," with enough sorrow on her voice to stay him.

Grandmother was still outside despite the cold. She sat at the table where they had all eaten, warming herself with tea. The man who was the most beautiful of them all—the one who had agreed so readily to follow Wei Wuxian here and never left, in spite of how lucky his chances were at being agreeably married—was speaking to her slowly. Wei Wuxian watched them and saw only the narrow walls around them, the heavy roofs over their heads. The silken prisons they were once left in to die.

"He remembers," Wen Qing said.

Wei Wuxian thought of Jin Zixun begging under his foot; and like with Luo Fanghua earlier, his chest tightened and burned.

Wen Qing laughed emptily. She put a hand over his arm, bracing herself against him. "He won't tell me anything, but I know he remembers," she continued. "But A-Ning is like you. He's convinced himself that relying on anyone else would be a terrible sign of weakness."

She supported herself on him as she rose, exhausted by the efforts of the day, her half-empty bowl spilling tea over her fingers.

"I won't break," she told him. "I know how it goes, Wei Ying. I'm no fool, I was no fool when we first met."
"I know," he replied.

He had never forgotten the words she had said as she was fixing the scars left on his back by Zidian.

"I handled everything. I could keep standing after A-Ning died, I could keep my head cool when Zewu-Jun brought you to me, I could handle all the people you brought here and keep them fed and housed."

His heart ached. "Wen Qing," he said.

She stopped him with a wave of the hand, with another grab at the thin meat of his arm. "Do not apologize," she barked at him. "I've told you already what I think of your guilt."

He must look very stricken, for Wen Qing's shoulders dropped all at once.

"Damn you, Wei Wuxian," she said without heat. "After all this time, you still believe yourself at fault for anything." She closed the cloak more tightly around herself. "Sometimes I wonder, if I hadn't taken the golden core from you, would you be able to see how much good you're doing? How grateful everyone here is for you?"

"Just tell me what I can do," he found the strength to say. "Wen Qing—just tell me what I can do to make you happy. I hate to see you—"

Jiang Yanli had cried, once, when he told her that he hated to see her sad; Wen Qing did not weep, she did not laugh or smile wetly, but she wrapped an arm around his back. She gave him warmth from the side of her body, and she whispered, "I don't want anything from you. You've already given me everything."

She touched his arm and the side of his face, pushing back the limp hair that had fallen before his eyes in the cold evening wind.

"So please," she said. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

On the first day of spring, Wen Ning broke apart the oakwood door of an empty omega house with his bare hands.

Wei Wuxian had asked him to come along with him on Wen Qing's suggestion. She had figured it a good way to allow the both of them some time together, far from Wen Yuan who now clung to Wen Ning's side every chance he got.

"Where are they all?" Wen Ning asked him.

Wei Wuxian walked twice through the little house. Habit had him checking under the bed, into the cupboards, between the wooden beams supporting the roof. No one was there, but the ghostly touch of sweetscent remained. People had lived here until very recently.

"They're being kept somewhere else," he replied. He brushed a hand against the surface of a table; his fingers came back unmarked by dust. "Probably with the greater sects," he said, clenching his fist. "Somewhere I can't access them so easily. I suppose it only took these idiot two years to figure it out."
Wen Ning shuffled and shifted on his feet, twisting his pale hands together.

"Young master Wei," he called.

"I told you to call me by name."

But Wen Ning shook his head decidedly. "Young master Wei," he repeated, as stubborn as Luo Fanghua and his sister combined. "I wish—I wish to help."

"You're already helping plenty—"

"No. You do not understand."

Wen Ning had never interrupted him before. Wei Wuxian stared at him, surprised, and waited him out.

Whatever Wen Ning wanted to say next obviously came with some difficulty. Anyone else may have believed him unfeeling and unmoving, but Wei Wuxian had grown used to watching over him, to pushing past his own shame and terror when Wen Yuan was by Wen Ning's side, if only to glimpse and look for a hint of unhappiness on the man's face.

"This body is strong," said Wen Ning.

He picked up a clay pot over the table, turning it twice between his fingers. Then he crushed it one-handed, breaking it into sharp little pieces.

Wei Wuxian heard himself grunt in worry, felt himself move to Wen Ning's side to open his fingers and check that his skin had not split; but although the shards of clay were fine enough to cut, his palm bore no trace of so much as an indent.

"I have to be careful," Wen Ning said, allowing him to stroke over his palm in shock. "Once, I almost hurt A-Yuan without knowing. But I know I can lift a horse, perhaps two, and I can run very fast as well."

"You shouldn't push yourself," Wei Wuxian replied, "I don't know how solid your body truly is..."

"Young master Wei. I want to help you free them."

Wen Ning's lax fingers came alive. They tightened around Wei Wuxian's in a semblance of hand-holding.

"When the young master Jin killed me, I could do nothing," he said eagerly.

Wei Wuxian tried to tear out of his hold, but Wen Ning's strength was true. Although they never became painful, his fingers did not leave any give for Wei Wuxian's hand to squirm out of.

"I wish I could have done something then. I was never one for violence, I always preferred to read than to hunt, even if I do miss archery..."

"You don't have to tell me," Wei Wuxian said tightly.

Wen Ning shook his head. "But now, I am strong," he said. "I'm stronger than any man alive. I could help, if you wish to go against the greater sects."

Wei Wuxian took a deep breath. He pushed his other hand against Wen Ning's until it would finally relax and let him go.
"Your sister would never agree," he tried to argue.

"I have already asked her. She said that she wanted me to do it, if it was what I wanted."

Wen Ning stepped forward. His oddly-still mouth moved, twisting into a smile he meant to be encouraging.

"If I had Jin Zixun before me now," he said, "I could kill him before he had the time to blink."

Gentle Wen Ning, shy Wen Ning, looked at Wei Wuxian with the same quiet strength that his sister had ever-shown.

"Use me, young master Wei. Let me help you like you have helped me."

They went to Gusu first.

Wen Ning tore apart the cultivators in the mountain villages who tried to stop them. He broke down housedoors and spiritual swords, heedless of the shouting of frightened alpha and beta. Tempered steel could not break his skin any more than clay could; moon and sunlight had not effect on him, unlike other corpses; his name spread over the land in quiet and terrified whispers.

They found three young omega willing to come with them at the foot of the Cloud Recesses, after thirty strong of the Lan clan's affiliates failed to stop the both of them. None came from the Lan clan themselves to help—the affair was too quickly put to a close, the omega whisked away in the deepest and darkest of night.

Caiyi Town was a much different sight under steel and torchlight than it had been when Wei Wuxian chased water ghouls on Biling Lake. He had no Suibian now to help him fly, but his ghost flute Chenqing served well enough to terrorize.

One couple resisted him. A beta man and his alpha wife, holding between the both of them a babe with the scent of berries.

"Don't take him from us," they cried at him in that endless first night, as Wen Ning stood before them with his black-veined hands held open.

Wei Wuxian thought of the figure he must cut to them, with his fierce corpses and black flute, with his eyes rendered red by the glare of demonic cultivation.

The child cried in his father's arms. The man himself shook with terror, his face bearing faint traces of familiarity that Wei Wuxian could not place to a single person he knew.

Still, he drew back. Still he called Wen Ning to his side again and told them, "I will come back, and if I find that he is growing locked up, I will take him from you."

He never again saw those two people, who moved to the Cloud Recesses soon after, who died of illness before their time; but fourteen years later, his reincarnated self would crouch before their son in the main hall of Mo Manor. He would look into the young cultivator's eyes and say, wondered and ached: "You're omega."

In Lan Jingyi's quick wit, in his unabashed freedom, Wei Wuxian would kindle the first embers of
his own hope.

To Gusu Wei Wuxian first showed his Ghost General. To Qinghe then he guided him, raiding the towns around the Unclean Realm and then the Realm itself. He met neither Nie Mingjue nor his half-brother Huaisang there, as they at the time were caught in a conference with Jin Guangshan, but loose tongues would say that upon hearing of his deeds, Nie Mingjue laughed.

That he told the harrowed messenger who came to deliver the news, "Just let him have them."

The eighty omega of the Burial Mounds became a hundred, became a hundred and twenty, before Wei Wuxian was stopped by Jin Guangshan and Jiang Cheng. And though it had been years since he started doing away with tradition and spitting in the faces of those who upheld them, those were the things that all would remember after he died—

The weeks that the Yiling Patriarch spent going after each greater sect, taking his due from them, walking around with his Ghost General. Spreading terror and myth as he went, making all whisper that it was not people he took, but souls; that all could fall prey to the madman's whims one day and end up one more lost spirit in Yiling.

The seventh day after Jin Ling's birth, when the mad Wei Wuxian was invited to Golden Carp Tower in spite of all concerns by Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli; when he attacked Jin Zixun in Qiongqi Path and murdered Jin Zixuan unprompted.

Then the confused hours after the massacre of Nightless City. The hundred and more cultivators who rose from their wounds and hurried to asiege the Burial Mounds, only to find sect leader Jiang Cheng howling out sobs and pleas, his hands wrapped around Lan Wangji's throat; and next to them the corpse of Wei Wuxian, his belly speared by Bichen's white blade.

Jin Zixuan had never known his father this angry before.

Jin Guangshan was of a bad temper, but he was the kind to mellow out under authority and settle easily into complacency. When Wen Ruohan had often visited Golden Carp Tower, the sect leader of Lanlingjin thrived in his attentions, doing his utmost to please him and ascertain his allyship.

When he was young, Jin Zixuan had found this demeanor humiliating. He had never realized quite how much until his understudies in Gusu, when he had spent more time than he wished to admit watching Wei Wuxian turn his nose to Lan Qiren's authority.

*If an omega can do it,* he had thought then, torn between his own shame and the fluttering of his heart each time honeyscent reached him; *If even en omega can do it, then why is my father unable to?*

Now the golden-and-white house in the far depths of the Tower stood empty of all its inhabitants, and Jin Guangshan raged and raged, breaking vases and liquor pots, terrorizing his concubines; and Jin Zixuan wished more than anything that he would go back to his meek, cowardly self.

"I will have Wei Wuxian's head," Jin Guangshan bellowed at the height of drunkenness. He had not stopped either—screaming or drinking—since the alarms had been rung that very morning, when servants had come to tell him that the omega house was empty. "I will kill this bitch if it is the last
"Father," Meng Yao said as Jin Zixuan stood frozen by his side; "Father, if your allies hear you say such things…"

"Spare me your snivelling, Meng Yao," spat Jin Guangshan. "What good is saying that killing him would be immoral now? He is so twisted and evil, he barely counts as omega anymore! Did you feel a hint of sweet scent on him in the competition, you bastard?"

Meng Yao did not recoil at the crude word, and neither did Jin Zixuan. For the first time that day, Jin Guangshan met his son's eyes.

He smiled. It was such a cruel and unknown thing, so foreign over his face, which Jin Zixuan had come to recognize as weak, that he found himself wordless.

"Perhaps you were right after all, A-Xuan," he slurred. Another cup shattered as he set it down too forcefully, and his soiled sleeved wetted again under the spill of alcohol. He laughed shriekingly. "Perhaps if I'd let you marry the boy, we would not be in such trouble."

"I'll kill you," Wei Wuxian had threatened.

He had not noticed until he was pushed away that the unfamiliar expression on Wei Wuxian's face had been fear. Not until he had thought of sealing his words with a kiss and looked up; and Wei Wuxian had been looking back to him, as unmoving as stone, cold energy spread over his skin like a layer of armor. So very still and pale under Zixuan's touch.

His fingers had burned when he pulled them from Wei Wuxian's face. They burned yet every time he remembered and guilt started hounding him. He had not slept a full night since the competition without it hounding him.

Jin Zixuan left the room stiffly, shame burning once more up his chest, his hand nervously wound around Suihua.

Outside of the hall where his father's high dais rested, servants and cultivators ran and shoved at each other, making preparations for the days to come. So many had come already to Golden Carp Tower, and Zixuan knew that many more would come still, called by his father's missives to rally behind him.

Only Qinghenie and Gusulan had refused. Yunmengjiang had not been informed at all.

"Maiden Luo," Jin Zixuan called when he found her in the widest of the gardens.

It had flowered thickly with the coming of spring, and fragrant scents wafted over the cool air no matter where he walked. Luo Qingyang liked to help with caring for the plants, and spent much of her time with her hands in water and dirt. Jin Zixuan thought, with his throat tight and febrile, of how often he had pictured Wei Wuxian in her stead; of how often he had watched him as a boy waddling happily among blooming lotuses.

But he had been wrong to assume even this much out of the man that this boy had become. Oh, how wrong he had been, and how bitter the knowledge was now.

"Young master," Luo Qingyang replied, nodding to him.

"You have recovered your sword from Qishan's treasury, haven't you?"
She looked at him oddly. "Yes," she replied after a brief silence. "What is it that you…"

Jin Zixuan hesitated.

He could still leave. If he were to turn around now and keep silent after all, no one could fault him for anything but a moment of lunacy. Luo Qingyang was a fellow disciple of the Jin sect, a girl he had known since he was only a child, but one he would only tentatively call a friend. He knew not if he could trust her with this.

He knew not whom he could trust aside from her, however.

He took the letter out of his sleeve slowly. Already the paper had creased from being handled so many times since the early morning hours, and the wax seal keeping it closed threatened to break apart.

"I need you to… No," he stopped himself.

Now more than ever, he could not afford brusqueness.

"I would like you to carry a message for me," he said. "To Jiang Wanyin, in Yunmeng."

Luo Qingyang had been reaching for the letter he held; she stilled at his words and looked at him in shock.

"Young master," she gasped.

"I know I have no right to ask this of you," he added hurriedly. "I know my father asked everyone to remain in the Tower whilst the other clans arrive, but—"

"Young master," Luo Qingyang interrupted. "Are you asking me to betray our sect leader?"

His tongue burned within his mouth, but he could not deny her accusation.

He was asking her such a thing.

"Please, miss Luo," he said.

His free hand found the place over his heart in a show of respect; the very place where it had held Wei Wuxian's cold and unresponsive hand in such terrible selfishness.

He doubted he could ever use such a gesture again and feel that he had a right to.

"Please, you are the only one I can count on for this."

Luo Qingyang was a pretty and mild-scented alpha, a short woman with a round face, with skin goldened by sun and a face ripe with smiles. She had been the one to tell him, once, of Jiang Yanli's secretive kindnesses. She had berated him for his uncouth attitude when he was but a boy in Gusu, when his words had come rude and hurtful for the purpose of having fifteen-year-old Wei Wuxian's attention on him.

"The Yiling Patriarch stole an omega from my family two years ago," she said, looking heartbroken. "She was a wonderful seamstress, and my family lost one of their greatest sources of income after she fled with him."

"I know," he replied.
He remembered when Luo Qingyang's father had come to spend his complaints on Jin Guangshan after it happened. How he had begged for retribution, on behalf of the fact that his alpha heir had trained under the Jin sect since infancy, and how Jin Guangshan had refused to hear of it.

Now Jin Guangshan was raising an army, because Wei Wuxian had taken the two omega hidden in the house at foot of a tower, and taken as well two of the man's five spouses who lived secluded in quarters of their own near his chambers.

Luo Qingyang took the letter from him. "I will warn sect leader Jiang," she said ruefully. "But Luo Fanghua needs to go back to my family once she is found. You cannot allow your father to keep her, as he will keep all of the people that Wei Wuxian stole if given the chance."

Her words could be taken as treason of a kind, as conspiring; but Jin Zixuan was too caught in how guilty he felt for agreeing to care at all that they were.

He had another task ahead of him, now.

Meng Yao found him at the back of the Tower, atop a string of stairs much more decrepit than the ones at its grand entrance. He looked poised and quiet despite the agitation around them, and his voice was even as he took in Jin Zixuan's travel cloak and sword and asked, "Where are you going, brother?"


Meng Yao was not someone he ever wanted to butt heads with. He was too clever, too talented despite his mild-manneredness. He was now Jin Guangshan's ears and eyes in a way Jin Zixuan had never been.

But A-Yao did not look angry or surprised. He stepped toward Jin Zixuan with only a smile on his lips, unbothered as always by all that surrounded him, his clothes devoid of dust and his brow clean of any sweat.

"I always took our cousin's insinuations for lies," he said once he stood by Zixuan's side. "But what father said earlier… could it be that they are true?"

"What insinuations?" Jin Zixuan asked, though he knew them very well.

Too often had Zixun taunted him through their youth, after his studies in Gusu, after the archery competition, even on the night they had both spend in the Lotus Pier as a storm raged outside—after Zixun himself had tried to buy Wei Wuxian under Jin Zixuan's very nose.

Zixun had been so incensed then. So terribly and profoundly humiliated by Wei Wuxian declaring that he would rather die than marry him. For hours he had talked Zixuan's ears off, criticizing his taste, accusing Wei Wuxian of licentiousness, for how else but by the use of his body should he have secured Zixuan's affection?

At the time, Zixuan had been only frustrated. Enraged by his cousin's audacity, simmered through by jealousy, wanting and yearning for the brief sight of Wei Wuxian in silken robes, his neck and collar left exposed to the air.

Now he knew how Wei Wuxian reacted to a touch, to an offer for love; and the shame eclipsed even the anger.

Meng Yao did not disgrace him with an answer. He nodded his head deeply, almost bowing at the shoulders. "You shall have to be quick," he said. "I do not know how long I can keep our father
occupied until he notices your absence."

Surprise swallowed Jin Zixuan's protests whole.

He was no good with words. He had never been more aware of than since watching Wei Wuxian stare at him in rage rather than understanding. Still, Zixuan grabbed onto Meng Yao's arm and promised, hoping that gratitude showed through rather than aggression: "After this is over, I'll talk with Father. I'll make him acknowledge you, I swear to you."

Meng Yao's becoming face tensed before he smiled.

Jin Zixuan flew for hours over the river-wet mountains and hills, knowing that the one he sought had hours to put distance between himself and Lanling—knowing, as well, that he was traveling with four omega in no running shape.

Most of the people that Jin Guangshan had sent in search of Wei Wuxian had gone toward Yiling directly. But Wei Wuxian was always clever, always bolder than people assumed he was. It was true when he defied the spiteful Lan Qiren with dark ideas he would later go on to make reality, and it was true now, even with how sickly he looked and how little he smiled. He would not have taken the short road home, even at the risk of exhausting his escort.

There was another road he could take. One leading close to the ruins of Qishanwen's stronghold, the now-deserted Nightless City. One that would require long days of riding through narrow mountain paths, and could ensure that any tail was lost or killed discreetly.

Jin Zixuan was willing to take that risk.

He found them after nightfall, following the glowing pinprick of fire at the entrance of a cave. Jin Zixuan had flown lower over the passes after the sun vanished behind the dry mountains; it was the only reason he even noticed the fire, which would have been hidden by rock had he been any higher.

He dismounted at the entrance of the cave. He looked over the empty space by the fire, noticing cloaks and bags but no one at all. Then he took a step further in, and suddenly a shadow loomed over him in the shape of a grey-skinned man.

One death-cold hand wrapped around his neck and squeezes all the air out of him.

"Stop," he rasped, dropping Suihua to the ground, clawing uselessly at the skin of the corpse's wrist—his nails could not cut through it at all, as if it were made of stone or steel. The hold tightened; he choked; his vision swam with black-and-white spots, and his body thrashed helplessly.

Then another voice from behind him—"Wen Ning, release him."

Jin Zixuan heaved in such a deep, shuddering breath after that hand left his throat, that nausea burned through all of his trachea. He coughed, swaying on his feet till both of his knees hit ground, expelling bitter bile over the soil.

There came a clatter of steel on stone. The edge of a sword rested over the side of his shuddering throat. When Jin Zixuan found the strength to twist his back and look, he found Wei Wuxian holding Suihua as if the sword belonged to him.

"Is your memory so short, Jin Zixuan," Wei Wuxian said coldly. His eyes glowed red even in the shadow of night; there was no differentiating the cold air from the stench of resentful energy. "I told you what you happen to you if you ever came close to me again."
"Wei Wuxian," Jin Zixuan croaked out of his aching throat.

Suihua's blade dug more sharply into his neck in warning.

A whimper echoed through the cave behind him. Jin Zixuan tried to turn around and look, but Suihua blocked him before he could do more than shift on his knees.

"Master," came the lifeless voice of the corpse.

"You go take care of them," Wei Wuxian replied. His eyes had not left Jin Zixuan. "I'll handle this alone."

Another whimper, no doubt from one of the omega hiding deep within the tunnel. The corpse's—the Ghost General Wen Ning's—footsteps rang onto rock and water as he walked away.

Suihua did not lower from Jin Zixuan's neck even when after they vanished.

"I warned you," said Wei Wuxian in the thick silence. "I told you that I would kill you."

Jin Zixuan swallowed back the protest, the anger immediately rising through him, and made himself look at the man before him. He made himself see what he had refused to when he had been so focused on expressing all that he held back for years.

Wei Wuxian had looked sick ever since his return to war. He had been pale and thin in Golden Carp Tower, and emaciated during the hunting competition. Jin Zixuan had known and noticed this and had not thought more deeply upon it, or upon his behavior around the Jiang siblings that day, but now, he did.

Now he wondered that Wei Wuxian could terrorize so many by his lonesome when he looked a second away from collapsing. He saw the fear and rage he had refused to acknowledge in his stupidity that day, and the shaking in the hand holding onto Suihua's pommel, never mind that the blade itself lay strong.

The Wei Wuxian he had known as a child, the bright and lively boy from Yunmeng who did not shy upon a touch or an insult, was not the same as the man standing before him now. No matter how much time Jin Zixuan had spent imagining the touch of his hand or the taste of his lips, or picturing him among the flowerbeds of Lanlingjin, wearing a golden uniform.

"My father is gathering an army," Jin Zixuan said. "He will be marching upon the Burial Mounds within the week to take back what you stole. I've sent a message to Jiang Wanyin to inform him, and Lan Wangji and Nie Mingjue refused to accept my father's call for rallying, but I'm afraid I can't stop him, not after—"

Suihua left his throat. The air it moved before his lips cut him short and breathless.

Wei Wuxian did not look surprised by any of his words; he did, however, look angered.

"You told Jiang Cheng?" he asked briskly.

"Yes," Jin Zixuan replied breathlessly.

"You—"

So great did his rage seem that he could find nothing to say anymore; but Jin Zixuan could guess what it was he was thinking, and had experience not taught him better, he would have grabbed onto
his arm to still him and convince him to listen.

He only had his words now, and those had always failed him somehow. "You'll need all the help you can get," he said anyway. He pushed himself to his feet, shocked by the weakness through his limbs after being strangled by the Ghost General. No doubt bruises already showed around his neck to tell the tale. "Wei Wuxian," he pleaded. "You can't survive against so many, you need your sect."

"I have no sect," Wei Wuxian spat at him.

He had taken a step back after Jin Zixuan rose. Zixuan tried, and failed, not to let disappointment grip him.

Silence spread over the both of them, broken only by the crackling fire at Jin Zixuan's back. It lengthened the shadow of his body till it touched Wei Wuxian's robes; it shone upon Wei Wuxian's face and dug deeply into the tired lines of it.

"I don't need Jiang Cheng's help," Wei Wuxian said.

He looked like he believed it, too.

"He won't put Yunmeng in jeopardy for me either. Your efforts were a waste, Jin Zixuan."

"They were not," Jin Zixuan protested. "You have time to flee."

Wei Wuxian laughed at him.

He threw Suihua to the ground between them. There had been no light to the sword, as though he had no wish to make use of its power, although Jin Zixuan had no doubt that it would obey him. His hand came instead to the black flute always hanging from his waist.

"Where's Suibian?" Zixuan asked him.

He had not seen Wei Wuxian's sword since it was stolen by Wen Chao.

Wei Wuxian's fist tightened around Chenqing. "I don't need a sword to deal with people like you," he replied. "Now leave before I decide to take your life after all."

But Jin Zixuan did not move. He did not look away from Wei Wuxian's shuttered face.

And though he knew, now, how his words would be received, he still told him: "There is something else I wish to say."

Shivers crept up his back as the cold and unforgiving presence of the Ghost General once more made itself known. He heard no footsteps this time, and felt no hands upon his bruised neck, but he knew that Wen Ning was looking at him and readying himself to attack.

Still, it was Wei Wuxian he looked at and not the wide-open space at his back. Wei Wuxian's bloodless face in the light of fire, Wei Wuxian's eyes gone grey again with what Zixuan now knew to be fear.

Jin Zixuan pushed past the guilt and the longing alike. "I will not reiterate what I—what I told you the last time we spoke," he said, the blood so thick in his throat that he feared it would spill over his tongue. "Although my feelings are still..."

But he cut himself short, shaken. His own hand lifted to his chest; he thought better of it and lowered it again.
The whole time, Wei Wuxian watched him like a hawk. Searching for any hint that he should approach or speak out of turn.

"I distressed you," Jin Zixuan managed to say. "I did not mean to, I did not… realize how much until the end, but that is what I did anyway. For this, I am sorry."

Wei Wuxian was silent for a long time. Wen Ning's presence at Jin Zixuan's back never vanished as he waited, as if the corpse were only a thin thread away from using his terrifying strength on him again.

At last, Wei Wuxian spoke: "I don't understand you, Jin Zixuan."

His fingers finally went lax around the ghost flute.

"You've never shown any sign of being less than faithful to your sect and father," he went on. "Yet you go against him now. You try to warn me so that I may escape his anger, although I could not be less afraid of Jin Guangshan even if he were an insect at the sole of my foot. Am I supposed to just believe that you didn't come here for your father's spouses? Or for the two people he kept locked in the omega house of the Tower?"

Jin Zixuan had never set foot into the omega house of Lanlingjin before that very day.

When he was woken up by a fearful servant and walked amongst the cries of the fretting house staff, it had seemed natural to walk down to the base of the Tower and see things for himself. He had known where the house was located, of course, and never thought much of it. His father had told him of the age and names of those held within it; he had participated in the coming-of-age ceremonies, in some negotiations for marriage; had even met a few of the omega who were sold during his lifetime.

But he had never gone to the house itself. Not until that cool spring morning, with rumors of Wei Wuxian's sightings spreading like wildfire, with frightened tales of soul-stealing, of the terrifying Ghost General. He had found the little golden house on the shadowed mountain flank where the Tower stopped short, accessible only through a fling of narrow stairs gone fragile with age and use. He had looked at the broken oakwood door and stepped into the single room it held.

He had taken in the windowless walls, the bed on which two people had slept only hours ago, the lingering sweetscent gone acrid with despair. The inside of the door was blackened by candlesmoke. The beams supporting the roof where the house was not buried in stone barely let in any air.

For the first time in his life, he had tried to imagine what a childhood spend in such a place could lead to; and for the first time in two years, he grew close to understanding why Wei Wuxian had renounced everything he was ever given for this one hopeless cause.

"You will not convince me that you are on any side but your own," Wei Wuxian was saying, wounded in ways Jin Zixuan could only guess at. "I don't understand you at all."

"I don't understand myself either," Jin Zixuan replied weakly. "I can only tell you that I am sincere. That I was sincere the last time, too."

Wei Wuxian's hand spasmed and shook before he tightened it into a fist.

"I acted mistakenly. I had no thought for your circumstances, only for what I wanted, and I came here also to tell you that I…" He swallowed. "That should you refuse me now, I will never again speak of this to you or anyone," he said. "This, I can promise you."
"I refuse," said Wei Wuxian.

Jin Zixuan's heart felt wrung dry.

There was nothing on Wei Wuxian's face. His mouth and eyes were cast into lines of anger, his body laid like the defensive wall of a keep. Although he looked handsome still, as he had been in his youth, this beauty had wasted with the hardships of the past years. There were no creases now for his mouth to smile into.

The sound of steps surrounded him. The Ghost General appeared again before him, rejoining his master's side, looking at Jin Zixuan with white eyes. Jin Zixuan had never truly met Wen Ning, had not even known who he was before that day at the Golden Carp Tower, but there was recognition on the corpse's grey face.

Wen Ning, the Ghost General, the brother of Qishanwen's famous doctor Wen Qing; and the omega that Wei Wuxian had once accused Jin Zixun of raping and murdering.

He looked not the part of omega now, with his inhuman strength and lack of any scent, but there was a wariness to the way he moved around Jin Zixuan. As if he should fear Jin Zixuan attacking him rather than the other way around.

"Get them ready for departure," Wei Wuxian told Wen Ning, who nodded at him. "We need to reach the Burial Mounds before Jin Guangshan does."

"Yes, master."

The corpse of Wen Ning went back around, giving Jin Zixuan a wide berth.

"Pick up your sword, Jin Zixuan," Wei Wuxian said next. "Go back to your sect. Don't speak of this to anyone."

Jin Zixuan feared that Wei Wuxian would step back again when he advanced, but the man held his ground. He felt his eyes over his nape as he bent down to grab Suihua. Its pommel was still warm from the touch of Wei Wuxian's hand.

And then Wei Wuxian moved. His hand went to Chenqing again before falling limply; his shadowed face tensed and frowned, and he looked away from him.

He said, "Even if I did not have so many people relying on me now, even if I'd still been just another cultivator of the Jiang sect, I would have refused you."


But he knew better than to assume he had a right to the answer.

Wei Wuxian seemed to know what he wanted to ask anyway. "I would have refused anyone," he replied. "Regardless of any affections. And I never held any for you."

Wen Ning came again out of the cave, followed by four people, two of whom Jin Zixuan recognized faintly for having seen his father marry them. A man and a woman not much older than he or Wei Wuxian were; dressed in the finest silks but wearing the face of the hunted, holding on to each other shakily. Three horses were also led out of the tunnel in the hands of the Ghost General.

Wei Wuxian stepped toward them slowly. "I do thank you," he murmured when he was leveled with Jin Zixuan. "For coming here today, and for that time you came to stop your cousin from buying me.
I'll repay both of those debts one day."

"There are no debts for you to repay."

Wei Wuxian smiled.

It did not lighten his face or wash away the fatigue that had gnawed the weight and color off of him, but it was a smile. It was the first smile Jin Zixuan had seen on him since they were both children traipsing through the mud-and-snow-covered mountains of the Nightless City.

"The both of you always say this," Wei Wuxian murmured, turning his back to Jin Zixuan. "I fear the price of such kindness."

As he watched Wei Wuxian help three omega onto two of the horses, and then mount the least sturdy of them himself with the youngest against his front, Jin Zixuan thought of the archery competition in Qishan.

He recalled the moment he had seen Wei Wuxian arrive to the gathering in company of meek-looking man with light hair and eyes. He remembered the shock that had shaken the ranks of cultivators as the smell of honey lingered, deeper and more settled now than ever before—as they all realized that Wei Wuxian was not simply an odd omega among his superiors anymore, but a mature one.

How long Jin Zixuan had searched for him through the maze of rocks, how delighted he had been to find him alone and bow to him for the first time with his intent as clear as day—how Wei Wuxian had already shown then such a deep discomfort at being addressed this way.

And then the end of it, his father's congratulatory words at the top of the majestic stairs, while Zixuan's attention was caught to Jiang Fengmian and his disciples not far. The sight of Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen going away with their uncle, Wei Wuxian running after them with a smile on his bright face.

The sight of him bowing to the Lan sect heir, and Lan Wangji asking him not to.

It seemed to Jin Zixuan, now, that his loss had been secured that very day. That he should have realized as much long before he wandered alone through the woods of Phoenix Mountain, shocked and despaired after his words of love were met with such terror, guided by the sound of music. That he should not have been grieved to glimpse Wei Wuxian through the thick, intertwined trees: to see him sat there, lax and peaceful, his pale brow eased out of tension; and Lan Wangji playing songs by his side with the black flute to his lips.

It took them two days to reach the Burial Mounds again, and by that time the horses were weary and the omega even more so. Wen Ning held the one he carried with unending strength, with the lack of fatigue that death had granted him, but he was the only one in such health. Wei Wuxian's legs and back ached from the quick and tortuous journey through the mountains of Qishan. His soreness did not ease even when the terrain flattened into kinder hills.

He found the village at the foot of the hillpath swarmed with cultivators, and he found Jiang Cheng with Sandu yet sheathed waiting for him at the edges of the barriers.
He was arguing with a group in the muddy robes of the Ouyang sect. In fact he was arguing with Ouyang Zhi, who was screaming words of outrage to him until he saw Wei Wuxian emerge with his following in tow.

"The Yiling Patriarch!" he bellowed, half-feared and half-vindicated.

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng called in the very same breath.

But Wei Wuxian did not linger on what expression Jiang Cheng wore; he took Chenqing in hand without even dismounting, and called forth the corpses buried all around them.

They were out of the earth in a matter of seconds. Twenty, thirty of them, all in grievous states of decay, surrounding the Ouyang cultivators and those who had followed them. Many of them lost their composure before the ghastly sight and retreated on their own. Those who did not, the corpses flattened to the dirt and disarmed quickly.

Only Jiang Cheng was not attacked in any way. Still he looked at the spectacle around them in thin-veiled horror, and his eyes upon Wei Wuxian felt like a blade to the neck.

Wei Wuxian galloped to him quickly. He jumped off of the riled, frightened horse, helping the young omega boy down with him and giving him to Wen Ning. "You take them up to your sister now," he told him in a hurry. "I'll join you in a moment."

"Young master Wei—"

"Just go, Wen Ning."

Wen Ning may have gotten his spirit back, may be able to feel and speak and act of his own volition, but he was tied to Wei Wuxian inextricably. He could not disavow this bond or disobey the orders which Wei Wuxian carried through it.

Wei Wuxian had never wished to impose upon his will like this.

"You need to leave," he told Jiang Cheng after Wen Ning had gone and taken the four terrified omega with him. He went so far as to grab onto his former shidi's arm tightly, repeating, "You need to leave now, before Jin Guangshan arrives."

"And just let you die?" Jiang Cheng yelled back. "Do you have any idea the state Sister was in when that messenger from Lanling came?? You should be thanking Jin Zixuan on your knees for the risk he took for you."

Wei Wuxian gritted his teeth. "I have no time for this," he spat. "Just go back to Yunmeng. I don't need your help, I'm not part of your sect anymore."

Jiang Cheng tugged his arm out of Wei Wuxian's hold so violently that Wei Wuxian swerved on his feet and almost fell.

"You look like death, Wei Wuxian," he cried. "You think yourself so strong, you think you can just handle the Jin sect and its allies on your own, just you and a bunch of terrified omega—"

"I don't need to hear this," Wei Wuxian cut him off.

Then he turned his back to Jiang Cheng and started walking up the hill.

He was not surprised when Jiang Cheng followed in his steps. He was close enough as well that the
token of passage on Wei Wuxian's body encompassed him too, and allowed him behind the barriers that years of cultivation had laid thickly over the Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian heard him gasp at the difference in the air—as the poisoned, grimy quality of it suddenly turned breathable—but he did not stop.

He all but ran up the half-mile separating the path entrance from the village. He caught up with Wen Ning and the Jin sect omega, and helped to carry the slowest of them the rest of the way. Jiang Cheng remained silent in his fury the whole time.

Finally, they emerged to the village. A group had gathered already, worried for the commotion of cultivators in such numbers. Wen Qing was there trying to soothe them all, although she looked tense and worried as well. Her face lit up at the sight of him and Wen Ning, before falling in disbelief when she saw Jiang Cheng behind them.

She had no time to quiet anyone this time; the omega saw him, and smelled the overturned earth scent he carried with him, and all of them scurried away in fear, some shouting or whimpering, causing the child in Grandmother's tired arms to start wailing as well.

Not even this terrible wail, this gut-wrenching sound Wei Wuxian always so feared, was enough to still him this time. "Get him away from here," he snapped at Grandmother, who looked at him shock but obeyed wordlessly.

Wen Yuan's cries vanished slowly in the distance.

Wei Wuxian could feel that Jiang Cheng was deeply shocked at being met with such a reaction. He knew that if he were to look at him now and study his face, he would find it shattered.

But there was no time for this, and no time either for the guilt he felt at having betrayed all of them by bringing an unknown alpha here. "Wen Qing," he called.

She snapped out of her own stupor immediately. "What is going on, Wei Ying?" she asked him. "Why are so many people here? What did you do?"

"Jin Guangshan is about to lay siege on us all," was all he said.

Her face whitened.

Around her, the four Jin sect omega stood still and frightened. Even the woman Wei Wuxian had found near Jin Guangshan's private chamber of concubines, the one who had begged him for over a minute to take her with him, her terrorized face turned to the ground and her shaking hand pressed to her swelling belly, now looked full of regret.

He saw that she was about to speak. He could guess at what she meant to offer, that she would be willing to go back to her own tormentor if only to calm his belligerency, and he spoke before she could.

"The four of you go get settled now," he said, as kindly and evenly as he could. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll handle this."

"Young master Wei, if I—"

"Consort Jin," he cut in. "I swear to you, you will never again have to be in that man's presence. Please follow Wen Qing and try not to worry."

His own tension had gone entirely.
It was as though the simple sight of her, of all the people like her he had gathered over the years, were enough to suffuse his body with strength. He saw that some had come back after running, hiding within the shadow of houses or of the stables where the old Wen sect man ever-worked, peeping fearfully at the scene. Looking in fright toward Jiang Cheng.

"Wen Qing," Wei Wuxian said again.

His own fear was distant now. Like the echo of water dripping from the ceiling of a cave.

Wen Qing's teeth clenched visibly under the gentle slope of her jaw. "I'll be with you in a moment, Wei Ying," she replied. "Don't you do anything stupid until then."

Then there was only he and Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng had not said a word yet. The worst of his shock must be gone now, which was the only reason Wei Wuxian turned around to see him. He found him staring oddly at the houses and stables; at the wide vegetable gardens that would need to be harvested soon, and the rows of dyed fabrics drying on strings strung from flowering trees.

Springly light shone over him kindly, belying the anger ever-simmering within him. Still his voice was not so harsh when he said, "So this is where you live."

"Yes," Wei Wuxian replied.

He knew not why the word had to push out of his lips thusly, or why such vulnerability shook him, seeing Jiang Cheng standing here.

"You," Jiang Cheng started.

He paused. His face tensed and twisted, his eyes shining and wide despite it all.

"There's so…. there are so many of them," he said at last.

"One hundred and twenty-seven, exactly."

The number seemed to shake him greatly.

"I never—I thought people were exaggerating," he stuttered. "You never took anyone from Yunmeng, I thought…"

Wei Wuxian would have laughed, had he not felt so weary.

"There were none to take in Yunmeng," he replied. "All the omega houses there are empty. Either omega stopped being born there years ago, or more likely, people have grown clever at hiding them and marrying them in secret. I started searching in Yunmeng, after all. They must have taken precautions sooner than the rest."

Jiang Cheng took this in stride more calmly than Wei Wuxian had expected him to.

"And they all came with you willingly," he said. "They all wanted to come with you."

Wei Wuxian looked away. "I know you don't believe me, but yes. Every single one of them."

He tensed reflexively when Jiang Cheng stepped toward him; but Jiang Cheng did not attack him or insult him, and only laid a hand on his shoulder.
The memory of his embrace fitted itself to Wei Wuxian's mind and heart and made him want to pull away as much as it tried to bring him closer and feel it again.

"You're going to your death," Jiang Cheng told him, aggrieved. "Jin Guangshan is not Jin Zixun. People would look the other way if he killed you. Your..." He breathed in loudly. "Your status won't protect you now."

"It never has," Wei Wuxian said.

He saw the alarm on Jiang Cheng's face and pulled away.

"Just leave," he ordered, before his former shidi could ask anything more. His heart beat like drum under the fragile veil of his throat. "There's nothing you can do."

"I told you," Jiang Cheng retorted in fury. "I told you you're not allowed to die!"

"And I said you had no responsibility toward me now!" Wei Wuxian yelled. "I freed you of this, I told everyone I was no longer part of your sect, so you don't have to stay, you don't have to risk anything for me now—"

But Jiang Cheng was holding him by both shoulders now, forcing him to face him, to read over the man's face what he thought would be anger but looked instead like disbelief.

"Wei Wuxian," Jiang Cheng called, in that same voice he used in those woods years ago, when tears had marred him and Wen Chao whimpered and cried at their feet. "After all this time, you think I'm doing this out of a sense of duty? You think I came here because I care for the reputation of my sect?"

Wei Wuxian stared at him, at the marks of grief and exhaustion on him that should not be there at all. Jiang Cheng had his sister and clan back, he had a thriving sect despite the losses of the war—he had a golden core in his chest, shining with spiritual energy, even now giving Sandu a glow that filtered through the gap between scabbard and sword.

Jiang Cheng's face loosened with surprise at his lack of answer. He huffed something desperate, something like a laugh. "You truly don't know," he said in wonder. "You truly think so little of me."

His hands left Wei Wuxian's shoulders. One lingered by his arm, squeezing it briefly, and Jiang Cheng's face seemed to ache again to find it so thin, like his sister's did so long ago.

He said nothing of it, however. He stepped back and pulled away, and his other hand lifted to his chest in a gesture too recognizable for Wei Wuxian not to see white and step back reflexively.

Jiang Cheng stilled. His sharp face grew sharper still, awash with frustration. His hand fell again to his side, clenched into a fist.

"I didn't come here because I worry for Yunmengjiang," he said.

And it looked as though he would say more, as if he were bracing himself for it, vulnerable and scared as Wei Wuxian had never seen him; but then Wen Qing appeared from around the corner of the nearest house with a group of Wen sect people in tow, and Uncle Four called Wei Wuxian's title brightly.

Jiang Cheng grabbed the pommel of his sword. "I won't let you die," he said. "You're not allowed to die while I still have breath in me. I'll find a way—"
He took a breath. Unsheathed Sandu quickly and stepped over the blade of it.

"I'll find a way," he repeated. "I swear to you."

He flew away from them all before Wei Wuxian could even move.

Jin Guangshan's army spread around the hills not two days later.

Wei Wuxian had not appreciated just how many people could be gathered in such a place, just how many of them could be looking at him in such disgust and hatred, so much more potently than they had on Phoenix Mountain. As if dripping rage from the mouth like spit.

Jin Guangshan sat upon a gold-clad horse with his seldom-seen sword in hand. He brandished it toward Wei Wuxian the second Wei Wuxian appeared out of the protective barriers, followed by Wen Qing and the twenty people of the Wen sect he had taken with him so long ago.

He had not asked them to come. He had tried to forbid them to come, in fact. But Uncle Four and the others had smiled and shaken their heads, even the elderly.

"It's the least we can do," the stable man had said.

So now they stood around him, some of them even wearing robes sewn with crimson suns, and Wen Qing held in her hands one of the swords Wei Wuxian had stolen over the years.

"Affiliating with Wen dogs," Jin Guangshan sneered from his mount. His long sword pointed to Wei Wuxian, his weak face gone delighted with triumph. "See now the kind of person Wei Wuxian is?" he called loudly for the sake of his troops. "See what becomes of an omega left to roam freely? And he would like to raise an army of them to do his bidding!"

"Thief!" people clamored as an echo.

"Madman!"

"Give back what you stole, bearer!"

Wei Wuxian fit the two halves of the Stygian Tiger Seal together, and corpses sprung from the dry earth of Yiling, crowding the cultivators into stepping back.

But there were so many of them. So many rows of them armed with swords and bows, with instruments to repel the dark energy. They surrounded the hills as far as the eye could see.

"I'll take care of Jin Guangshan myself," he told Wen Qing coldly.

"Wei Ying, wait—"

He felt her despair as acutely as his own.

There was no coming out of this alive for any of them; still he would die before allowing any of these people entry.

Jin Guangshan did not seem scared of the terrible strength that Wei Wuxian gathered, or even of the
Ghost General Wen Ning who was now sending cultivators flying every way in a rampage. He watched Wei Wuxian approach from high upon his horse. His face in the sunlight seemed to change for a second, seemed to twist into the monstrous head of the Xuanwu of Slaughter, which Wei Wuxian had gone to face on his own much the same.

He almost expected to see Lan Wangji by his side, strangling the beast with bowstrings tied together, calling his name in worry.

"You will lose, you deranged omega," Jin Guangshan was saying now, his face the very picture of disgust. His hand clenched over the reins of his horse so tightly, Wei Wuxian fancied that he could hear the sound of knuckles cracking in the distance. "You will be captured and taken back to where you belong, and those you have stolen redistributed to their sects and families."

"So you don't actually intend to kill me, Jin Guangshan?" Wei Wuxian replied coldly. "And here I thought you couldn't prove yourself more cowardly."

Jin Guangshan reddened in rage, and his horse huffed under the kick he gave its sweaty flank, veering forth and sideways. "I have not sunk so low as to sully my hands with omega blood," he spat, "but who knows what could happen? Perhaps you may suffer the same fate as that pet ghost of yours."

Wei Wuxian called, "Wen Ning."

Wen Ning answered him as if he had whispered the words to his ear.

Cultivators fell. Cultivators died under the power of the Seal, for the first time since the Sunshot Campaign. Rows and rows of them put themselves between Jin Guangshan and he, blocking his way each time he tried to get close enough to the man to finally stop his continued living.

And Jin Guangshan sat on his horse in the distance, watching his people die for him, secure in the strength of his own numbers—knowing, as Wei Wuxian knew, that no man alone could hope to stop him now.

A man who had insulted him too many times to count since he was just a child. A man who had sheltered Jin Zixun, who had lived for so long with the reputation of one who liked to hoard Wei Wuxian's kin like mere possessions; who had put a child into the belly of his youngest concubine and left her crying to Wei Wuxian's knees, begging him to take her away.

She had broken out of her quarters herself after hearing the commotion in the Tower, after hearing his name. She had found him, barefooted and frightened, as he was about to leave; she had wanted so dearly to be taken as she had heard others were before her.

"Where's your son, Jin Guangshan," Wei Wuxian called as Wen Ning kicked away one more man trying to make a shield of his own body. "Did you bring him to life with the same violence that you did your many bastards? Is this why Madam Jin can't even stand the sight of you?"

"You mad thief," Jin Guangshan replied in rage, "rotten like your bitch of a mother, you should have been locked and left to starve before you could grow old enough to speak—"

Like Luo Fanghua and the forever bruise at her ankle, like Grandmother who had weeped so after walking into the sun, like Wen Linfeng sobbing into his lap as she related all her fears.

Like the old man in the Lotus Pier whose name Wei Wuxian had never known.

Sandu came down from the sky like the coming of storm, carrying with it the scent of lighting and
upturned earth, the acrid smell of a landslide.

Jiang Cheng was the one to parry away Wen Ning's attack this time. He hit his sword to the side of Wen Ning's chest and made the corpse sway aside, and he stood before Wei Wuxian with sweat shining over his brow, as if he had traveled across land and sea to get there in time.

"Wei Wuxian," he panted.

Wei Wuxian felt so cold. So very distant from his own self and feelings, so very numb to all but the wish to see Jin Guangshan dead. "Get out of my way," he replied. "Or I'll kill you too, Jiang Cheng."

No matter how the repercussions of such a thing would destroy him, no matter how much love even now tried to surge up his frozen heart at the side of the one he wished to call brother.

Wei Wuxian tugged Chenqing out of the strip of leather at his belt. He pointed it to Jiang Cheng with enough meaning to it that he felt the black tip of it should flatten, widen, lighten; take the shape and feeling of Suibian in his hand and make the hole in him fill again with a golden core.

But Jiang Cheng did not move. "Just look around you!" he howled.

Sandu swerved around him to show the battlefield, the decaying corpses and rage-lost cultivators, the Wen sect remnants crossing blades with enemies, Wen Qing herself caught in battle with a man twice her size.

"You can't win this! You'll die if you try to kill him, you'll lose everything you ever fought for!"

"Get out of my way," Wei Wuxian breathed.

Chenqing hit against Sandu's blade, so much weaker to such blows than Suibian ever was; not meant to be wielded in the way of the sword.

Wei Wuxian's hand shook badly. If Jiang Cheng meant to just push the flute out of his way, he could have, so easily. Wen Ning stood still by their side, his bond to Wei Wuxian telling him that this was foe at the same time as it told him that this person should never, ever be hurt. Jiang Cheng had no restraint to him if he should desire to put an end to it all.

But he did not. He stared at him in despair, heedless of Jin Guangshan at his back crying at him to finish it, to fix the mistake that his clan had brought in letting Wei Wuxian be raised under the sun.

"Get out of my way or kill me," Wei Wuxian said to him, pleading. Three years of exhaustion, of hanging onto nothing but the barest of threads, pushing the words out of his bleeding lips. "If I have to die here, Jiang Cheng, please be the one to kill me."

And for a second he saw before him not the man that Jiang Cheng had become, but the child he had met on the first day of his life in Yunmeng; the stubborn boy who looked at him so jealously, until Wei Wuxian first dragged him through mud and water to play and made his serious eyes widen and shine.

His first shidi. His first and only brother.

Sandu cut into Wei Wuxian's belly as if cutting through water. It plunged through him unfelt, emerged glistening with blood, shaking in Jiang Cheng's hold as if he were a second away from dropping it. Wei Wuxian did not immediately feel the pain of the wound or hear the agonized cry of his name that Wen Qing gave in the distance.
Then it spread through him, crushing, unbearable; and he fell to his knees in the mud and retched blood over the hem of Jiang Cheng’s robes.

He felt hands over his back immediately, heard Jiang Cheng’s voice call in a hurry—"Take him away, take him back up the hill now."

"Young master Wei!"

And other such words lost to the ringing in Wei Wuxian's head and the pulsing, awful pain in his middle. A pain he had not felt since the day he had lain in his own blood and sweat and pushed out of his body the parasite put there by Wen Chao.

He recognized Wen Ning's strength around his back and under his knees, the call of Wen Qing's voice asking for all to retreat back to the village. The two halves of the Stygian Tiger Seal came undone, now that he had no strength to keep power surging through it.

He felt tepid rain on his face, breathed in the smell of petrichor. He swayed in Wen Ning's careful hold, hearing the whispers of his name coming from those dead lips, from that airless throat. He opened hazy eyes in direction of Jiang Cheng, whose hold on Sandu trembled, whose face had wetted already with the rain and his tears.

He thought of the first touch Jiang Cheng had given him after his first fever; he thought of Jiang Cheng's hands around his throat in the aftermath of his parents' death; he thought of his embrace in the abandoned fort grown tight and stifling with relief.

He thought, Don't look at me.

Then he thought of nothing at all.

_________________________

There was music in the distance.

Songs from across the land, born up on the cool and clear mountains of Gusu. Old enough that the structure of sentences was barely more than a series of high and drawn-out notes infused with spiritual energy. The song changed and turned into another, echoing off of walls which must be made of stone smoothed over by time.

Lan Zhan, he thought; and he wanted, suddenly, for that song he had played as he lay in such a groggy state. For the sound of bowstrings pinched by bleeding fingers, and Lan Wangji's voice humming over the faint backdrop of stillwater.

But no such song came.

Wei Wuxian opened his eyes to the familiar ceiling of the bloodpool cave. For a second he did nothing but watch light stripe the ridges of stone overhead, but hear the unfelt fire crackling near him. One of the blankets sewn by Luo Fanghua rested over him.

The music stopped. A warm hand slid under the cover to grab his, practiced fingers pressing against the crook of his wrist to feel his pulse, and Wei Wuxian breathed in the scent of persimmon.

"You didn't need to," he told Wen Qing.
His voice came thin and easily broken, and the effort of speaking alone tugged at the wound left in his abdomen.

Wen Qing said nothing. He turned the head to look at her, quickly enough to catch the little flute she set on the floor by his side. She was not wearing the clothes he had last seen her in, and her face and hands were clean of dirt, of blood.

"How long?" he asked.

"Five days," she replied evenly.

So long, then. Longer than Wei Wuxian had ever slept before.

Long enough for everything to be taken from him.

Wen Qing must see how he tensed then, how he made as if to push out of the bedding and crawl his way outside the cave if he had to; her hands pushed his shoulders down harshly, and she told him, "Calm down. They're all fine. If you reopen that wound now after the work it took to fix you up, I'll kill you myself."

"We wouldn't want that," he said thinly.

She almost smiled. It almost looked as if she were crying. "No," she replied succinctly.

The rest was routine.

Wen Qing undressed his wound carefully, going so far as to bring torchlight closer for a better look of it. It must be nighttime, Wei Wuxian thought; the smells were different here after the moon rose, and the air that came in from the entrance of the cave was cooler. No light filtered under the curtain of furs they would soon take off for the summer.

"Sect leader Jiang was very careful how he stabbed you," Wen Qing said, palping the wound slowly.

Wei Wuxian did not look at it any more than he had the others—the Qishanwen brand or the line of core surgery, or even the shameful marks left by his once-stretched skin.

"He did not hit anything vital, or not much anyway. But your body is weak, and you've been pushing yourself more than ever lately. You caught an infection."

"You took care of it," he replied drowsily.

She gnawed at her own lips. "Your fever only broke yesterday," she said. "I wasn't sure you would wake up at all."

Perhaps it would have been better if he did not.

Wei Wuxian did not share those thoughts with her, knowing how she disliked his more maudlin moods. He allowed her to clean the wound and dress it again, and her fingers on his skin only felt the slightest bit maddening.

Wen Qing had more that she wanted to say. He knew it, and she knew that he knew, but she delayed anyway. She stepped away from him to put water to boil overfire. She remained there as the tea steeped, as she sorted out the drugs she would not doubt administer him, before scolding for not eating enough.
Wei Wuxian could not afford any more delays. "Just tell me," he said. "Just tell me how bad it is."

Wen Qing gnawed at her lips again. "It's not so bad," she replied. "Sect leader Jiang negotiated with Jin Guangshan for days, and they managed to come to an agreement. That as long as you never steal anyone again, and as long as you never attacked another cultivator, you can stay here. All of us can stay here."

Wei Wuxian scoffed, although the act pained him and cut his breath off. "I can't believe that's all there is to it."

"You were skewered on a sword in front of thousands. Many think that was punishment enough, considering your status. Jiang Wanyin is facing his lot of contempt for daring to do such a thing."

* I won't let you die. 

"And Jin Guangshan accepted this," he said, feeling dried out entirely. "He would just let me go after everything."

* There, he thought, watching the twinge of guilt in Wen Qing's ruthless face. There it is. 

"He wants his omega back," she admitted at last. "Especially the one pregnant with his child."

Rage simmered again under all the numbness. "He can't have her," Wei Wuxian replied. "I'm never giving her back to him, even if she begs me to."

"She did beg." Wen Qing's voice had gone soft with misery, with understanding; the glance she gave him then was too knowing for him not to avoid it. He looked again at the ceiling. "But she wasn't in her right mind, and her friend managed to make her see reason."

"What did Jin Guangshan have to say about this?" he asked roughly.

Wen Qing came back to his side. She took his hand in hers, not under any pretense of caring for his health this time—only to link their fingers together and try and share some warmth to him.

"He took a hostage for a hostage," she said quietly. "He required your shijie to live in Golden Carp Tower until the day you see fit to agree to his demands."

Wei Wuxian sobbed out a breath and covered his face with his hands, crushing it over his own eyes in hope of stoppering a flood he knew would not come any way.

He heard no word Wen Qing said after that—none of her soothing claims, none of the *It wasn't your fault*—nothing at all. He pressed onto his eyes until even darkness vanished under grey and red spots of pain, until the knot in his throat widened and cut out his airways, making him gasp, flaring pain through the wound Jiang Cheng had given him.

He tasted bile over his tongue, slick and warm, inescapable; but the bitterness he found there was only from his own failure.

Chapter End Notes

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Cheng don't get it yet but...... getting there. Oh boy.
I appreciate so much the number of people who are reading this story and sharing their enthusiasm with me about it, either in the comments here or on Tumblr. You guys are the best and I would have never imagined that ATC would get so popular and bring me so much joy, considering how painful the process of writing is. So please don't ever believe that I am ungrateful, because I'm not, and if I could date every single one of you I would. Well, maybe not the guys (are there guys reading this?) but I am lesbian and single *wink*

Anyway, what I wanted to say after this short disclaimer is: while I am always overjoyed by the amount of feedback I get, I sometimes also get a little hurt by some things. I know they are shared in good humor and not in any sort of negative way, which is why I try to always be polite and kind when I reply no matter how upset I am. But I thought it might be best to make a note about it? Yeah.

It has to do with some major themes of this story, mostly rape and unwanted pregnancy from rape. I'm sure I don't need to disclaim the reasons why I wish to write about those things in as kind and respectful a way as I can. You are all smart enough to guess. My point is, sometimes I get some comments which I know are in good faith and about nothing more than the story development—mostly comments about Wei Wuxian being "broken" or about how he needs to learn to love A-Yuan/Lan Wangji/etc.

These comments are very difficult to read for me for those personal reasons you can most definitely guess on your own, and I would like it if they would stop... I do not consider Wei Wuxian in ATC to be "broken", only deeply hurt and working through things as best he can. He doesn't need to be fixed, only to eventually find resolution for his issues and be able to move on more comfortably with life. Which he will. That's the whole goal of this story.

And more importantly, although we will definitely see development regarding his and A-Yuan's relationship, he will never be a parent to him. Never. I am aware that circumstances such as Wei Wuxian's lead to very many different reactions in families of all kinds, and that children born of rape can perfectly be loved by their parents as parents, but in this story, Wei Wuxian will never have a child other than A-Yuan, and he will never become a parental figure to him. Which doesn't mean that A-Yuan is not happy (in fact right now he is very spoiled and happy and clueless of anything). But Wei Wuxian's story in ATC is one of trying to have his own choices and trying to implement them, and this is one of his most important choices so far. He is actually handling the whole thing rather healthily, by keeping away from A-Yuan so that neither of them gets hurt.

That's all I really wanted to say... I don't like asking stuff like this because I know I am already lucky that people comment at all, and I really don't want the comment space on this story especially to be somewhere people feel stressed or feel that they are the target of hostility. I really do appreciate all the support I can get. I'm just asking this very selfishly for my own peace of mind while working through this very draining story—please be careful of the vocabulary you use to refer to Wei Wuxian or people in his situation, and please stop asking me to make him love A-Yuan. There is development ahead of us, I promise, and I hope you will find it satisfying.

Thank you very much for reading this story! Love you guys. Until the next chapter, and as always, I truly wouldn't have made it here if not for all your kind words.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Warnings: this chapter and the next are just TRAUMA in big capital letters. If you've read until now you know what to expect. Also, murder and gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

and the calm is deep where the quiet waters flow

Chapter 23

Autumn in Lanling City fell as golden and cool as the halls of the Tower. The last flowers of the clement seasons blossomed in the gardens, less fragrant for the lack of heat but no less beautiful. Hearths were lit in the chambers of the Jin clan and its guests, tended to hourly by servants.

Or perhaps not so, and Jiang Yanli was an exception.

It amused and worried her that they should feel the need to watch her so closely, she mused, looking at the back of the woman who had come to rekindle the fire. Jiang Cheng's words had halted as the door to her rooms opened; he was watching the woman too, although his face bore a frown of distaste she had never quite seen on him since the war.

The woman seemed scared of him as well. She avoided his gaze, bowing only in Yanli's direction and scurrying away wordlessly once her task was done. Jiang Yanli needed not ask what it was that made her so frightened. She had heard the whispers and the tale; she knew what they said of her brother.

She was honest enough to know, as well, that the shivers on her skin each time she remembered the sight of him covered in blood were due to shock as much as worry.

He had been so shaken. Pale and speechless, and Sandu in his hand still red and dripping.


Jiang Cheng did so reluctantly. He had been in such a mood since he arrived; somber and hesitant, and with guilt in his eyes no matter where he looked. He sat by Jiang Yanli's side with quite the room between them.

He grabbed the tea before him without bringing it to his lips, though they looked dry. Jiang Yanli frowned and shifted on her knees till she was by his side, till she could reach his face with her hand and stroke his cheek and forehead.

"Are you coming down with a cold?" she asked gently.

For a second, he looked as though he would push her away. His shoulders had become so wide in the past few years, and they tensed and shuddered in anticipation for movement.

But Jiang Cheng had never rejected her. Even when he took her hand in his to bring it down, his hold was gentle.
His thumb stroked the lighter patch of skin at her index—where Zidian had been until she was forced
to give it away.

"You shouldn't have asked me to come here," was all he said. "People will talk."

"I don't care about gossip," she replied. "What will they say anyway? That I miss my brother, and
want to see him?"

"You know they call me—"

Omega murderer. That was what they called him.

When Luo Qingyang had come to Yunmeng weeks ago, bearing a message from Jin Zixuan
informing them that his father meant to march upon the Burial Mounds of Yiling and take back
everything that Wei Wuxian stole, Jiang Cheng had been panicked. He had struck the dinner table
they were all sat around so harshly that Wen Linfeng had jumped in her seat with fright. He had left
without a word, taking only a travel cloak and his sword, and leaving Jiang Yanli to deal with the
three children around her who had gone pale and still.

She had not known what to do at the time. Like A-Cheng, she knew what the message did not say;
that Jin Guangshan had obtained so much power in the wake of the Sunshot Campaign that all
would turn a blind eye to his actions now. Who could say, after all, what truly happened in the midst
of battle? Who could predict every lost arrow, every blade held forward?

Who could say that Jin Guangshan meant to kill Wei Wuxian rather than capture him, if Wei Wuxian
simply found himself at the wrong end of a sword in the confusion of the fight?

But it was not Jin Guangshan whose sword Wei Wuxian was pierced by in view of hundreds of
eyes. And therefore it was not him who walked the halls of Lanlingjin's stronghold with whispers in
his trail.

"A-Xian is alive," Jiang Yanli said.

Jiang Cheng's hand shook around hers, trying to pull away, but she took hold of it before it could.
She brought it to rest in her own lap and stroked it soothingly.

"You've had news from maiden Wen, you know he survived. You know he'll be fine."

"I know," Jiang Cheng replied, almost spitting the words out. "He's always fine in the end, isn't he?
Not for lack of trying to die like a fool."

Jiang Yanli smiled, though her heart tightened painfully.

He had not told her what it was he had seen before or during the siege. Not even after she herself
arrived in Lanling to speak to Jin Zixuan, and Jiang Cheng had come back from Yiling and spoken
long and hard with the Jin sect heir.

She could guess, however, that it had not been easy for him to see; that Wei Wuxian probably looked
no better now than he had when she had last seen him in Phoenix Mountain.

A-Xian, she thought, not for the first time. What happened to you?

She should have asked him again, even if he did not wish to answer. She should have asked again
and again until he had no choice but to give her the truth; until this thick shell of indifference he had
grown during the war finally shattered and let her understand what had driven him so far from her.
"He hasn't been seen in weeks," A-Cheng said. "Some of the Wen sect remnants sometimes come and go from the hills to the village, that damned Ghost General always with them, but never Wei Wuxian."

"He must be recovering," Jiang Yanli replied, placating.

"I just don't understand. He knows you're here, he knows you're in danger—why won't he just give up that one omega? Why does he have to be so stubborn?"

"Did you see her?"

Jiang Cheng's face grew pained.

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli called again patiently. "Did you see consort Jin when you were there?"

"I did," he admitted at last.

"And how did she look? Did she seem like she wanted to come back here?"

She read the answer off of him without him having to give it to her.

Jiang Yanli smiled. She squeezed his hand in hers, feeling the warmth and pulse of it, comforting herself with it. "A-Xian has never been able to let go of someone in need of his help," she said. "Not when they were right in front of him."

Jiang Cheng took his hand back and replied, "Yet he could let go of you."

He looked ashamed for his words almost immediately, but he did not take them back. Jiang Yanli knew that her own face showed nothing either. No matter how much the truth ached in her.

"You don't need to worry about me," she told him. The tea they were served earlier had grown tepid; she took her cup in hand anyway, and stroked with a finger the thin engraving of a bird laid into the side of it. It held within its beak the very fine painting of a peony flower. "Madam Jin has been very good to me. She will not allow her husband to see me, and she never lets me dine alone."

"Sister—"

"Tell me about the children," she interrupted. "They must feel lonely."

A-Cheng's fingernails dug into the skin of his palms as he struggled not to question her for lies. But Jiang Yanli had told him nothing but the truth—Jin Guangshan had not seen her since the day he had come back from the siege, followed by Jiang Cheng and immediately hounded by him and Jin Zizhuan both into allowing Wei Wuxian to live. Jiang Yanli only had to give up so little to make sure he agreed.

Zidian, her last memento of her mother. Her sword which Yu Ziyuan had forged for and before her when she was just a child. The promise that she would never try to flee the grounds of Golden Carp Tower, for her doing so would ensure that Jin Guangshan marched once again upon the Yiling Patriarch's stronghold.

Her freedom.

How odd, that only now that she was rid of it, she found herself thinking of the black-wooded house at the edges of the Lotus Pier, and of the days neither she nor anyone else spoke of when Wei Wuxian had to be locked in it.
Jiang Cheng told her tales of the three Wen omega living in the Pier until evening came, cold and somber. She knew by the way he hesitated that he struggled to spend time with them at all; he had never liked to be close to them even when Wei Wuxian had been there with them all to curb Wen Yueying's bright personality and keep Wen Yiqian occupied. It must be difficult for him, to know that after Wei Wuxian and his sister had gone, the responsibility to care for their happiness fell to him.

She knew that Wen Linfeng must miss her terribly. The girl was so young still, immature and gentle, and she had grown used to meeting Jiang Yanli at night and speaking with her in soft voices. She was always so shy around Jiang Cheng, too. She must hide whenever he was around and not let him enquire after her well-being.

Servants avoided them as Jiang Yanli walked her brother back to the top of the white-and-gold stairs. She saw that he was looking at the wide hall there, as he did every time; that he must be remembering the day Wei Wuxian had made so many enemies and torn away from him for good.

The sound of footsteps reached them slowly as they looked over the height of the mountains around. Jiang Cheng turned his head aside immediately, but Jiang Yanli smelled the scent of pinecone and knew that she was safe.


Jin Zixuan nodded to him with both hands before him. "Sect leader Jiang," he replied. "My apologies for not greeting you sooner, I was busy elsewhere."

His father must have once more summoned him for a lecture.

Yanli bowed to him as well, smiling faintly at the nod he gave her. Jin Zixuan had been nothing but polite to her since his father had so rudely ordered for her to remain in the Tower, unarmed and unaccompanied. His behavior was much the same as it had been when she had run to him after the Lotus Pier fell; he greeted and spoke to her at least once a day, sometimes shared a meal with her and his mother, and otherwise made her life here as comfortable as was in his power.

The space at his hip where Suihua always rested was conspicuously empty. Jiang Yanli wondered, sometimes, if the place it was taken after being confiscated was the same as her own sword and Zidian. If the three weapons rested next to one another.

"Are you about to leave, then, sect leader?" asked Jin Zixuan.

"Yes," Jiang Cheng replied.

He seemed to struggle with himself for a moment longer. His brow furrowed and twisted before he could bring himself to speak again.

"I must… thank you, again, for your help." The words looked to be tearing themselves from him with pain. "If not for you," he added, "Wei Wuxian may be dead today. I'll make sure he knows this, one way or the other, and present you with his own apology one day."

If Jiang Yanli were more self-preserving, she would have kept looking downward as she was taught to in the presence of her betters; but this particular ache had never fully dimmed in her, and so she looked at Jin Zixuan's face.

She saw just how he stilled. She saw the way his throat shivered, the guilt washing briefly over his handsome face.
"There's no need for this," Jin Zixuan muttered, looking away. "I bid you goodbye, then."

Jiang Cheng, of course, had no idea. He turned to Jiang Yanli with a dark expression, one which Yanli doubted would dissipate even after she held him in her arms tightly. He gave her back her embrace tenfold. Her shoulders ached slightly where his upper arms pressed inward.

"Be careful," he murmured for her ears only.

He sounded so much like a little boy.

"Of course," she replied, stroking the hair over his nape. He pulled away from her, looking at her as always with emotion he had no words to express. She smiled at him. "Take care of yourself, A-Cheng," she said. "Tell the children I've gotten their letters and will be replying soon."

She and Jin Zixuan watched him fly over the mountains until he was but a speck of black in the distance; a grain of dust against the purpling sky.

It was no surprise to her when the Jin sect heir followed in her steps unasked, standing a little way behind her as she took the direction of the gardens. He had taken to walking with her like this when his mother could not, to make sure she wasn't lonely. Jiang Yanli felt no small measure of pleasure at this, and no small measure of guilt either.

"They will be withering soon," Jin Zixuan said softly.

She was standing before a massive bush of chrysanthemums. At his words, she stroked a yellow flower between index and thumb. "It's a shame," she replied. "I only saw the end of summer."

"They will flower again next year."

He must realize the implication of his own words—that she would still be trapped here a year ahead—for when she looked at him, he seemed guilty again.

He tried to smile at her. "I was lucky to first visit the Lotus Pier when the flowers were in bloom," he said. "I will never forget how beautiful the docks were that day."

Jiang Yanli's mouth lifted at the corners. Her eyes stung.

"Was it the docks that caught your eye then, young master Jin," she asked shakily; "or was it Wei Wuxian?"

Jin Zixuan tensed like a bowstring pulled by heavenly fingers. If she were still young, still the well-mannered child that her mother so coveted and her father liked to look away from, she would have taken her words back right then. She would have never uttered them in the first place.

But she was so tired. She was so lonely, so scared, so betrayed in her ugliest of hearts that for weeks now, A-Xian had not given sign of concession in spite of the threat on her life.

She had so longed to one day see Jin Zixuan look at her as he looked at Wei Wuxian.


But the words had left him. She could see it on his face.

Still, she smiled. Still she remained straight-backed and kind. "You don't have to lie to me," she said. "I've known for quite some time now."
His voice came roughly. "How? Were you the one who overheard…"

He stopped himself. Although he had known they were alone in the garden, he looked around them both. Jiang Yanli knew not what she was supposed to have overheard, but the worry on his face made her decide to end his plight.

"I knew on the day you came with me to stop your cousin from buying his hand," she told him. "Even though he was so awkward in those clothes, you looked at him in such a way…"

Jin Zixuan's face grew red and miserable, halting her before she could finish.

"I do not believe he ever noticed, if that is your worry," she added softly. "A-Xian is… he was never very good at recognizing those things."

Wei Wuxian had never been able to see that he was worthy of such feelings. Even before the war, even before the fevers which had so shaken him. As a child, he only spoke of love to her in the farthest of hypotheticals. Jiang Yanli could hardly imagine that he was any better at it now, with how different he had looked the last time they had met.

Jin Zixuan could not meet her eyes anymore. "I know this," he said.

The words, said in such a defeated tone, dried at her throat. "Have you spoken to him about it?" she asked. She tried so hard to keep her voice even, yet it broke at the end and made her taste bitterness.

She saw the answer in the way he moved; in the hand in flexed and then opened at the empty space by his hip, and the shaking of his throat over a painful swallow.

She breathed out a short, silent laugh. She turned her back to him so that he would not see how her eyes shone. "Well," she forced out. "I can't imagine that he took it very well."

His silence said it all.

Such bitter, bitter jealousy, so much bitterer now than it had been on the day she had come to Lanling begging for help. Even then the sight of Jin Zixuan's concern for Wei Wuxian had hurt her deeply, for she knew that Wei Wuxian had asked for none of it, that his status was more of a burden to him than anything else. And now in the aftermath of near-war, after her own brother had had to stab Wei Wuxian, she still found it in herself to grieve.

She was such a silly girl. A silly girl in her mother's armory, watching her show the precious collection of blades and bows she had amassed over the years; a silly girl in front of her father, who looked at the honey-scented child before him as if he were his own.

She breathed in deeply to quiet the pressure in her chest. Air itself came to her shakily, almost hesitantly. She said, "You don't have to tell me anything. Though, for your sake, I wish that things were different."

"I swore that I would speak of it to no one."

It almost made her smile. Of course Wei Wuxian would think this a terrible secret to hide.

Little by little, her heartbeats eased. Her fingers relaxed over the edge of the flowerbeds before her. The peonies and plum flowers there had turned darker with the coming of night, their petals closing together. She picked the largest she found between two fingers and cut its stem with a nail. It was still wet from the morning's rain.
"Maiden Jiang," Jin Zixuan said. She heard him approach her, saw him take place by her side, his back as straight as a ruler. "I must apologize for how I treated you when we were younger. I was only a child frustrated by my circumstances, but I should have known better. You did not choose to be betrothed to me either."

"I never minded," Jiang Yanli replied.

She felt more than saw his surprise as his arm jumped nearby hers.

"A-Xian and yourself have more in common than he thinks," she said. "The both of you are proud and rather difficult to approach. You are both better cultivators than most… and neither of you is very aware of others' feelings toward you."

"Maiden Jiang, I—"

"Do you still love him?"

She looked at him. She braced herself atop the bannister, readying herself for meeting his eyes and trying to decipher a lie in them.

But Jin Zixuan did not give her one. "Yes," he said roughly. "However, I…"

He interrupted himself without her input this time. She once more saw his neck tremble as he worked through his own misery.

"I know that those feelings will lead nowhere at all," he declared at last. "And I do not intend to pursue them any further."

He looked so sincere. He looked a moment away from putting a hand over his heart solemnly.

"Good, then," Jiang Yanli smiled.

In his surprise, Jin Zixuan did not pull back from the hand she had wrapped around his wrist. Yanli herself hardly felt the fear that such boldness should have brought in her; she was always such a shy girl, always so quick to fall silent and let confrontation slide over her unseen, yet now she took his hand. Now she held a thumb against the veins in his wrist where his own heart beat slow and strong.

With the other, she put the peony in it. She closed his fingers around it until the petals bent, until she was certain that he would not let it fall. She took her shaking hands back.

"Maybe one day you'll look around you," she told him, "and notice that you, too, are loved."

---

On the first day of spring, on the third year since Wei Wuxian had started living at the Burial Mounds, Wen Qing came to get him inside the bloodpool cave.

She pushed aside the drapes keeping the cool wind out. She sneezed as she often did when the moonless flowers were in full bloom and nearly ready to be picked and dried, having no love for the bitter smell or taste of them. She found him sat against a wall at the far end, nearby the red pool whose light never really dimmed—and even now traversed his closed eyelids and painted his darkness crimson.
She called his name: "Wei Ying."

Wei Wuxian blinked slowly, carefully; like one blinked after the deepest of sleeps, one moment gone and the next here. The bodiliness of breathing reached him. The weight of arms and legs hung upon him once more. His neck bent under his own head before he found the strength to lift it.

Wen Qing stood silently as she waited for him to emerge. Dressed in the cloak she wore only for travelling to the village, her boots muddy and her hair swept by the wind. Only when the breath left his lips audibly did she speak up again.

"For your information," she said, "you've been in here for three days."

This would be the reason why he felt so heavy, then.

Wei Wuxian said nothing, knowing that his throat was dry and his voice weak. He pressed a hand to Chenqing at his hip thoughtlessly; then he pushed against the stone ground to kneel and stand.

His eyesight ran dark and painful as soon as he was upright, but he did not sway.

"I won't bother asking if you've eaten," Wen Qing said. "All the food A-Ning left you is still here."

"Wen Ning came?" Wei Wuxian couldn't help but ask.

As expected, his words were nothing more than whispers.

Wen Qing's lips thinned. "Of course he did," she replied. "He worries for you."

"I'm fine."

"Keep your lies for the others, Wei Ying, not me."

He had not even the energy to argue with her.

Still, he followed her outside, barely blinking when sunlight shone into his eyes. Everywhere he looked for the past few months had taken on a dark tinge, as though a see-through veil rested over his eyes. Even now, in the middle of day, the village around him looked to be shrouded by dusk.

He realized too late that Wen Qing was calling his name again. "What is it?" he asked tiredly.

Her mouth closed. He thought faintly that he should feel something less distant at the sight of her worry, or at the sound of anger on her voice when she replied, "Luo Fanghua said she wanted you to deliver the new batch of clothes to the village."

"Luo Fanghua?"

"Yes," Wen Qing snapped. "Do you still remember her, or has your mind rotted away in that cave of yours?"

A moment passed. Wind shivered through the newborn foliage of trees.

Wei Wuxian exhaled. "Of course I remember her," he said. He pressed a hand over his eyes, rubbing at them futilely. It did not rid him of the darkness, but it made him feel a little more present. "I just wonder why. Usually she's fine asking Uncle Four or someone else to do it."

"Well, she thinks you might need the fresh air. We all do."
Would that he could argue her words, but already eyes were turned to them. Already he could see some people near the closest houses knock on doors a little way farther and pointing in his direction.

They wore smiles when they looked at him. They looked relieved at his presence.

Wei Wuxian turned his back to the village. "Just get your uncles to do it as usual," he told Wen Qing. "I've got better things to do."

He tried to walk past her, but she blocked his way.

"No you don't," she said. Wei Wuxian stared fixedly at the arm she had lifted before him; a second later it lowered, and Wen Qing's hand grabbed his wrist instead. "You haven't gone outside in months," she added. "I think you've had quite enough time to wallow in your misery. Get yourself cleaned up and go deliver those clothes."

"Have you forgotten there are about twenty cultivators between here and the valley ready to pounce on me?" he asked between his teeth.

He tried to shake her hand off of him. She squeezed even tighter in answer, looking a second away from yelling at him, but then the sound of high-pitched laughter reached them. She let go reflexively, her worry taking over her frustration in a second.

But not even that laughter could still him now. Wei Wuxian took his hand back and looked briefly at the running silhouette of Wen Yuan in the distance.

Wen Qing sighed. "Going to the village is not breaking any of the rules Jin Guangshan set," she said. "Go take a walk. I need to harvest the flowers anyway, we'll soon run out of the tea."

"You know I like to do that," he replied.

"Then be back before I'm done," she retorted. "And take A-Ning with you."

There was no arguing with her even if he had the will to.

The masons of the Wen sect had built a bath house over the river a year and a half ago. Half of it served to dye and wash the fabrics that Luo Fanghua and her assistants worked with daily; the other was a series of narrow tubs, separated by wooden walls, heated with stones left overfire. Wei Wuxian disliked going there during the day, when he ran the risk of meeting someone else, but today his feet took him to the entrance by themselves.

He washed himself quickly, scrubbing succinctly at his skin, looking nowhere but straight ahead the whole time. Even with the steam around him, the heavy smell of dyes permeated the air. He changed into cleaner clothes than the one he had taken off and walked again outside before he was completely dry.

Luo Fanghua awaited him by the end of the hillpath, a pile of folded clothing twice as big as she was set atop the cart that they all used for such travels. Her face was closed-off as always, although her eyes belied no anger toward him. Wei Wuxian felt himself nod to her in greeting, and then to Wen Ning standing by her.

"I'm sorry for my sister, young master Wei," Wen Ning said as they began to descend down the sloping tracks. "She should not have bothered you with this."

He was pulling the cart with his bare hands. Wei Wuxian could remember a time when he insisted that horses do the job instead, feeling faintly ill at the sight of Wen Ning doing such work, before he
understood that Wen Ning enjoyed it.

Considering the other kind of work Wei Wuxian once had him do, it was all-too-easy to see why.

"No need for apologies," Wei Wuxian replied.

He fit his back more comfortably against the clothes. Shadows emerged in his eyesight every time he blinked, sweeping between tombstones and dead trees like ghosts.

"I've had nothing to do for months but wallow in my failure."

"No one thinks you failed," Wen Ning said softly.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. He tasted bitterness as he thought of his shijie; as he thought, also, of the now-heavily pregnant omega living in the same house as Wen Qing and Grandmother.

"At least our little friends should get something to report out of this," he replied at last. He blinked. Laughed dryly. "The Yiling Patriarch, deliverer of homemade goods," he added. "I hope Jin Guangshan gets a laugh out of it."

He had no need for good eyesight to feel the presence of cultivators near and far.

Wei Wuxian tried to lie down over the cart. He tried to watch the blue sky over them, rendered purple by the diminishing of his eyes through the past months, and to make sense of the shape of clouds as he did as a child. This memory seemed so far from himself now that it may as well belong to another life entirely—a little Wei Ying on the docks of Yunmeng, laid over old wood with his naked feet in the river. Arguing with his shijie and shidi over one thing or the next. Heedless of the years that were to come to him.

He could almost see his own face in that half-somnolence; and Wei Wuxian thought for a moment that he did, before he realized that such a face was above his; that grey eyes peered down at him from above the edge of one of the wide clay pots the cart always carried.

He was wide awake, now. The breath caught painfully in his lungs, his fingers near-spasming with fright. Above him, Wen Yuan rubbed his nose with one small hand, looking down on him in curiosity.

He called, "Uncle."

Wei Wuxian grabbed the edge of the cart with one shaking hand, feeling splinters lodge themselves in his skin with the strength of his hold, and hoisted himself off of it entirely.

It had rained the day before, and the soil was muddy. His boots slipped over it before he caught himself on the bark of a dead tree. He vaguely saw the cart halt after he had hopped off of it—vaguely heard Wen Ning call his name in worry, vaguely saw the child climb out of the pot he had been in all along—

"A-Yuan," Wen Ning said in surprise, "what are you doing here?"

"You didn't find me," said the child.

His words were so much clearer now than that time in the bloodpool cave. Almost eloquent.

Wei Wuxian turned his back to them. He leaned against the tree, closing his eyes, breathing forcefully out of his mouth. Cold tendrils of energy roamed over his skin, ever-responsive to his
moods, but he chased them away. It would not do to cause Wen Ning to lose his control now.

When at last he felt that he would not be sick, he pushed himself upright once more.

Wen Ning and the child were speaking to each other slowly. They turned to face him almost as one, and Wei Wuxian once more had to hold his breath or risk faltering where he stood.

"I'm sorry, young master," Wen Ning said softly. "A-Yuan and I were playing hide and seek before we left… I didn't know he was hidden in the cart."

"You didn't find me," Wen Yuan repeated proudly.

As he said it, his hands grabbed the long ends of Wen Ning's hair and pulled. Wen Ning seemed to suffer the treatment habitually, and wasted no time before pulling the child's fingers out of his hair, a vaguely scolding expression on his face.

Wen Yuan laughed.

Wei Wuxian wanted to vanish on the spot.

"Should I take him back, master?" Wen Ning asked.

One did not need to be as apt as Wei Wuxian was at reading him to know that he was concerned. Wei Wuxian had no idea if Wen Qing had told him anything of Wen Yuan's origins, had no idea even if Wen Ning suspected anything was wrong between himself and Wen Yuan…

But they were close to the village already. Going back now would mean a delay of another few hours. And if Wen Ning ran back with the child by himself, Wei Wuxian did not know that the owner of the eyes he had felt on them all along would not try to attack him.

He could not afford to slip up and hurt one of them.

"No," he said roughly. "I'll just—"

_I'll just walk ahead_, he meant to say; but his eyes met Wen Yuan's again inescapably, and the words died on his tongue.

"Uncle," the child said again.

"Don't call me that," Wei Wuxian snapped.

Wen Yuan's face fell. His fingers loosened within the strands of Wen Ning's hair he was still grabbing tightly. "Then what do I call you?" he asked.

It felt like a nightmare. All of it. Wei Wuxian realized slowly, thickly, that he had never before thought of Wen Yuan as more than a shadow in the corner of his eyes; that the child had never been more to him than the threat of cries or laughter, the sound of a voice and the shape of a small body.

Not words, not _conversation_. Not the bright gleam of intelligence in grey and lively eyes.

"You don't call me," he choked, and he had no idea if the child heard at all.

"Come here, A-Yuan," said Wen Ning, offering his back to the child rather than let him to his own devices over the cart.

Wei Wuxian walked past them and led them the rest of the way toward the village, trying the whole
time to hear nothing but the slow beat of his own blood.

They found the town bustling with activity as always. It had grown these past few years, and the merchant that Wei Wuxian sold Luo Fanghua's work to had rebuilt his shop right at the center of it, twice as big as before. It was there that he headed after Wen Ning put a wide hat over his head to hide the pallor of his skin. A strip of cloth was wound around his neck in spite of the warm day, in order to disguise the black veins running there.

Wei Wuxian left Wen Ning and the child outside as he greeted the man. He watched him unfold and examine the clothes and gauge the price he would pay for them unseeingly.

"Been a while since we saw you here."

The man's words came thinly to Wei Wuxian's ears. In the lapse of time it took him to react to them, the man had re-folded the silken robes he was holding and put down the glass he used to magnify his sight.

"I've got some more fabrics for that little seamstress of yours to look at, if she wants," the man went on, now that Wei Wuxian was looking at him. "They're just waiting in the back of the shop. It's been months now since I got them."

"You could have given them to one of the others," Wei Wuxian said slowly.

The man gave a laugh that sounded like a cough, raucous and disagreeable. "I don't trust that lot half as much as I trust you," he replied. "Just wait here a moment, little master. I'll be back with the samples."

He rose from the chair heavily, awkwardly. The rainy beta-scent of him lingered for a moment before vanishing, as did his thickset body vanish behind the drape keeping the backroom from view.

Wei Wuxian was seated in an alcove near the rear of the shop itself. From here he was mostly unseen, but he could see well, and he saw that a few people were roaming the rows of fabrics and clothes, speaking with ease to the owner's husband who was helping them make their choice. He realized that they wore travel cloaks and boots, and that the horses tied to the front of the shop must belong to them.

"Noticing now, are you?"

Wei Wuxian looked aside; the man had come back with strips of fabric in hand, tied together with string, and a bag full of noisy coins. He placed both before Wei Wuxian on the table.

"Where did they come from?" Wei Wuxian asked, lifting a hand to take them.

"Far and wide. This shop has gained quite the reputation since you started coming here." The man sat with a loud grunt. He continued, "Such fine sewing in such a place… well, they do say the touch of an omega is the most delicate of all."

Wei Wuxian stilled with his hand over the money pouch. He looked at the man in silence, feeling the air freeze over him, feeling the hole within his chest glow with power.

The man did not look afraid. "Your eyes are red now, little master," he said evenly. "I would calm down if I were you. There's been news that an immortal cultivator came last night to chase away some spirits."

After another moment of stillness, Wei Wuxian dragged the fabrics and money to him. He opened
the pouch to count the coins, never fully looking away from the one before him. Once he was done, he hid it in his sleeve near one half of the Stygian Tiger Seal. Then he asked darkly, "How many know?"

"Hard to say. We're not the brightest bunch, are we?" The man laughed his raucous laugh again, drawing toward him the fond eyes of his husband, which rested over Wei Wuxian quickly before looking away. "But I would wager most of the shops you've done business with for food or clothing have a hunch. They don't care, either."

"I rather doubt that," Wei Wuxian said.

The man shrugged. He leaned back onto his bench until his wide back touched the wall. "As long as money is good, we don't much care where it comes from," he replied. "And I suppose there's some pride in doing business with the Yiling Patriarch, what with all the folks who come here looking for you, spreading all those tales."

Wei Wuxian should deny this, should pretend to be nothing more than a merchant. He should leave the shop now, take Wen Ning and Wen Yuan and hurry back up the hills until he was safely behind his barriers again.

Instead he said, "Perhaps there's some truth to the tales."

"What does it matter to me anyway if there is," the man retorted. "Me and my husband, we're not like those cultivation sects. We couldn't afford an omega even if we wanted one, and none's been born here in decades. As far as I'm concerned, you can rob them all you want."

"I'll take my leave now."

The man showed no anger or disappointment. He watched Wei Wuxian rise from his seat in silence, his broad face as somber as always in spite of his smiles, his beta-scent clinging to him faintly, as it did all people who shared his status.

Sunlight did not blind Wei Wuxian under the veil of his own impoverished sight. He walked past the horses tied to the front of the shop, looking slowly around for a trace of Wen Ning and the child.

The cart was where he had left it, but Wen Ning was nowhere in sight.

He frowned. "Wen Ning?" he called through the bond tying them together.

He felt an echo of acknowledgement to the right, where the broadest street of the village extended toward an inn and tavern and a quick-running river. He stepped in that direction without feeling any of the people who walked past him, carrying donkeys and horses or pushing forth carts full of straw and other goods.

He found Wen Ning in the narrow space between two houses, standing awkwardly in the shade, looking at him with guilt.

He was alone.

"Young master Wei," Wen Ning whimpered. "I'm sorry, I—I lost sight of A-Yuan. I looked away for a moment, and then…"

Wei Wuxian remained still and wordless for a moment longer. There was a pulse to his chest, he felt, though it seemed that all it did carry was emptiness. Shadows swarmed the edges of his sight.
"Let's just," he tried to say. His mouth was dry. "Let's look for him," he managed. "Then get away from this place."

"Yes," Wen Ning murmured.

They separated to cover more of the village more quickly, and all the time Wei Wuxian walked his chest constricted and beat voidly, vanishing sound and sight alike as his boots crushed dirt and grass under their soles. He felt that he was walking on air rather than ground, that perhaps the valley should wash from beneath him as if he flew over it on a sword.

How far could such a young child have wandered on his own? He was so short still. He had hidden his whole body in the pot over the cart, and it must have been a rather easy fit, considering the time he allowed to let go before making his presence known. How old was…

How old was Wen Yuan?

Wei Wuxian stopped in the middle of the street, causing those next and behind him to voice their annoyance. He heard none of their words, so taken was he by the fact that he could no longer count the number of seasons. The aches of labor had never fully left him, the feel of blood and fluid over his legs never entirely washed away. He could still hear Wen Qing's voice, her dreadful calm as she told him what to do even as he forgot to breathe, as she had to slap his face to make him tense and push; as his whole body finally detached from him and felt no more familiar than a lump of formless clay.

He could not remember how long ago he had woken in that inn and wanted so dearly to have died.

The air he breathed now felt like ice. The light around him dimmed in the way of winter twilight, quick and all-encompassing, as if any second now the moon should rise and bring about snowfall. Wei Wuxian marched on through the wide street, searching for the alpha-scent of petrichor as much as he dreaded it, seeing nothing around him but blackness.

Yet petrichor was not the first familiar scent he found; instead his nose filled with the first warm breath of sandalwood, and when his blind eyes rose to see before himself, an expanse of white shone in the midst of so many shadows.

As he blinked, as the light came back to him in increments, Wei Wuxian recalled the shop owner's words: "An immortal cultivator came last night to chase away some spirits."

Lan Wangji certainly looked the part of an immortal, even as confused as he was in the middle of a staring crowd—even with a child hugging his leg and beginning to cry loudly.

Wen Ning, Wei Wuxian thought.

Wen Ning's awareness came to him within a minute. He spent it looking from a distance as murmurs shivered over the crowd. Wen Yuan cried over Lan Wangji's leg; Lan Wangji looked at a loss for what to do; a woman near them said, "Be kinder to your son, master."

Wei Wuxian rubbed a hand over his face and tried not to let sickness rush up his throat.

The awkward Wen Ning was here soon enough. He came to Wei Wuxian's side in confusion, before taking in the spectacle in the middle of street. Then he called, "A-Yuan," gently, and went to retrieve the child from Lan Wangji's side.

Lan Wangji saw him, and he was not as easily fooled as the villagers by a wide hat and a scarf. He must have noticed the color of Wen Ning's skin and the ever-cold aura around him. One of his pale
hand grabbed Bichen's pommel, and the other took hold of Wen Yuan's collar, ready to pull him out of harm's way.

Wei Wuxian forced out, "Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji's head immediately turned in his direction.

Perhaps it would have been unneeded, as Wen Yuan himself cried even louder at the sight of Wen Ning and finally released Lan Wangji's robes to throw himself into the corpse's arms. Either way the child was retrieved, and Lan Wangji now looked at Wei Wuxian with wide eyes.

Wei Wuxian approached carefully. "Don't you have better things to do?" he asked the small crowd around the street, who looked at him in rancor and went reluctantly back to their tasks.

Soon enough they stood alone, and Lan Wangji spoke at last: "Wei Ying."

It was Wen Ning who replied to him rather than Wei Wuxian, whose tongue seemed to be caught within his dry, dry mouth. "Thank you for finding him, young master Lan," he said softly. "We've been looking for him."

He rocked the child once in his arms, and Wen Yuan added a small, "Sorry."

Lan Wangji seemed not to mind at all that part of his ever-clean uniform now bore little handprints in dirt. "He found me," was all he said, looking not at Wen Ning but at the child he held; and then staring at Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian could not meet his eyes.

"Wen Ning, you go back to the cart now," he said hoarsely. "You take—"

But the name could not leave his lips, and anyway Wen Ning obeyed as he always did. Perhaps such an order had carried over the bond they had, impossible for him not to comply with, through the strength of Wei Wuxian's discomfort.

He walked away, Wen Yuan still held against his front carefully.

Wei Wuxian exhaled only after they were gone from his sight. "What are you doing here, Lan Zhan?" he asked.


It was a long second before Wei Wuxian's confusion made way for understanding; before he remembered the woods atop Phoenix Mountain, and the songs Lan Wangji had played for him there.

Indeed Lan Wangji's guqin was strapped to his back in soft grey cloth, the very same that seemed to carry more items at his waist.

"You look surprised," said Lan Wangji.

"Shouldn't I be?" Wei Wuxian replied after a brief silence. "We are far from Gusu. You came here without warning, in spite of…"

In spite of the the warning hanging heavily over Wei Wuxian's head in the shape of Jin Guangshan's army.
But instead of saying anything about this, Lan Wangji told him, "I met maiden Wen this morning. She said she would tell you."

Anger thrummed through Wei Wuxian for a bare second, vulnerable and betrayed; but he knew like Wen Qing must that had she told him the truth of why she wanted him in the village, he would never have come.

He sighed. His chest felt pained and slow. He gave a look to the man beside him, whose eyes had not drifted from Wei Wuxian's face since he had heard his call earlier. His presence alone seemed to chase away the shadows clinging to Wei Wuxian's sight. As if light poured out of his skin rather than the sky above.

"You shouldn't be here," he told him. "There are too many eyes on me now."

Even now he felt them, roaming over his limbs like the footprints of insects.

"People will accuse you of treason. Don't you care what your brother or uncle will say?"

"No," Lan Wangji replied.

No more, no less. As stubborn now as he was on the day they met, and he attacked Wei Wuxian over the outer wall of the Cloud Recesses for bringing in liquor.

Some echo of a smile lifted Wei Wuxian's lips. "Let the Yiling Patriarch treat you to a meal, then," he said. "Or whatever excuse for a meal is served here."

He took a few steps toward the entrance of the inn close by, but Lan Wangji remained where he stood.

His head was turned to the long street beside him that Wen Ning had traversed as he left.

"This child," he said; and Wei Wuxian's empty veins iced and stilled.

The lump of clay of his body weighed so much in that instant that he felt he ought to gather upon the ground like thick mud, to lose shape and will and then solidify as he was. If a cultivator had come right then to take his head, he would not have had the strength to lift an arm and take Chenqing in hand.

The silence that followed was the longest of Wei Wuxian's life. He spent it feeling like the knoll of a freshly-dug grave.

Lan Wangji said no more. He walked to Wei Wuxian's level and then past him, into the inn's doorframe; and Wei Wuxian thought for a terrible moment that he would not look back. That the picture of his back disappearing into shadow would be the last he saw of him.

But Lan Wangji held the door open for him. He looked him in the eye in silence, his outstretched arm the same as the one Wei Wuxian had offered him years ago.

The inn was quiet and deserted in the hours of mid-afternoon. All who would come here to drink would do so later at night, and what few were seated were travelers, weary and gaunt, wrapped in long cloaks stained with dust.

"You don't drink, do you," Wei Wuxian said after they were served. The liquor sold here was strong, yellow in color, as bitter as it was sweet. He downed a cup of it before he was able to speak, and another after his question.
"Alcohol is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses," Lan Wangji replied calmly.

Wei Wuxian mourned that he could no longer recall what a young Lan Wangji had looked like, saying those words to him for the first time.

"It's just as well. The one I brew in the Burial Mounds tastes much better."

Lan Wangji's brow broke out of its smooth exterior and into a single crease. "Alcohol is a good way to keep warm," he said slowly. "In winter."

"You don't have to be polite with me," Wei Wuxian replied, smiling faintly. "I've been aware of your disapproval for many years."

The frown on Lan Wangji's forehead only worsened, though his gaze was kind.

Wei Wuxian drank more of the bitter liquor, wiping the spill of it at the corner of his mouth with a sleeve. It had been a while since he got to indulge, as the alcohol in the bloodpool cave could only be made in small quantities and had to be shared in-between all of them. If Lan Wangji intended to remain desperately sober, then he would drink his fill.

To his surprise, Lan Wangji did not berate him for it. In fact he pushed the jar set by his side of the table toward Wei Wuxian without a word. It threatened to topple after knocking into a hole of the wood, and Wei Wuxian caught it by the neck, his fingers brushing Lan Wangji's in the movement. The man drew his away slowly.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian said when it became evident that Lan Wangji was set on remaining silent. "Show me the music you brought."

It was a second before Lan Wangji moved to open the cloth tied at his waist. He handed him a stack of paper, each sheet covered in minutious writing.

Wei Wuxian spent a while shuffling through the different songs, humming some of them to make them easier to remember later, trying not to show just how grateful he was. Wen Qing had played the ones he had badly taught her many times, and each had given his heart less peace over the years. Perhaps these would bring him some more of the quiet he had found when Lan Wangji played them.

"I won't be able to remember all of these," he said mournfully. "But thank you. I think the simplest ones will stick."

"You can keep them."

Wei Wuxian looked up from the papers in his lap.

Lan Wangji had his head turned to the table between them, one hand delicately wrapped around the tea he had yet to bring to his lips. The tips of his ears had gone red in the stuffy air of the inn.

"They are copies," he said. "You can keep them."

"Copies?"

Lan Wangji nodded. His fingers twitched around the porcelain before his grip loosened.

Wei Wuxian stared once more at the sheets he was holding, noticing now that every stroke of ink on paper was even no matter which he read; that the same hand must have drawn all of them.

"Did you copy all of these yourself?" he asked.
Wei Wuxian's fingers ran over the smooth, expensive paper, the very same that he had scribbled on a lifetime ago in punishment. The same he had drawn Lan Wangji's portrait on, lost in contemplation for the boy before him who withstood silence and immobility so easily.

It had been so long since Wei Wuxian drew anything that wasn't a spell array, since he picked up a brush for something other than formulæ or the occasional note about his aimless life. He had not even done this much since Jin Guangshan had laid siege on him. Each day he spent in the bloodpool cave became two or three before he had the time to breathe; and he could not recall what he did during them, in-between the moments of clarity that shook his head and lungs.

He felt the sudden need to push paper to wood, to rub ink to inkstone, to feel the smooth length of a brush in-between his fingers. He felt that he could paint Lan Wangji like this; that he could once more attempt to catch the light emanating out of him and try and translate it the only way he knew. The only way he used to know.

But his fingers were awkward now, bent into the shape of flute-playing and not painting, out of practice and out of time. Already the light outside had dimmed, and his own sight with it. Lan Wangji before him was but a spot of white among shadows.

"I can't accept this," Wei Wuxian said. He blinked, hoping to see better, unsurprised when the shadows remained.

He tried to push the sheets toward Lan Wangji, but the man shook his head. "Keep them," he replied.

"Lan Zhan, those are songs from your sect. Even I can recognize how old some of them are."

"Keep them," Lan Wangji repeated, as unmoving as marble. "Learn them. If they are of no use to you, then I will take them back."

"Why?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Why would you do such a thing?"

But Lan Wangji did not answer this time any more than he did the last time Wei Wuxian had asked him. He lowered the head again, almost in a nod, the tea he held lifting at last to hover before his white-clad chest.

Wei Wuxian's hand rose over the table; before it could do anything, be it grab at the sheets or at Lan Wangji himself, he felt one of his barriers fail.

His breath caught in the second it took for one of the talismans on him to burn and scorch his skin—and then he was standing, knocking into the table outright in his need to run.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Wangji called.

But Wei Wuxian did not reply. He rejoined the outside of the inn, watching Wen Ning run to his side in the distance, a frightened Wen Yuan clinging to his back and shoulders.

"Master!" Wen Ning said when he reached him in inhuman speed. "Master, I felt—"

"I know," Wei Wuxian cut in. "I shouldn't have come here, I should've known they would try something while I was gone—"
"Wei Ying."

Lan Wangji had come out of the inn as well, the sheets of music once more rolled into grey cloth. He took another step toward Wei Wuxian.

"What is it?" he asked plainly.

"Someone is trying to break into the Burial Mounds," Wei Wuxian replied. "I have to return now."

Lan Wangji looked at him in stillness for a second.

Then he unsheathed his sword, letting it hover low above ground, and extended a hand forward.

"Master, you'll be faster on sword," Wen Ning said, his voice coming from far away. "I can run with A-Yuan, we can leave the cart for now…"

No, Wei Wuxian thought, trying to turn away; but his eyes met Lan Wangji's above the arm he had not moved between the both of them.

The road back over the cart, even with Wen Ning running as fast as he could, would take over an hour. A second barrier fell as Wei Wuxian stood still and breathless, singeing the skin of his arm under the narrow sleeve he wore.

"You get there as fast as you can, Wen Ning," he said, never looking away from the man before him.

"Yes, master."

The air that Wen Ning's departure moved erased everything, even Wen Yuan's surprised cry.

Wei Wuxian felt that he had to push forth impensable weight in order to grasp Lan Wangji's arm, to be assisted up Bichen's wide, hovering blade. And then again he almost dropped off of it when he felt Lan Wangji at his back, when the man's chest knocked into his shoulder, and he said—"Wait."

His fingers were so cold. As though they had just plunged into wet earth to try and pull the weight of him away.

Wei Wuxian stepped back till his heel hit the raised edge of the sword's pommel, leaving the space before him empty for Lan Wangji to occupy instead.

Lan Wangji asked no questions. He stepped onto the sword again, waited until Wei Wuxian's hold on his arms felt secure enough, and followed the path Wen Ning had taken out of the village.

Wei Wuxian could not have told when the last time he flew on a sword was—save for the practice sword he had forced into obedience as he rejoined the Lotus Pier in fear, he could not recall when last Suibian had lifted him in the way Bichen lifted Lan Wangji. The familiarity of the flight, however faint it was, ended there; this was more akin to being carried on a wild horse, no matter how smooth the path was that Bichen carved into the evening air. He had no control over it except for the direction he gave to the man who wielded it, and no core within his chest either to feel the echo of spiritual energy being released around him.

They flew beyond Wen Ning quickly. They went above the tortuous path through the hills, above the macaber air surrounding the village, above even the few and far-between silhouettes of cultivators on swords watching over the road. Within minutes they arrived to the edge of the barriers, and Wei Wuxian did not have to tell Lan Wangji to slow this time. He felt the cold slither of resentfulness on his own.
Lan Wangji lowered them to the ground carefully, too slowly for Wei Wuxian's taste, who wanted nothing more than to stop holding onto him and put distance between the both of them. It was sandalwood he smelled rather than death and decay as he dismounted the blade, and sandalwood seemed to cover even the burn of the third talisman vanishing on his skin.

He followed the there-and-gone light of the barriers in a run. He took in hand the two halves of the Stygian Tiger Seal, ready to bring them together at whatever sight awaited him beyond the scorched trees.

What he found under the arch of wood which he had used as a boundary so long ago was not an army, however, but one man. Lashing talisman after talisman against the solid air before him, fracturing the barriers like glass, all the raised corpses around him unwilling to lay a finger on him.

Wei Wuxian's eyesight grew white, grew red; he stepped over the dry ground and yelled, "What are you doing!"

The last talisman burned after digging again into the breakline that its predecessors had caused, and Jiang Cheng turned toward him, Sandu drawn in one hand, the other holding more yellow paper.

"Wei Wuxian," he said; but whatever he meant to say vanished as he took in the man who stood behind Wei Wuxian.

The talismans he held fell to the ground uselessly. He walked toward them, Sandu brandished to Wei Wuxian's left, asking: "What is he doing here?"

There was so much ire over his face. Such disbelief and betrayal as he stared at Lan Wangji, whose own sword had not gone back into its scabbard. Bichen glowed over dry earth and dead branches with white and holy light.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said quietly.

But far from keeping at bay the cold now spread through Wei Wuxian's middle, or washing off the taste of grass from his lips, his words only made them sharper; and Jiang Cheng before them both grew pale and furious, and spoke before either of them could.

"Is this how you spend your time while my sister rots in Lanling, then," he growled. "Is this how you repay the sacrifice she made for you, you—"

"Jiang Cheng—"

"Wei Ying," Jiang Cheng called back in unending sarcasm. Each of his words burrowed under Wei Wuxian's skin like a stab wound. "You've always thought me so gullible, so stupid, with your great acts of self-sacrifice! 'Yunmeng's hero', was it?"

"Calm down," Wei Wuxian said between his teeth, trying to see through the shadows of night encroaching upon them.

But Jiang Cheng did not obey. "Was that not what you called me? Was that not the promise you made me!" he roared. "How many promises of yours will go to waste, Wei Wuxian, before you've had enough of playing people for fools? Or is your loyalty only for Lan Wangji?"

"Jiang Wanyin," came Lan Wangji's cold voice through the ringing in Wei Wuxian's ears, "mind your manners. You do not know what you speak of."

"Don't I?" Jiang Cheng spat. "Has Wei Wuxian not always been yours, alpha!?"
It was as though his voice traversed through the ages, as though Wei Wuxian still lay upon the grass in the mountains behind Yunmeng, Jiang Cheng's hands strangling him: *Who's to say he's not carrying a little Lan?*

The crack of steps upon dead wood reached them, and Wen Ning appeared where they could all see him, holding a drowsy Wen Yuan in his arms.

Bile burned up Wei Wuxian's throat, more potent than liquor, as if all of his insides wanted to retch themselves out of him at once.

By some miracle, he contained it. He managed to swallow and speak, horse and painful, as Jiang Cheng panted in anger. "Wen Ning," he said. Saliva flooded his mouth bitterly. "Go up to the others. They must be in a panic."

"Master," Wen Ning protested.

But Wei Wuxian did not acknowledge him. After a brief moment, Wen Ning ran through the barriers and vanished from all their sights.

Wei Wuxian walked forward. Sandu veered to him instead of Lan Wangji, and he saw a shadow of doubt over Jiang Cheng's face, a trembling in the hand that held it before it stabilized. He did not stop walking until its pointed edge rested above the place it had stabbed months ago.

"Have you calmed down now?" he asked quietly.

"You don't have a right to speak to me," Jiang Cheng seethed.

Sandu pressed the slightest bit forward, a single point of pressure between Wei Wuxian's ribs, but it broke neither cloth nor skin. It wavered in Jiang Cheng's hold.

"Either kill me or sheathe your sword, Jiang Cheng," Wei Wuxian said. "But don't leave the job half-finished again."

He saw the breath that Jiang Cheng took shake through his throat and chest and make his face redder; and the look that his former shidi directed to him then was not one he knew how to handle anymore.

*Please fix this,* Jiang Cheng's eyes said. *Please just fix everything.*

But Wei Wuxian had not the knowledge or power to, and Sandu fell from his chest to stroke the ground instead. Both of Jiang Cheng's arms became lax by his sides.

Wei Wuxian closed his eyes. He breathed almost forcefully, enough to feel his own body again despite the otherness clinging to him. "Lan Zhan, thank you for today," he said without daring to look back. "I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

"No," Lan Wangji said.

Jiang Cheng moved again at last. "Just leave," he snapped at the man behind Wei Wuxian. "I'm not going to attack him."

The status they shared must carry more weight to Lan Wangji than anything Wei Wuxian could say, for only then did he abide. There came the sound of cloth unwinding, of something dropping to the dead forest floor; and then white light shone again between Wei Wuxian's feet and Jiang Cheng, and wind rang between branches as the man took flight.
When Wei Wuxian looked over his own shoulder, he saw only the music sheets that Lan Wangji had brought him, laid upon the ground.

"What was he doing with you?" Jiang Cheng asked then in a much more moderate voice then before.

"Nothing," Wei Wuxian replied. "We met by chance. He was with me when I felt the wards fall, he just offered to carry me back."

"He wouldn't have needed to if you carried your own sword."

Wei Wuxian ignored the jab. He turned to the half-broken barriers before them. He took the Stygian Tiger Seal in hand and brought the two halves together, mindless of the fatigue that threatened to drag him to his knees. He layered more of his wards again, more fragile than they had been before for lack of nurturing.

"Did you have to destroy months of work in a tantrum?" he couldn't help but ask, his voice breezy with effort.

"How else was I supposed to make sure you'd come out?" Jiang Cheng retorted. "You haven't been seen in months."

"You must have terrified them all. Wen Qing will have my head for this."

Wei Wuxian stared at him just in time to see the guilt over his face, the discomfort giving him that ugly blush again. Jiang Cheng turned his back to him and sheathed his sword at last.

His own heart still smarted from the words spoken earlier, but Wei Wuxian thought it best to put them behind him and never think of them again.

If he thought about them—if he tried to imagine the face Lan Wangji must have made, being accused of such things with him—

"Why did you come here?" he asked, having to swallow again for the nausea crawling up his torso and neck.

Jiang Cheng faced him again after one bracing second. His eyes dragged from Wei Wuxian's face to his belly, and his hand over Sandu's scabbard tensed and whitened. "How is your wound?" he said for all answer.

"Fine. It takes more than a sword to kill me."

"Don't say such things," Jiang Cheng snapped at him.

Wei Wuxian smiled at him ghostly, though he had wished so desperately at the time that Sandu did kill him. "Just tell me why you're here, Jiang Cheng," he said. "I can't imagine you just wanted the pleasure of my company."

"I came to tell you that Sister is getting married."

Wei Wuxian's mouth opened and closed silently.

Jiang Cheng frowned at him. "I thought you might like to know," he added spitefully. "Even if you won't give that omega back to free her."

Even the guilt of having made this decision could not pierce through Wei Wuxian's surprise now.
Silence stretched between for a long time before he managed to ask: "To whom?"

"Jin Zixuan."

The feeling of a hand on his face, of words spoken close to his lips as he stood cornered by his own fright and the wide trunk of a tree. The too-easy grip of Suihua in his hand as he put the blade to its master's neck and watched him beg him to flee, his face lit from behind by a fire, four terrified omega hiding in the entrails of a mountain cave.

"Is this another plot of Jin Guangshan's?" The words had to tear out of him by force and sickness alike. Wei Wuxian looked at Jiang Cheng's shuttered face, asking, "Does he intend to trap her like this too? Is Jin Zixuan trying to—"

"No," Jiang Cheng replied with no hesitation. Frustration once more tensed at his neck and brow. "You have no idea the amount of begging Jin Zixuan did for you," he spat, and Wei Wuxian near-flinched back, though he knew. He had known all along. "He wouldn't harm her. His proposal was sincere."

Wei Wuxian swallowed. His throat ached and burned unpleasantly. "And shijie is," he tried; he stopped, having to breathe again. "She is happy," he said. "With him."

"She is. You know she has always loved him."

_I've loved you since we were children._

He had never known a secret so heavy, he thought; and never a guilt quite so crushing.

"She wanted me to tell you," Jiang Cheng said, unsheathing Sandu again. The sword's dark glow washed over the grounds around them as he mounted it, as he looked at Wei Wuxian in anger and longing. "She misses you."

"I miss her too," Wei Wuxian replied softly, though he had no right to.

Neither of them moved for a moment longer. Wei Wuxian read on Jiang Cheng's face the same regret he held so deep beneath his skin, the same ache for better and freer days, no matter that this freedom had always been a lie. The same absence of warmth at his side, when too often their arms had knocked without daring to embrace.

Jiang Cheng opened his mouth, looking grieved and lonely, and Wei Wuxian wondered if he would say the words he could feel trying to escape his own lips.

But he did not. And as Sandu vanished over the gnarly branches of dead trees, carrying out of sight the person he missed the most bitterly, he found himself more alone than he had ever been.

The next-to-last time Wei Wuxian saw Jiang Yanli was seven days after Jin Ling's birth; five days before he lay bleeding in the empty Burial Mounds, in the arms of the only alpha he had ever trusted.

He saw her then happy as she had never been in his presence, the fatigue marring her face unable to stop it from glowing, more beautiful and kind than any who stood by her. She was sitting in the wide bed of the bedroom she shared with her husband, clothed in gold and white. If any of the pain of
labor followed her still, she showed no sign of it; her politeness as she greeted the ones who came to visit her and presented the newborn to them was without fail, and she looked for all intents and purposes as any new parent should.

Happy. Fulfilled. Loved and loving endlessly.

There were half a dozen people within the room when Wei Wuxian arrived with Jiang Cheng by his side. All of them looked at him in hatred before leaving it, hurried, some even holding their sleeves to their faces as if afraid of catching the scent of him.

"Why did they invite him?" he could hear them whisper before they could walk far enough; "Why call the Yiling Patriarch here today?"

"Sister," Jiang Cheng called, unhindered by the murmurs, his voice swelled with emotion.

"Come here, A-Cheng." Jiang Yanli replied with such a bright smile that it shone even in the ever-darkness. "Come meet your nephew."

Jiang Cheng did so in slow steps. He sat by her side on the bed, he looked at the child held in her gold-clad arms. He smiled as he touched its hand; his eyes shone when Jiang Yanli turned the head and pressed a kiss to his temple, saying, "Thank you for bringing him."

Wei Wuxian avoided her eyes when they rested on him. He met Jin Zixuan's instead across the room, and the rigidity that struck him was not any better.

The Jin sect heir was standing by his wife's other side, his face red and lax with joy. He too wore the colors of his sect, his golden robes thicker and more beautiful, the peony embroidered to his chest more detailed than Wei Wuxian could remember. He had on him the air of someone who could not believe what they were seeing; he saw Wei Wuxian, and nodded to him in greeting; and he looked again at Jiang Yanli and the child she had birthed him, and wonder illuminated him anew.

"A-Xian."

When he could not avoid it anymore—when all details of the room and its occupants had burned themselves to his mind for the ages to come—Wei Wuxian turned to face his shijie.

He did not know what he expected to see on her face. Disappointment perhaps, or betrayal of the worst kind. Some happiness for the sight of him, wasted by the worry she had always exuded in his presence since her parents had died. But Jiang Yanli smiled at him kindly. She placed her child into the crook of her right arm and extended the left to him, inviting him forward.

Wei Wuxian could do nothing but join her. Jiang Cheng left him his spot upon the bed, and he took it so slowly and carefully, the mattress hardly dipped under his weight. His arm almost touched hers when she shifted to face him.

"Shijie," he said.

"A-Xian..." He did not move to avoid the hand she lifted to his face, the brief caress she gave to his temple and cheek. He felt her palm frame him as she took in the sight of him; as she noticed the differences between how he looked now and how he had looked the last time they had met.

He could not have told if there were any. He had not looked at himself, not in a mirror or in water's reflection, in too long to remember.

All he knew were the worry Wen Qing showed day after day for his lack of eating or sleeping, and
the same look in his shijie's eyes as she chose not to say a word of it for once.

"Did you meet any trouble on your trip?" she asked gently. Her hand dropped once more to the burden she carried, stroking over the golden cloth keeping it warm and covered.

"No," he found the strength to reply. "Jiang Cheng complained the whole way, however."

"Because we could have flown instead of riding," replied Jiang Cheng's voice angrily behind him. "If someone hadn't forgotten his sword again."

Jiang Yanli smiled at her brother. "A-Cheng, will you please fetch young master Meng for me?" she asked. "More people came than I thought there would be. I need to discuss the seating arrangements for the feast with him."

Jiang Cheng scoffed, bothered and frustrated, but he had never had the will to refuse her even when she did not look so very tired. Wei Wuxian heard his footsteps echo upon the walls of the room as he left. He looked at the bedspread he was sat on rather than his shijie's face or anything she held.

When he was gone, Wei Wuxian asked: "Is Jin Guangshan lying on his deathbed? I'm not certain myself how I managed to walk up the stairs without being attacked."

A moment of silence followed; then Jin Zixuan coughed from his side of the room, replying, "No," in a strangled voice.

"Sect leader Jin agreed to your presence here," Jiang Yanli said, relieving her husband. "Though not immediately."

Wei Wuxian said nothing. The only reason he could think of for Jin Guangshan approving of his presence, outside of an ambush, was to show off the hostage he had kept for over a year to his face.

There was another child in the Burial Mounds, now; another crying babe with the last name of the Jin clan in the arms of another mother, who was not so finely draped as the one Jiang Yanli held in her arms.

He looked at it before he could help it. It was only a glance, barely longer than a blink of the eyes, and still the image of the wrinkled, sleeping creature burned into his eyes and made him want to throw up.

He made as if to rise, but Jiang Yanli's hand was on him again, pushing his shoulder down. He met her eyes with his heart beating at his throat.

"A-Xian," she said, "we'd like you to choose his courtesy name."

He stilled. He looked at her in incomprehension. Her face showed nothing but kindness, however, and Jin Zixuan's behind her belied no other thought either.

Finally, he let out, "What?"

"We've discussed it for a long time," Jiang Yanli explained, rocking her arms and smiling down at her son. "Ling'er is beta. It does not matter to sect leader Jin who chooses his courtesy name, only those of A-Xuan's alpha heirs."

She looked up to Wei Wuxian again. "I think it should be you," she said. "It couldn't be anyone but you."
It could be Jiang Cheng, or Madam Jin, or even a member of the Yu sect far away in Meishan. It made no sense at all that the choice should fall to Wei Wuxian, who had betrayed and abandoned her, who stood in disgrace to all who roamed the halls of Golden Carp Tower.

He was the one who had stolen her first love from her, even if she was married to him now. He had driven Jin Zixuan into holding his hand in those woods and declaring his love.

"The next generation of Jin clan rulers will be named 'Ru',' said Jin Zixuan, but Wei Wuxian could not look at him now.

He had never named a child, not even the one—not even Wen Yuan. He knew not if Wen Yuan had a courtesy name chosen for him either, and he did not wish to know. When Jiang Fengmian had asked him to name his sword, the sword which now lay abandoned at the deepest of the bloodpool cave, Wei Wuxian had not known what to answer him either.

The only named possession of his was Chenqing. And Chenqing did not sound so beautiful to him, either the name or the music it produced, since Lan Wangji had played it and quieted him with it.

His mouth dried. His jaw loosened. "Rulan," he said.

There came a moment of silence before Jin Zixuan asked, "Like the Lan clan?"

Wei Wuxian felt the hair rise at his own nape. "You don't have to keep it—"

"No," Jiang Yanli interrupted.

Her hand on Wei Wuxian's arm pressed over cloth and skin warmly.

"No, I think Jin Rulan is perfect."

A breath he had not known he was holding loosened itself out of his lungs. Jiang Yanli's hand left him and came back to her child. She stroked his sleeping face, her lips stretched into the same loving smile she had worn since he had entered the room—as if she did not know any other way to be, as if happiness had settled so deeply within her that her mouth could not lose the shape of it.

Then she asked the sleeping child, "Would you like your sect-uncle to hold you, Ling'er?" and Wei Wuxian could not have moved even to flee her.

No, he thought, but she was already tugging his arm toward the bundle of golden cloth; Don't make me, he wanted to beg, but already the light weight of the newborn was placed at his elbow, and Jiang Yanli closed his hold on it and laughed. The air she breathed felt like ice over every inch of his skin.

Jin Ling did not cry, did not squirm, as Wei Wuxian recalled the bloodied body of Wen Yuan did in Wen Qing's hands after hours of pain. Still the unsettled riverscent of him dried his throat and his lungs, and the mere sight of him again, the feel of him over his hands, made his stomach twist and ache. Bile rose up his neck and bathed his tongue.

He wanted to throw Jin Ling away. He realized this in horror and in fear. The impulse was at his fingers, at his neck, in the muscles of his back already tensing and shifting. He wanted to throw him away, to make sure he could never touch him, never look or speak to him as Wen Yuan that day.

Instead he gave him back to Jiang Yanli almost forcefully, shaking from shoulders to fingertips, doing his best not to show it. He heard her call his name through the blood rushing past his ears, but he did not heed it. This time there was no hand to hold him back as he rose, and he almost swayed on his feet, so dark had the world around him become.
"I'll let you rest, shijie," he heard himself say to her. "You have many more visitors to entertain."

"A-Xian—"

Wei Wuxian walked out of the wide and sunlit room, allowing his feet to guide him rather than relying on his eyes. He heard murmurs and footsteps after him as he crossed the threshold; he smelled the same bitter pines that had once driven him to threats, and he was not surprised as he stopped in the middle of an unseen hallway to turn around and find Jin Zixuan following him.

"What do you want?" he snapped at him.

It was all he could do not to rest his weight on his hand against the wall. His legs had gone shaky and weak, unable to support his own weight. His heart still beat wildly far up in his own chest, and the darkness had only lifted enough for him to see Jin Zixuan who stood right before him.

Jin Zixuan went still at his question. It was a tense moment before he replied, "You do not look well," in as quiet a voice as Wei Wuxian had ever heard from him.

"I'm a madman, as you well know," Wei Wuxian said. "Go back to your wife before someone sees us."

Jin Zixuan looked torn. His head turned to the direction of the room Jiang Yanli was in, and the harshness of his features seemed to loosen, his brow easing and his mouth curved; then he met Wei Wuxian's eyes again and tensed anew, nodding his head, one hand rising to cover his own chest.

Wei Wuxian grabbed it at the cloth-covered wrist before it could.

Jin Zixuan inhaled in a deep and short burst, the sound of it ringing through Wei Wuxian's own lungs in echo. He did not move to tear his hand from Wei Wuxian or advance upon him again. He simply stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Do you love her?" Wei Wuxian asked him.

Himself felt breathless and sick, the weight of the child still hanging over his arms and making them shake. The very act of touching Jin Zixuan threatened to send him over the edge and have him retch where he stood, but he held strong.

He looked at the man's face. He tried to search for deceit in his eyes, in the pulse of the wrist he held so tightly, but he could not find it, just as he had not found any whilst Jin Zixuan looked at his son or at Jiang Yanli herself earlier.

"Yes," Jin Zixuan said, and the truth of it seemed written over him.

Wei Wuxian released his hold on him. Jin Zixuan's hand lowered and did not lift again.

"You take care of her," he told the Jin heir tiredly.

All the strength seemed to have gone from him.

"You better make her happy, Jin Zixuan."

"I will," said Jin Zixuan softly. "I could not forgive myself if I did not."

Wei Wuxian supposed that such a promise would have to do. He stepped away from the man slowly, making sure that he would not be followed again, and Jin Zixuan seemed to accept it. He turned his back to Wei Wuxian and took the direction of the room they had both left.
Wei Wuxian paid no mind to the whispers that followed him as he rejoined the wider areas of Golden Carp Tower. He had known they would be there since Jiang Cheng had come again to the Burial Mounds days ago, alight with excitement, telling him of his nephew's birth; and promptly asked him to come to the boy's seventh day celebration, arguing that none would dare to contest his presence or harm him while he was there.

The whispers had started when they reached Lanling City. They had not ceased as the both of them ascended the long stairs around the mountain. Now they clung to Wei Wuxian's skin like sweat, and the eyes that avoided him were not any better than the ones that followed him.

He found the entrance of a garden behind the widest hall atop the stairs, a place lush with flowers and trees, smelling heavily of sweetness. It was empty but for the birds who came to peck at the seeded soil.

He retched there away from all eyes. He held his aching stomach with one hand, near-whimpering at the pain he felt digging a hole through it. When he wiped his mouth with a shaking hand—when he finally could breathe without wanting to hurl—it came away stained with blood.

Wei Wuxian looked at it confusedly. He ran his tongue over his teeth, over the inside of his mouth entirely, looking for the sting of a cut. He found none.

"A bit weak-willed, aren't you?"

Wei Wuxian wiped the blood off on the black cloth of his robes. He rubbed over his mouth once more to be certain that none showed there. "I wasn't the one crying," he retorted.

Jiang Cheng was sneering at him when he turned to face him, but it was not the sneer of disgust and hatred he had shown in front of Lan Wangji. It looked more like the playful kind he sported as a child whenever Wei Wuxian did something especially embarrassing.

"Sister told me you ran away when she tried to make you hold Jin Ling," he said, mocking. "I'm sure most of the fools here would have a field day with this. The Yiling Patriarch, defeated by a baby."

Wei Wuxian felt too exhausted for Jiang Cheng’s words to make more than faint queasiness rise in him. "I'm not staying," he muttered instead of trying to argue. "I've seen enough."

Jiang Cheng frowned at him. "The celebrations will last days," he said.

"And it'll take me days to go back home. I can't be away for so long."

"Home," Jiang Cheng repeated through his teeth. "Is that what you call that place?"

But Wei Wuxian had not the will for another fight with Jiang Cheng, not with his stomach still aching so brightly. The phantom weight of the child still rested upon him hauntingly. "Yes," he said.

He put the little box containing his gift to the newborn Jin Ling in Jiang Cheng's hands and walked away.

No more people stopped him except for Meng Yao, who was walking near the entrance in direction of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan's room. "Leaving so soon, young master Wei?" he asked with a deep nod of his head.

He had a guqin strapped to his back, like Lan Wangji the last time Wei Wuxian had seen him. Wei Wuxian realized distantly that the celebratory the music he had heard upon his arrival must have been played by him.
Meng Yao, as always, seemed not to find offense in his lack of answer, though Wei Wuxian stared at him silently for a moment. He simply made way when Wei Wuxian walked again, and the feeling of his eyes over Wei Wuxian's nape vanished soon enough.

He saw no one but civilians as he descended the stairs. Those people carried heavy loads on their backs, sometimes two at a time, going up to the great halls above to deliver their gifts. Cultivators had no such need for an effort. They flew over their heads on swordback, showing not a sign of being willing to lend the earth-bound hand.

Cultivators had once again occupied the last of the stone steps for a way before the city proper, loudly proclaiming for him to approach and browse the things they sold. But Wei Wuxian had no need for anything, and no desire to linger as he had on the day of the discussion conference. He went to the stables where he had left his horses and took the both of them back.

The farther he rode out of the city after that, the easier he breathed.

Wen Ning had accompanied him and Jiang Cheng on foot on the way. He rejoined him outside the city gates and took the horse Jiang Cheng had ridden, his face absent any gratefulness or fatigue. "Young master Wei," he said simply. "Did you meet the little master?"

"Yes," Wei Wuxian replied.

It seemed to be enough of an answer for Wen Ning, who asked no more questions as they trotted away.

He must be thinking of his sister, whose hard work Wei Wuxian had required extensively to repair the barriers broken by Jiang Cheng months ago. Few cultivators had the core strength that Jiang Cheng did, let alone enough of it to break through three layers of defenses alone, but the fact that he did had been enough to frighten her and all the omega who lived beyond those invisible walls. They had all felt the clear air ripen with death, the ground shake, the crows hover in the distance as they had the one time Wei Wuxian had been absent from the Burial Mounds for over a week. The newest of them had not known how to react; those who had lived there for years remembered, and not even Wen Qing's calm had been enough to quiet them before Wei Wuxian arrived.

"I need to find a way to create more powerful barriers," Wei Wuxian said when they reached a rocky path through the mountains.

A short cliff of stone rose along the road they trod. Vegetation was sparse here, as though scorched by the sun, and the ground below the horses' hooves was cracked and burned like in the Nightless City. It was only the beginning of spring, but already the day felt hot and bright. Not a cloud could be seen. The rivers they had passed on their way were thick with the melting of snow.

"I need to make sure all of you can be safe even if I die."

"Master," said Wen Ning in worry. "Master, you should rest. You shouldn't say such things."

"It's necessary," Wei Wuxian told him, turning to look at him—turning his back to the cliff along which they rode. "If I can't make sure all of you remain out of harm's way in my absence…"

He was not certain, for a second, why his words stopped. He felt a shake through his body, as if something or someone had hit him from the side, and he toppled on his saddle before sitting upright again.

But then he heard the release of a tense string, the whistling of iron cutting through the air; and Wen Ning cried, "Master!" and jumped off of his own horse, which ran away, terrified.
Wen Ning was before Wei Wuxian now and holding an arrow in his hand. Wei Wuxian looked at his own shoulder and saw that another had already pierced him, digging deeply into his flesh, so that the shaft did not shake when even he moved the arm.

He turned his head to the top of the cliff.

Only the head of the bowman could be seen from behind rock before he rose. And then he was not alone, as Wei Wuxian hoped; several more people appeared, dozens of them, until over a hundred and fifty stood along the ridge and stared down at him with bows and swords in hand.

A man stepped forward in the middle of them all. A stout and unpleasantly-scented man, with a voice Wei Wuxian had heard first while trapped in silk and last while threatening him.

"Wei Wuxian," said Jin Zixun in triumph. "You finally show your true colors."

Wei Wuxian slowly grabbed the arrow notched into his shoulder. He pulled it out, keeping away the wince of pain threatening to overcome his face, and let it fall bloodily to the dry ground.

A few of the cultivators stepped back at the show of resilience. "I am leaving," Wei Wuxian told Jin Zixun coolly. "You can go back to your master, Jin Zixun, and tell him that I obeyed his threats peacefully. I will not attack you."

He expected Jin Zixun to resist and insult him, to lose his composure again as he was wont to. He did not expect him to grow white in the face with outrage.

"You have the gall to say this," Jin Zixun expelled, his words nothing short of screams. "You have the audacity to come here, Wei Wuxian, after what you've done to me!?"

"What have I done to you?" Wei Wuxian asked loudly. "I've seen not even a shadow of you in over a year, you miserable worm. What is it that you're trying to pin on me now?"

There was something nagging at him, a white-and-bright feeling of rage and despair laid parallel to his heart that he could give no name to. Wei Wuxian shivered and put it aside, trying more than ever before to keep his head clear, to remember his shijie laid in a bed and the threat which rested over her even now that she wore gold and not purple.

"Shoot him!" Jin Zixun ordered the hundred-and-more men surround him. " Shoot him down!"

Most of them did not move, their eyes fixed to Wei Wuxian's left where the infamous Ghost General stood. Some more withdrew in fear, now that the plot was discovered and they were no longer safely away from Wei Wuxian's notice.

But a few armed their bows and loosened their arrows, and Wei Wuxian's horse whinnied loudly, rearing back, almost dismounting him entirely. Wen Ning ran before him and caught as many shafts as he could with his hands. Some missed him by a wide margin, others pierced his unfeeling flesh as they would a shield; one Wei Wuxian had to duck himself atop his horse, and the last buried into the animal's thigh.

It screamed, now nearly foaming at the mouth in fear. It bucked under Wei Wuxian and made him fall to the cracked earth with such strength that no doubt a bone should have snapped, had Wen Ning not caught him in time.

"Wen Ning," spat Jin Zixun from high upon the rock. "You should have stayed dead, you dog."

The feeling was there again by Wei Wuxian's heart: an awareness foreign to his own, gnawing
slowly at his conscious.

"Wen Ning?" he murmured, realizing at last where it came from.

He tore his eyes away from Jin Zixun.

Wen Ning was still holding him upright, but his arms were shaking. An arrow stuck out of his back, another out of his belly. The black veins at his neck seemed to have spread under his skin, covering his chin and rising to his cheekbones.

His eyes were fixed to Jin Zixun above them.

"Master," he whispered. "I—"

He reeked of fear. His ever-cool body, always slicked with a layer of resentful energy, now felt as cold and slippery as ice.

Wei Wuxian grabbed Wen Ning's arm. He pulled the arrow out of his belly, saying, "Come on, let's go, let's run from here."

The fright only grew in Wen Ning and in him, cloying, sticking to skin like sap. He understood that Wen Ning could not move at all.

Wei Wuxian ground his teeth. He blinked away the ghostly sight of a drenched mountain pass, the feel of mud over his skin as he and Wen Qing waded for eons, looking for a sign of life.

"Jin Zixun," he called, placing himself before Wen Ning. "I've not attacked you or your clan in any way. You are the one breaking the peace between us."

"Liar!" Jin Zixun screamed at him, one of his hand fisted into the neckline of his robes. "You cursed me, you mad bitch!"

And he pulled down the golden cloth covering his torso, and showed all who were present the ghastly sight of his punctured skin.

A glance would have sufficed for Wei Wuxian to recognize the Hundred Holes Curse, but Jin Zixun did not stop at a glance. He spread apart the crossed line of his outer robes, showing the blood staining his underclothes in the shape of pebble-sized dots.

In the part of Wei Wuxian's soul occupied by his bond to Wen Ning, another image showed; that of Jin Zixun disrobing in a similar way, lit by dusk and fire, and looking down on him with his dark face cut against the sky.

The ache in his stomach tensed and shuddered. Blood filled his mouth again and made him taste iron.

Wei Wuxian swallowed it back. He held on to Wen Ning's arm behind him and spoke to Jin Zixun: "A fitting way for you to die, but not my doing."

"Who else could it be but you?" Jin Zixun yelled.

"What proof to you have that it was me?"

Jin Zixun looked around himself for help, but now many of the cultivators who had come with him were distracted by the horrible sight of him. The closest had stepped away from him in shame or fear, unwilling to risk catching the curse upon themselves.
"I did not curse you," Wei Wuxian said as evenly as he could. "Look upon your other enemies. You must have quite a few."

Raised bows lowered, raised swords stopped glowing with power, and for a moment Wei Wuxian believed that he would be able to walk away. He believed that Wen Ning's simmering terror would cool. He believed that he would see again the smile on Wen Qing's handsome face, or watch from afar as Jiang Yanli flourished in marriage and motherhood.

Jin Zixun tore the bow out of the hands of the nearest cultivator and notched an arrow to its string; he spat out, "Die, you deranged thief;" and Wen Ning pushed Wei Wuxian to the ground and jumped across soil and rock faster than the eye could see.

"No!" Wei Wuxian screamed as the dry ground cut his palms, "No, Wen Ning, stop!"

But it was too late—already cultivators were falling in the corpse's quest to alleviate the terror eating him, and his white eyes were spotted with black, his spirit gone despite the years Wei Wuxian had spent tying it to his flesh again.

Blood colored the yellow rock. Necks shattered under the grip of inhuman fingers. Wei Wuxian watched the sand drip redly from the edge of the cliff, tied at the throat by the vivid memory of Wen Ning's last moments as a living man.

He pushed himself upright, took Chenqing in his trembling hand—he played with all the strength of his frayed memory the songs that Lan Wangji had brought him, every single one of them learned by the fire of the bloodpool cave, all of them meant to appease the soul. Despair swallowed him whole and made the bright day somber. He could not see any more out of his own vision, only out of Wen Ning's.

Wen Ning had no soul now, however. One by one he massacred them, tearing limbs apart bare-handed, crushing heads and throats under his feet. Many of them tried to flee, some blowing alarms from the horns hung about their necks, Jin Zixun amongst them; but Wen Ning was faster than any of them. He was faster and stronger than ten humans could hope to be.

"Wen Ning!" Wei Wuxian yelled when the corpse grabbed Jin Zixun by the undone collar.

But Wen Ning did not feel or hear him. Wen Ning was led only by the terrible memories of that rain-drenched day, when the man he was now holding had hurt him and left him to die.

"Please," he saw Jin Zixun beg without hearing him, for his voice was choked out by Wen Ning's grasp on him; "Oh please, spare me—"

Wen Ning tore his head from his neck with no more effort than he used to carry Luo Fanghua's fabrics in his arms or play hand games with Wen Yuan.

Wei Wuxian heard nothing, saw nothing. His very heartbeat washed over his ears and eyes and made him deaf and blind. He stood frozen and alone before the rocky cliff from which blood dripped in the way of waterfalls. It was his own life, he knew, flowing thusly under the sun; his life from the moment he had lain naked over grass and to the very second extinguishing now.

He felt only from afar as an arm wound around his front, as he was held to someone else's body and made to take flight. Cold wind slapped at his face and the field of death below him vanished, Wen Ning staring in his direction in beatitude.

This fleeting awareness of his own body did not last long. Soon enough his lungs constricted and forced him to take in air, to smell the bitter scent of trees. His back knocked against wide shoulders,
his skin shivered and crawled everywhere the arms held him.

He spat out blood. He struggled in the alpha's hold, mindless of the sound of his own name called so near to his ears. The hot breath he felt there like another lash of wind made him cry out and rage.

He fell from the sword while it was still high up, and had those same arms not caught him again before he hit ground, Wei Wuxian knew he would have died. He struggled anyway. He squirmed and clawed at the hands keeping him aloft until slick blood made his nails slide on skin, until his feet touched the rocky floor and he could at last push away the body smothering him.

"Wei Wuxian—"

"Get away from me," Wei Wuxian tried to yell, but all that came out was a dry heave of words.

His stomach ached like a blade in the belly. He retched over the ground, blood and bile dripping to his feet and the front of his soiled robes. He fell to his knees in his own sick, unable to breathe without pain tearing him apart.

Jin Zixuan tried to approach again. He tried to put a hand on his shoulder, to help him up perhaps, his voice coming unheard—but Wei Wuxian felt only the pain, the memories of Wen Ning in his head mingling with his own, and such a hand in such a place deserved only to be broken.

He grabbed Jin Zixuan by the wrist. He felt bone and tendon twist under his hold, heard the grunt of pain the man gave before pulling away. Only when he did so did Wei Wuxian push his own hands to the ground.

Never had standing up been so difficult, so painful, not even when he first fell into the Burial Mounds. He watched Jin Zixuan nursing his own wrist before him and heaved until he could speak.

"Do you want to die," he rasped out. "Do you have a death wish?"

Jin Zixuan looked at him as if the very sight of him ached. He was pale too despite the sun overhead, shaken by what he must have seen in that path further away. "I can help you," he said.

Wei Wuxian laughed. It pulled at the bright wound of him, exuded despair and not joy. He pointed wildly eastward, whence they came, and screamed, "I just killed over a hundred cultivators!"

"It wasn't you—"

"I just killed your cousin!"

"I saw you try to stop Wen Ning!" Jin Zixuan snapped. "I know it wasn't you, I saw!"

Wei Wuxian put both hands over his face. He wanted to tear away his own skin, to taste anything but iron, to vanish on the spot and never have existed at all. From far away he felt Wen Ning's still-bright terror getting closer by the second, as he followed the call of his master through the bond they both shared.

"You need to leave," he breathed to Jin Zixuan. "You need to—to go back to the Tower, you need to get shijie out of there, you need to—"

But he choked at the thought alone; at the image his mind of Jiang Yanli hung for his crimes, of her child orphaned for his deeds, of Jiang Cheng left bereft of the last of his family.

"I can protect A-Li," Jin Zixuan's voice replied from far away. "She is my wife, my father wouldn't
dare lay a finger on her now. I can protect you as well—"

Wei Wuxian laughed again, and felt blood drip from his lips as it had dripped over the gore-stained cliff. "How?" he asked, lowering both his hands, watching through the darkness the man who stood before him.

Jin Zixuan wore the same eyes now that he had in that forest after Wei Wuxian pushed him away. Suihua was not yet sheathed. It gleamed in the sunlight, immaculate in his hand.

"How could you possibly protect me now?" Wei Wuxian howled. "Or do you intend to kill your own father for the sake of me? The rest of the sects would just finish the job!"

"If you," Jin Zixuan said haltedly, "If you…"

He breathed. His bleeding hand twitched by his side.

"My father… he could never touch you either. He could never again do anything against you."

Jin Zixuan's hand rose to his chest. He bowed again in all the formal ways, golden and proud, his face showing only the same despair he had once pushed so forcefully onto Wei Wuxian. It was stained with dust and blood for having pressed to Wei Wuxian's back as they flew.

Wei Wuxian stared at him uncomprehendingly. He took in his posture and words and could not make sense of them at all.

When he did—when the terrible truth rang through him and made his chest shatter—he asked: "Are you asking me again to marry you?"

The shudder that shook Jin Zixuan, the deathly silence of him, was answer enough.

Wei Wuxian breathed out thinly. He wiped the blood off of his mouth again with one trembling palm. "You are," he said in disbelief, "the lowest of all scum I have met in my life."

Jin Zixuan gasped. He looked up with begging eyes. "I give you my word that I am not asking for any feelings I hold," he said. "I know you do not want me, I only mean to offer you protection. I swear that I would never touch you."

"You give your word so easily, Jin Zixuan, what worth is your promise now?"

The volume of his own voice threatened to have Wei Wuxian choke again. Still he felt no pity at all to see Jin Zixuan bow under his words as if they were blows; and the hand that the man extended to try and grab his arm, still holding Suihua, made only disgust shine in him. No matter that the other still grabbed hopelessly at the peony sewn to his chest.

"Go back to your Tower," he spat, shaking away Jin Zixuan's hold, feeling more and more of himself let go again to the white and blinding rage. "Go back to your wife."

"Wei Wuxian, listen to me," Jin Zixuan begged.

He stepped back. He bowed again more lowly than he ever had before, lower than his status asked for. Suihua fell to the ground as his fingers loosened, raising a cloud of dust. Threads pulled out of the cloth covering his heart and hung limply around his pressing hand.

"I can help you," he said, and honesty could have worn his face, sacrifice taken his name. He extended his unarmed hand forward in pleading. "Please, let me help you."
Time slowed.

It thickened and lengthened before Wei Wuxian's eyes. The beating of his heart slowed with it until he could hear it no more. Jin Zixuan suffered the same fate as red spread over his golden clothes; as the hand spread before him lowered and the one he held to himself fell.

There was another hand under it. One clawed and unfeeling, one so painted by blood that only glimpses of grey skin could be seen, and only the beginning of veins turned black by resentment.

Wen Ning tore it out of the hole it had just dug all the way through Jin Zixuan's back. It rested by his side, flesh and muscle hanging from its long fingernails, unmoving as the rest of him was now that all threats were eliminated.

Jin Zixuan coughed once; blood sprayed over his chin and neck and the ground before him; his knees gave out from under him and he crumbled to the dry soil, one hand a breath away from the pommel of his sword.

He never moved again.

There came a flutter of wind. The unmistakable sound of a sword cutting through the air. A voice, even, familiar and rough, screaming out in horror. Wei Wuxian could only watch the place that Jin Zixuan's face had occupied before he died and which Wen Ning's did now. He could only stare into those white, unseeing eyes; only feel the very fear and loneliness haunting Wen Ning from those hours under the rain when Jin Zixun killed him.

It's over, he thought, and he wanted to laugh.

For the years he thought he had a right to live after his first home burned, for the corpse of Jin Zixuan taunting him overground, for the memory of a kind man holding a hand to him in a filthy street of Yiling—he wanted to laugh.

The voice cried and howled, the hands it belonged to shaking him, the smell of upturned earth filling his nose and head. Wei Wuxian felt not the desperate embrace that those two arms gave him; he felt not his head be crushed against shoulder and neck, or the calls of his name spoken through sobs and tears.

Neither did he feel those hands pressing to the highest of his nape, in the same three spots he had learned long ago could make a man asleep before his knees hit ground.

The sky blackened, the air ripened, time found its flow again; and Wei Wuxian could only be glad for oblivion as his conscious left him.

Chapter End Notes

18,665 fucking words...

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!