Summary

Wei Wuxian wakes up.

This is not particularly strange nor out of the ordinary. Being awake is simply part of being alive.

Wei Wuxian is alive.

There are stars in his eyes and oaths in his steps. His hands are made not for commanding the dead, but instead for weaving the golden strings of fate. Wei Wuxian is alive, and he has a duty to the world.

He owes the world nothing. He owes the world everything.

(A year after the great evil known as the Yiling Patriarch is banished from the world, inexplicably, inexorably, a god of luck is born.)

Notes

this is by far one of the most self-indulgent things i've ever written.
Wei Wuxian wakes up.

This is not particularly strange nor out of the ordinary. Being awake is simply part of being alive.

Wei Wuxian is alive.

There is grass beneath his hands, cold strands weaving between his fingers. A gentle breeze billows past his ear and through his hair. The sky is a gentle shade of blue, and the sun greets him a gentle hello.

*Welcome to the world,* something inside him says.

*This world is not kind,* something inside him warns.

*The world is what it is,* that same something amends, softly, with acceptance. *It is our own actions that make our end.*

There is something in him that feels strange. He lays a hand to his chest. It doesn’t hurt, but the ache remains, like a scar that doesn’t exist. He is bleeding from a wound that has already healed.

Wei Wuxian lowers his hands and looks at them. His palms are soft and clean, and his fingers are long and nimble.

*You have a perfectly good pair of hands,* something inside him says. *And you are much luckier than you know.*

Wei Wuxian clenches his hands.
So, something inside him continues, with an emotion Wei Wuxian can’t discern, _how about you go out there and prove that you deserve this second chance?_

The world is not kind. The world has never been kind. But for some unknown reason, the world has decided been kind to Wei Wuxian.

By chance, by choice, or by some convoluted means far beyond his understanding, Wei Wuxian is alive, and he has a duty to this world.

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So he tells himself, but the world is a very strange place.

It doesn’t take long for Wei Wuxian to settle into his body. Mannerisms that were probably once familiar to him settle in comfortably: lifting a hand to tuck a strand of long black hair behind his ear, bringing a smile to his lips, reaching for something at his waist that is no longer there.

He is confident in himself and in his body. It isn’t a foreign feeling, he thinks; whoever he was before, he knew himself well.

The only new factor is the divine hue that gently hugs his skin.

Under normal circumstances, it’s so faint that it barely exists. When he reaches out and tugs on the golden strings of fate, though, the aura around him glows a halcyon gold, warm and all-encompassing, as if to say, _give yourself to me._

Wei Wuxian is a god. He has every right to ask anything of anyone.

But he doesn’t. He’s a god; he should, but for some reason, he feels that he has taken away too much from too many to carelessly ask for more things, only to break them.

Besides, he doesn’t have anyone to ask. He’s young, hardly old or wise enough to be revered as an all-powerful being, and he needs to find his place in this world.
So he travels.

He travels, he travels, he travels. He walks through forests and across streams. He never stops moving, watching as the sun rises and sets each day with wonder in his eyes. He hums songs with lyrics long forgotten and is delighted when animals begin to follow behind him. He stares down leopards and bows to deer. He finds himself walking faster when wolves begin giving him looks.

It is warm, and it rains. He keeps walking.

He dips his toes in cold water and grins when he comes across a lake spotted with lotus pods. He peels them with practiced ease and dances across the water, running his fingers through golden strings.

(He hears playful laughter and the sound of splashing water behind him. When he turns, there is nothing but a dying image of purple and the clear chime of a bell, too far out of his reach for him to ever grasp again.)

Laughing, Wei Wuxian leaves a trail of gold behind him, reaching his hands out and accepting all this world has to offer.

Soon enough, stray souls begin to follow him, lost and confused and hopelessly drawn to any warmth they can find. Wei Wuxian cups his hands and allows them to rest in his light, listening to the faint whispers asking about life after death, about legacies left behind, about finding peace.

Wei Wuxian is stunned. Humans are one of the many creatures that inhabit this earth. Of all the creatures he has met so far, why are they the only ones that are so confused about their existence?

_I am lost_, so many of the souls say, _trapped in a despair of their own creation. I have died, my body is no more, but I have nowhere to go._

Wei Wuxian isn’t sure what to say. He barely knows anything about this world; if anything, the humans whose very souls he holds in his hands know better than he does.

But he is a god, he has a duty to bring joy to these people, and he knows how it feels to be lonely. It is an ache in his chest he knows he is intimately familiar with, although he can recall nothing about why he was so alone.
He simply knows that it isn’t right for anyone in this world to die alone.

So he takes a breath.

“It’s alright,” he says.

“Everything will be fine even if you’re lost,” he says.

“All who are lost will be found,” he says.

“After all,” he finishes, smiling, “I found you, didn’t I?”

Every night, more souls come to him. Many of them come seeking release, and Wei Wuxian knows they are looking in the wrong place. Death is not what he governs. Only mortal beings can bring peace to these wandering souls.

So he keeps walking in hopes that he will find humans with the abilities of gods. The souls follow him, drifting behind him like a parade of fireflies. He leads the way through the night, promising that he will find someone who can help them, exchanging eager conversation along the way.

Who are you? someone asks, and Wei Wuxian says, “I’m a god.”

A god of what?

“A god of luck, I suppose.”

Why do you wear such ominous robes?
Wei Wuxian looks down. He doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with his robes. He likes them quite a lot, actually. “It’s what I was born in. Is there something wrong?”

_You look like a demon._

For some reason, Wei Wuxian isn’t as surprised as he should be. “Appearances can be deceiving,” is all he says.

_Are you here to save us? Or are you here to pass judgement?_

Wei Wuxian doesn’t know, so he says nothing.

The souls don’t only ask questions. They tell him stories of their lives and their experiences, of the joys and sorrows of life. They speak of the innocence of childhood, the admiration and heartbreak that comes with love, the bitterness and despair that comes with loss, and the uncertain future.

Their stories are captivating. Although human life is so short, they live so brightly. They burn, burn, burn, and burn themselves out. Wei Wuxian can still see the remnants of flame within their silver souls.

Slowly, surely, the despair that had such a firm grip on the souls unravels. They begin speaking more freely, fluctuating wildly in emotions so powerful that Wei Wuxian is worried that his presence might be making them worse. He realizes only after something in him tugs back that the more emotion they show, the more human they are.

_There was a war not too long ago, _the souls tell him one day. _The cultivation sects banded together against their oppressors and crushed them._

“I see,” says Wei Wuxian. The pain in his chest is back. He lifts his hand over a scar that no longer brands his skin.

_A great villain was born from the bloodshed_, the souls tell him. There’s something strange about the way they say it, as if they expect Wei Wuxian to answer. He can’t. He doesn’t know how.
It’s painful to dwell on it for too long. He doesn’t know how or why, but he doesn’t ask any further, and the souls fall silent.

In a complete change of topic, one of the souls chirps, *Yunmeng is beautiful this time of year. If you ever have the chance to visit, you should absolutely go.*

Wei Wuxian brightens considerably. He loves hearing about the many splendors the world has to offer. He asks eagerly about cultivators, about sects, and when the souls have nothing more to say but names that Wei Wuxian won’t (doesn’t) remember, he asks about good food and alcohol, about love, about every aspect of being alive.

“Being human sounds so wonderful,” Wei Wuxian says one night, a golden flame in his palm to light the way. “But why do you limit yourselves so much? Why not travel the world, become a cultivator if you aren’t one already, or – or do whatever makes you happiest?”

For a moment, there is silence. Then there are whispers among the souls. Then they turn to Wei Wuxian.

*Life is about holding on, the souls say. Our lives are so short, and there is so much we want to do. We are only mortal, so it is incredibly hard to earn even one thing while it is so easy to lose. So we hold on as tight as we can, but you only ever have two hands.*

A soul hovers over Wei Wuxian’s shoulder. He lifts his free hand up to let it rest on its palm. Its warmth is familiar. His heart aches.

*If they’re already full, you have to let go of something first.*

Wei Wuxian’s mouth is dry. He feels guilty for no good reason. “I see,” is all he manages.

The souls are patient teachers. They teach Wei Wuxian how to mend his robes when they rip (though he used golden, ethereal strings, it’s all the same). They tell him how to forage and what to eat and what to avoid. They share advice on all sorts of skills they learned in life, from fishing to bartering to dancing. They tell him of restaurants he should visit, people he should speak to, and sights he should see. They share songs and hymns with lyrics still in mortal memory.

In the coldest of nights, when the pain in his heart is too much to bear and he chokes on the weight
of a life he can’t remember, Wei Wuxian will stop and light a fire. The souls around him will talk to
and tease each other as animals peek in to find warmth.

Even though it hurts, he needn’t suffer alone.

The smaller souls — the younger ones — will huddle by his side or curl up contentedly on his lap.
The others will talk through the night, their melodious voices lulling Wei Wuxian off to the land of
sleep, and when he wakes up, they will all be there, waiting for him.

Slowly, surely, they teach Wei Wuxian how to live.

Together, they cross rivers, weave around mountains, and watch each day come and go. They laugh
and they dance. They continue walking.

One early morning, Wei Wuxian comes across a small village. It’s a quaint little thing, nestled in a
valley, surrounded by flush green forests on either side, neighbouring a wide lake and a wall of
uneven, rocky peaks.

Here we are.

As if finally reaching home, the souls behind Wei Wuxian drift forward and upward into the
darkened sky, glowing a beautiful, unblemished silver.

“Wait!” A surge of panic rises from within him as he chases after the veil of silver. He reaches out
but doesn’t know what he’s looking for. He just doesn’t want to lose anyone again. “I haven’t found
someone who can free you yet!”

The souls shiver. A stream of bell-like laughter dances through the wind.

We don’t want to burden you any longer. You have already done so much for us.

The guilt is back, and Wei Wuxian doesn’t know why. He feels like crying, and he doesn’t know
why. There are a million words caught in his throat that he has never managed to say. “I... I haven’t
done anything to deserve your thanks.”
Then keep walking until the day you feel worthy, the souls say, drifting higher and higher. One day, you will find someone who will help you like you have helped us.

There are many things Wei Wuxian wants to say. He wants to thank them for keeping him company, he wants to apologize for something he doesn’t understand, he wants to beg them to wait until he can see them off properly.

Instead, he bows.

“I’m sorry this world couldn’t keep you safe,” he says quietly. “May your journey home be a soft and peaceful one.”

He has no right to apologize on behalf of the world, and he has no right to assume that it is the world that has done them wrong. But he feels that it is necessary.

At the very least, may his blessing keep them safe until they finally find rest.

Thank you, the souls whisper, dancing just beyond Wei Wuxian’s reach. He reaches out, but he can never reach far enough. His fingers trace the steps of people who have already moved on. We can take it from here.

In a burst of light, those brilliant orbs of silver fly high into the sky, returning to places that Wei Wuxian has never been.

In his ear, one last whisper rings:

We’re all cheering for you, A-Xian.

Wei Wuxian turns. There is nothing behind him. Not anymore.

But there is so much in front of him.
The morning sun is still hidden behind the twilight sky, scattering gentle light across a gentle land, when Wei Wuxian falls in love with the world.

Wei Wuxian meets humans for the first time and is comfortable in their presence. His divine glow is unmistakable, and he’s relieved when he finally comes across some living souls.

The first humans who see him stop in their tracks, eyes wide. Wei Wuxian smiles and waves at them.

“Good morning,” he says, nodding. The villagers bow back in a flustered panic. “I apologize for the trouble, but I’ll be imposing on you for a little while.”

The villagers trip over each other assuring him that he’s not at fault and that they’d be honoured to have him stay in their humble homes. Although most of them seem so nervous that they’ll ascend to the heavens right there and then, they eagerly show him around their village with pride in their eyes.

They feed him, they house him, they tell him tales of recent miracles and disasters that have befallen their village. Whether or not they are aware of exactly what sort of divine being he is, they seem to know that Wei Wuxian is someone who is to be treated with respect.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t mind; he enjoys the company of these vivid beings. Though he’s quite sure that he was very much human before... all this, he finds it incredible how any single person can be laden with so many emotions and desires and remain so unique from anyone else. He finds it incredible how he himself was just like these strange, vibrant beings in a life he’s forgotten.

Slowly but surely, he begins realizing that he’s developing (regaining) a personality. Humor comes to him easily, conversation rolls off his tongue smoothly, and when all those painful feelings he’s been carrying for so long return with a vengeance, he crushes them mercilessly beneath his heel and throws the remains into the deepest recesses of his heart.

No one needs to know. He keeps smiling.

He stays in that little village for a while. There’s a celebration being held for the one year anniversary of the death of some notorious villain, but by what Wei Wuxian hears, nobody in the village has actually seen or been affected by the villain himself. The news is an excuse to bring joy to the people, and Wei Wuxian is fascinated.
It’s so easy to martyr someone, Wei Wuxian thinks to himself. Whether it’s the birth of a hero or the death of a villain, people will celebrate all the same.

Interesting, he thinks, ignoring the bitter laughter that rings in his ears. Very interesting.

Regardless of how utterly detached Wei Wuxian is from the situation, he finds the celebrations very entertaining. Stalls line the roads and people of all ages come out to enjoy the festivities. Children run through the streets, reenacting dramatic scenes of what appears to be the villain’s death, while adults and elderly enjoy good food and alcohol.

Wei Wuxian has never been someone to reject a good celebration.

“You must be new here,” the head waitress says to him one night. She smiles as she places the dishes onto the table, all gorgeous and colourful and entirely smothered in chilies. Both the sight and the smell are incredibly enticing. “That’s quite the bold palate you have. Most people cry when they see just how spicy we like our food.”

Another waitress cheerfully puts down two jars of the house wine onto the table. She politely pours a cup for Wei Wuxian, nods at her friend, then leaves to serve another customer. Wei Wuxian smiles sweetly at her, and she blushes as she steps away.

Lifting his cup to his lips, Wei Wuxian redirects his attention to the head waitress. “You’re right on both counts. This is my first time here, yes, and I’m aware that my tastes might scare some unenlightened folks.”

The waitress grins, leaning her weight on the table. Everyone in this town is so wonderfully casual, and it makes Wei Wuxian incredibly happy to see a group of people so closely connected and so caring toward each other. To hell with formality.

“You’re a funny one,” the waitress says, her voice teasing. She looks around the restaurant for a moment, judges the situation, and seats herself on a chair opposite to Wei Wuxian. “But you’re a traveller, aren’t you? What’s the world like out there?”

Wei Wuxian thinks for a moment. Then, with far more confidence than he should have, he declares, “It’s bigger than you’d ever expect.”
The waitress waits as if she’s expecting more. Upon realizing that Wei Wuxian has nothing more to say, she raises an eyebrow and bursts into laughter.

“Is that all?” She laughs, and although Wei Wuxian doesn’t understand what’s so funny, he humors her anyway and shrugs helplessly. “What, no bragging about all the places you’ve been and all the adventures you’ve had?”

Wei Wuxian chuckles. “You gravely overestimate me.”

The waitress pauses. She looks Wei Wuxian in the eyes, seems to find whatever she’s looking for, then hums an indistinct note of agreement. “Maybe. Then, good sir, if you don’t mind me asking, who exactly are you?”

Her tone is curious, and yet she watches Wei Wuxian carefully, not with suspicion, but with caution.

It’s a reasonable reaction. For the past few days, Wei Wuxian has been staying underneath their roof, eating their food, and walking among their people, all after strolling out of the forest with stars in his eyes and gold in his steps.

Ah, well. There’s no shame in saying it. Resting his chin on the back of his hand, he says, “I suppose you could say I’m a god.”

For a short moment, the waitress is silent. Then her measured expression melts into something more comfortable, and she lets out a relieved sigh. “Well, I guess that explains a lot!” She slaps her knee, as if she’s enjoying a good joke.

“You’re very calm about this,” says Wei Wuxian, a little surprised.

The waitress throws him a side glance. “I am,” she agrees. “Why? Is there something I should be grateful to you for?”

Wei Wuxian isn’t sure how to answer. “Not yet,” is what he decides on.
The waitress nods as if she was expecting such an answer from the beginning, then moves to refill his cup. Now that Wei Wuxian has finally heard her speak her mind, he realizes that her words aren’t thrown out casually, but given kindly. Bestowed.

“Either way, I can’t say I see the gods in any particular light. Divine, immortal, sure. I get it.” She looks at Wei Wuxian, past the gold in his eyes, and into someone he doesn’t remember. “But the scope of forever and eternity is too great for any mortal to understand. So if the gods want to preserve the world, they can go ahead and do it. If they want to destroy it, I won’t mind. Frankly, I don’t believe all too much in gods. If anything, I believe in a world that doesn’t care and people who do.”

There’s nothing Wei Wuxian can say to that. He can’t say I care because he isn’t the world, and he can’t say I agree because he isn’t human.

So he says the next best thing. “I understand.”

For the first time since the conversation began, surprise colours the waitress’ features.

“You do,” she says, not asks. The question only comes when she leans in closer and repeats, “You really do, don’t you?”

Wei Wuxian isn’t sure what she sees in him that lets her place such trust in someone she neither knows nor cares to know, but he’s grateful anyway.

“In all honesty, I’m a bit new around here,” he admits. Though he wasn’t trying to hide the fact that he’s been a god for no more than a few months, it feels a little embarrassing to know less about the world than the average mortal. Technically speaking, he’s younger than most of them, too. “I haven’t done anything very godly yet. If I were you, I don’t think I’d believe in the gods all too much either.”

The last of waitress’ wariness melts away. She props her head up on her hand and raises an eyebrow. Amusement lights her eyes. “I’m not sure if that’s blasphemy or some serious self-deprecation.”

“That’s me,” Wei Wuxian says, downing what’s left in the jar in one go. He reaches for the next jar. He can’t tell what sort of smile rises to his lips, but the waitress takes one look at him and snorts. “If the world hates me, what difference does one more person make?”
From there, the conversation steers toward friendlier topics. The waitress continues to make teasing jabs at Wei Wuxian’s supposed godhood, while Wei Wuxian responds in kind by either feigning ignorance or asking genuine questions that send the waitress into fits of boisterous laughter.

“You – you don’t know who the Yiling Patriarch is?” The waitress uses the table to keep upright, wheezing between choked breaths.

Wei Wuxian huffs and crosses his arms. Another waitress comes by to pick up the empty plates, sees his petulant look, and giggles. He pouts some more. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Then,” the waitress declares, raising a hand dramatically, “let this undeserving servant tell you a story.”

It’s a story Wei Wuxian has never heard. It’s a story of a child, a prodigy, given every gift in the world: talent, beauty, a bright future. He is but a child, innocent and naive.

One day, he comes back, and he is no longer himself.

Thousands fall before him, and he watches on with blood-red eyes and a cold smile. He grabs the sun with his bare hands and tears it to pieces. He destroys his own sect and murders the only people who gave him love. He is all-powerful, a master of the dead, and yet he is an atrocity, a monster of his own creation, a murderer who revels in chaos, and he must be stopped.

The world bands together to destroy this great villain. His own brother leads the charge. He doesn’t care.

In the end, it is he who destroys himself. There is no body to bury. It doesn’t matter. Nobody mourns him.

And so the world is rid of another great evil. The people live in peace once more. Everything is good. Everything is how it should be.

Everyone is happy.
It’s a story Wei Wuxian has never heard. He wants to say something, interject with *if only you knew*, but he knows that a villain with a heart as black as the Yiling Patriarch's deserved everything he received.

As the waitress draws the tale to a close, she sighs. There’s an emotion on her face that Wei Wuxian can’t place. It’s something tired, like acceptance, but it’s also something sad, like pity. “They say his name was Wei Ying. At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

Wei Wuxian’s heart stutters and fails. His breaths catch and his fists clench. “His – his name?”

“I might be wrong,” the waitress says, watching his expression carefully. He isn’t sure what kind of face he’s making right now. “Though I hear some of the cultivators who still call him by his courtesy call him Wei Wuxian.”

_A-Xian. You... you should stop first._

_Don’t... don’t..._

There’s a pounding in his head that won’t stop. It hurts, but he’s used to pain. He smiles through it.

“That’s some awful irony right there,” he says. Every word that rolls off his tongue is bitter. “A child of ghosts, torn apart by ghosts. Born with no envies, died envying the world.” His smile is scornful. It sits on his lips like a scar. “A bright light always casts a long shadow. The fools who run toward their deaths and drag along others with them are the most despicable beings in this world. I’ll drink to his death.”

The waitress pours herself a cup, then raises it to meet Wei Wuxian’s. There is something in her eyes that reminds him of warm soup and a soft voice. There is something in her eyes that reminds him of the sheen of metal through flesh, words forever lost, and something breaking.

“I’ll drink to it too,” is all the waitress says, her every word measured.

It’s hard for Wei Wuxian to say anything after they drink. Dark thoughts lull in his mind, asking him, *Was it you? Was it you?*
Eventually, Wei Wuxian comes to the conclusion that it couldn’t have been him. Villains are to burn in hell for all eternity. Why would anyone so vile be given new life as a god?

It’s an impossibility. If anything, Wei Wuxian is just unfortunate to share a name with someone so horrible. Perhaps some higher power thought it would be fun to give him a name (and what he can infer from his conversations with the souls, an appearance) with a blood-stained legacy.

So Wei Wuxian is just Wei Wuxian, god of luck. That’s all there is to it, and nothing else.

“By the way,” says Wei Wuxian, just as he’s moving to clean up, “I’ve been awfully rude, exchanging so many words with you and never once asking your name. How should I address you, fair maiden?”

The waitress places a hand on her hip, eyes crinkling in amusement. “Shouldn’t you give your own name first before asking for a woman’s?”

That’s a rather unfortunate question to ask. Still, a question is a question, and Wei Wuxian won’t shy away from it.

“Some secrets are best kept close to your heart,” he answers coyly. Wei Wuxian raises a finger to his lips and winks. “I’d prefer it if you called me... Fuxing.”

The waitress pauses for a moment. Her eyes go wide. “Fuxing,” she repeats. After a brief silence, she hesitantly adds, “the god of prosperity?”

Wei Wuxian waves his hand dismissively. He doesn’t care much for titles, but it’d be unfortunate if people learned his true name. Besides, the title feels right. “Luck, prosperity, wealth, whatever you want to call it. It is what it is.”

“Huh.” The waitress leans on the table again, as if dazed. She blinks out of it quickly, then bows. “Thank you for telling me your title. You can call this humble servant Mie Yu.”

Oh, cringe. Nope. Wei Wuxian doesn’t like where this is headed. He really doesn’t.
“No formality,” he says flatly. When the waitress looks up and opens her mouth to speak, he holds up a hand. “Listen. I understand that prosperity is a big deal for you mortals, but...” He sighs, tucking a strand of loose hair behind his ear. “I’m just trying to do the best I can, and you’re trying to do the best you can. You can respect me if you want, you can revere me if you want, but please, don’t put me on a pedestal. It really isn’t comfortable up there.”

Mie Yu stares at him for a moment. A series of emotions cross her face: first surprise, then suspicion, and then mirth. Her posture relaxes, and she gives an exaggerated bow. “Whatever your divine lordship commands.”

The night is still young when Wei Wuxian begins to pace the streets. Mie Yu tells him to enjoy the festivities while they last, then says that she’ll ready a bath for when he returns. He nods his head in thanks, then steps out into the lantern-lit roads.

Despite how small the village is, the streets are so busy that Wei Wuxian feels like he’s – somewhere. Someplace familiar. Home, maybe. Even if he doesn’t know, it’s a good feeling. He isn’t a child anymore, but the grin that rises to his face when he watches children run between stalls and to their friends speaks of fond memories.

By now, most of the villagers know he’s some sort of divine being. Regardless of whether they believe he’s a servant of a god or an actual god, they bow their heads slightly when he passes, and Wei Wuxian nods back.

Some of the younger storekeepers call out to him and insist on giving him gifts. If he were human, he wouldn’t reject them, and as a god, he can’t reject them. So he carries them as best as he can, struggling to fit all the flowers and incense and charms and snacks in his sleeves and in his arms. Just as he’s considering returning to his residence to empty his hands, all the offerings disappear in a brilliant flash of gold.

Everyone turns to stare. The people who were staring to begin with continue to stare. Even Wei Wuxian stares down at his glowing hands.

He isn’t sure what to think, but he feels... stronger? It isn’t the right way to describe the sensation of fulfillment he gains, but it’s close. He feels warm, he feels good. Something swells inside him.

“Hey, hey, how’d you do that?”
A small hand tugs at his robes, and Wei Wuxian turns to see a small boy, no older than three or four at most, staring at him with wonder in his eyes.

*Xian-gege!*

For a moment, his breath catches. Something stabs him in the gut. The warmth in his chest subsides.

Despite everything, Wei Wuxian smiles. He kneels down and spreads his hands in front of the boy. Golden strings form between his fingers, five short threads stretched taught.

“Are you curious?” Wei Wuxian watches as the child nods eagerly, running his small hands down the shining strings reverently. Despite his young age, the boy seems to understand that the strings are important.

“I heard people say that you have special powers,” the boy says. He looks up at Wei Wuxian with hope in his eyes, and something within tells him, *orphan.* “Can you make people alive again?”

It’s a question Wei Wuxian has to answer carefully. He knows the answer is yes, but it’s an answer so cruel that it’d be kinder not to say anything at all.

Instead, Wei Wuxian’s expression softens. Nobody asks such a question without a reason, least of all a child. “I can make you lucky, and that can make you happy, but if someone is gone, it’s best to let them go.”

The boy deflates. “Oh.”

Something inside Wei Wuxian hurts. Is it pity? Empathy?

He doesn’t know. That’s alright; he doesn’t need to know.

“But,” says Wei Wuxian, in a voice he remembers using to put someone to sleep, to comfort someone, but who, and when, and what was his name? “If you become someone they’d be proud of, then there’s no reason not to keep them close to your heart.”
The boy looks at him so earnestly that it makes him want to turn away. But he doesn’t. He’s done enough running.

So he takes the boy’s hands and intertwines the golden strings between his fingers.

Wei Wuxian is a god, and this will be his first blessing.

With closed eyes, Wei Wuxian begins. “The first, for gentle fortune, so you may find light in the Darkest of nights.”

All it takes is one phrase for everything to come to him. He breathes the very life of the world, he channels the spirit of all that is alive, and he speaks an oath the cosmos and the stars made long ago.

“The second, for a long and healthy life, so you may stand tall even as time walks on.”

What does it matter who he was before? Immortal or not, nobody can live in the past when the present is all there is.

“The third, for respect from and to all, so you may greet and be greeted kindly.”

The memories that seep through speak of pain and tragedy and loss. It doesn’t matter.

“The fourth, for bonds that will never break, so you may find a family that will never abandon you.”

It’s a new day. There are people praying for happiness every waking moment. Wei Wuxian will not let them suffer alone.

“And the fifth,” Wei Wuxian finishes, opening his eyes to a child who has stars in his eyes, “for happiness that no one can offer to you but yourself, so you may find peace within and without.”

The last of the strings vanishes in a burst of light, and Wei Wuxian lifts his hands. The boy looks
down at his own small hands, so soft and young and innocent. He looks up again.

Then, with more force than Wei Wuxian expected from such a small child, the boy leaps at him with open arms, smothering him in a wordless hug.

The cost, Wei Wuxian thinks somewhere in the back of his mind. He raises his hands to gently pat the boy’s back.

“Why don’t you head back to your friends?” Wei Wuxian gestures toward a group of children who appear to be watching from a distance with bright eyes and wide mouths. “I’m sure they’ve been looking for you.”

The boy looks devastated. “You’re not coming?”

“Gege is very busy.” He gently runs a hand through the boy’s unruly hair. “But if we meet again, I’ll be sure to treat you to some delicious food. Okay?”

The boy beams. “Okay!”

As he runs to join his friends, Wei Wuxian smiles. It’s better this way. Although it’s an incredibly faint memory, he recalls attempting to raise a child as his own—

You’re such a good boy.

I love you.

Live for me.

-And the ending was-

It’s better if Wei Wuxian lives in reality and does his duty as a god instead of playing the parent.
He continues to walk through the streets, watching as the lanterns are put out as the night marches on. People look at him with a different light in their eyes, undoubtedly a change spurred on by witnessing a blessing. In a small village like this, word spreads fast, and Wei Wuxian knows that everyone will have heard of their local god of luck when morning comes.

When he returns for the night, Mie Yu grins knowingly. “You’ve been busy.”

“I just got busy.” Wei Wuxian corrects. He sighs. “I’ll take that bath and call it a day. I’ll be gone before the sun rises.”

Mie Yu lifts an eyebrow. “Leaving so soon?”

“Duty calls,” is all Wei Wuxian says. Now that he’s started, he can’t just stop.

As he’s heading upstairs to his room, he pauses. He looks down at Mie Yu, who peers up at him.

One good act begets another. Wei Wuxian leans on the banister, running his fingers along the sturdy wood, and casually says, “When I’m gone, I suggest you be the one to clean up after me.”

Being the smart woman she is, Mie Yu laughs. “If that’s what your divine lordship commands, how can I refuse?”

That night, Wei Wuxian snatches stray threads of gold and ties them into circles. By the time the sun is just beginning to scatter light across the valley, the bed is completely covered with gold coins.

Wei Wuxian makes eight more for himself. He slips them in his sleeve.

He’ll come back here someday. Gods are entitled to whatever they want, and he wants to return here once he’s made people happy, see how far that blessed boy has gone, have a drink with Mie Yu, and give her a true answer as to what the world is like.

There is an ache in his heart. He is bleeding from a wound that has already healed. There are days of darkness and despair behind him—
But the world is vast. And there will be plenty of other days.

He leaves the village just as dawn breaks.

Chapter End Notes

if you've read anything else i've written, you can tell it's me because it's an au and revolves around the mc struggling to remember a past life.

i'd like to think of this as a sort of really convoluted fix-it, but it's more of a chronicle of wwx's travels as he tries to heal from wounds he doesn't remember. the fix-it thing is valid, technically, but only for events after wwx's death. anyway, i thought the god of luck thing would be an interesting touch considering mdzs is basically a story of how everyone gets royally fucked by luck (or a lack thereof), so it's more of a plot device than a lore expansion.

also, i used a line from rupi kaur's the sun and her flowers:

i am sorry this world
could not keep you safe
may your journey home
be a soft and peaceful one

thanks for reading!
A-Qing runs.

Her feet are bleeding, her hands are shaking, every breath is choked on the memories of Daozhang, Daozhang, Daozhang.

Fear. That’s all there is. And anger, and despair, and the burning desire for revenge. There are a million emotions raging inside her, and they’re all so complicated but so simple.

_Die, die, die. May the gods smite you from this earth. May you burn in hell for eternity. May your soul be torn to shreds. May you suffer the pain you inflicted onto the world tenfold. You don’t deserve a peaceful end, you monster, you monster, you monster—_

The desperation in his broken voice, the sheen of cold steel, words forever lost, and something shattering into pieces.

It hurts, but what A-Qing feels is nothing in comparison to the pain suffered by Daozhang and his... his friend, lover, family, partner, irreplaceable, gone forever, because of him, because of her, because of that demon, because of the gods, because of the world.

All this time, Daozhang carried so many burdens. Song Daozhang must’ve been the same, and yet he didn’t make a single sound as he slowly slipped away.

What sort of horrible god made the world so cruel?

A-Qing isn’t blind. She’s young, but she can see far more than most people. The story that Daozhang never finished didn’t need finishing.

One who carried the other home and left without him, one who walked forward because looking back hurt too much and the other who chased after him because he knew how much it hurt, one who fell and the other that chased after him to a place A-Qing can’t go.
And there was nothing but silence to greet them.

A-Qing won’t ever know what they wanted to say to each other.

(He knows.

To someone who promised to stay by your side but couldn’t, to someone who gave you everything when you didn’t want it, to someone who was lost before you could reach out to them and bring them back—

What else can you say but “Thank you” and “I’m sorry”?

A-Qing had a family. It was a lie, an illusion built by a demon who saw kindness in a man with nothing but good in his heart and exploited it. But no lies can last forever. The end comes with the truth, and the truth comes with the end. It doesn’t matter which one comes first, because both will come eventually, and when one comes, the other is never far behind.

A-Qing isn’t stupid. She knows that she can’t run or hide forever. You don’t realize how little time you have left until everyone around you has already run out of time.

So with the time she has left, she needs to find someone who can bring justice to all the innocent people who have fallen at Xue Yang’s disgusting hands.

*This is for Daozhang*, she tells herself, wandering through the same streets over and over again, asking for help, for strength, for anything at all.

*This is for me*, she knows, curling into herself when night falls and the cold comes with it. *This is for me, who doesn’t deserve anything, but you took something away from me that I can never replace, and it hurts, and I’ll never forgive you.*

Time is running out. There was never enough to begin with. Days pass, and A-Qing knows that Xue Yang will find her.
“Excuse me, are there any powerful cultivators here?”

No matter how desperately A-Qing asks, everyone snorts and turns away from her. They’re so ignorant and carefree and selfish that A-Qing wants to punch them in the face, pull them down to the ground, and scream, Why are you wasting your stupid life that Daozhang died to save!?

The sun is beginning to set. A-Qing feels weary and exhausted down to her very core.

She keeps walking. Her hands are shaking, but her grip on her bamboo pole is firm.

And there, strolling slowly through the streets, is a man with long black hair wearing a weimao with a golden veil. Black robes fall down his shoulders in many layers, tracing a pattern for white peonies to tumble down his arms and into a white pool at his feet.

As he passes, people turn to stop and stare in awe, eyes wide with reverence. Some give him a wide berth, others bow respectfully, and others still smile and turn away knowingly.

A-Qing can’t see his face, but she knows an important person when she sees one.

Using her newfound strength, A-Qing runs down the street, muttering half-apologies at those she collides with, ignoring the stinging pain in her feet, until she reaches out and grabs a handful of the man’s peony-patterned sleeve.

The man pauses. He barely has time to turn his head before A-Qing steels herself and tightens her grip.

“Excuse me,” she says resolutely, planting herself down and refusing to move until he listens, “do you know of any powerful cultivators around here?”

When the man fully turns to face her, A-Qing gapes.

He’s more beautiful than anyone A-Qing has ever seen. His skin is pale and clear and his features are elegant. He’s pretty in a real way, not like those other filthy men who dress like they’re kings and act like they’re criminals. His expression is bright but muted, as if he’s watching the sun slowly set into
twilight. And...

There’s a legend of sorts going around these days about a god. It’s the kind of thing everyone knows in the back of their mind, but whether it’s real or not comes down to what you’ve seen.

**A god descended to the mortal realm not too long ago.**

They say he’s a god of luck. He’ll grant you the fortune that the world won’t give you. If you should ever find yourself lost, he’ll bring you home.

He’s a kind soul. He will treat you with respect before you treat him with respect. But he is a god, and no matter how friendly a god is, there is a line that mustn't be breached.

At the end of the day, though, he’s a friend. If you need his help, he won’t turn away. He understands what it’s like to be alone, and he won’t let you fall to the same fate.

*His eyes are full of stars, but the stars he wants you to see are somewhere else.*

“Your eyes,” A-Qing whispers.

It’s like looking at the stars at night when every other light has gone. Hundreds of golden dots linger in a landscape of grey and blue and purple, and when he blinks, the stars rearrange themselves and swirl endlessly in circles and circles, neverending, eternal, quietly breathing and dying.

The man—the god—takes one look at A-Qing and smiles. His expression softens. “You’re looking for a cultivator? Is there something wrong?”

His voice is a bit deeper than A-Qing expected, but it’s firm and kind. Snapping out of her trance, A-Qing nods furiously and tightens her grip. “Sir, your divine lordship, please, I beg you! I need your help. Please!”

This is a chance that A-Qing can’t lose. No matter how tricky or powerful Xue Yang is, it’s impossible to kill a god. And who better to enact justice for all those unfortunate innocents that died at Xue Yang’s dirty hands than a god of luck himself?
The god takes a moment to peer behind A-Qing. His eyes narrow.

When A-Qing turns to look, she sees nothing but the same dusty streets she’s been roaming for days.

“I can help you.”

With those words, A-Qing feels the tiniest bit of hope crawl forth from somewhere inside her. But she keeps it far from her heart. It’s that desperate hope that Xue Yang revels in crushing, and A-Qing refuses to waste the life that she’s been given by falling to the same cruel methods.

Bowing as deeply as she can, A-Qing bites down on her quivering lip and forces the tears back. “Thank you. Thank you. This... this undeserving servant will be forever grateful.”

“You don’t need to bow,” the god says, softly, gently. When A-Qing stands straight, he offers his hand. A-Qing hesitates, and he shakes his head with an emotion that’s too complicated to identify. “You don’t need to be scared. It’s my duty to help. Whatever it is you’re running from, I’ll help you face it.”

His hand is slender but calloused. His eyes are clear. They’re the hands and the eyes of someone who does good and asks for nothing in exchange.

_The world really is vast, Daozhang._

In an act of—of what? Shedding the past? Running full-speed into the only option she has left?

A-Qing doesn’t know. She doesn’t care. She looks up at the god’s starry eyes that somehow still manage to convey so much genuine emotion, and takes his hand.

The god lets out a small breath. In an instant, his expression shifts from something somber to something lighter and more jovial.

“First things first,” he says, his voice lifting with a cheer that A-Qing finds herself appreciating, even
in the midst of everything, “let’s get you cleaned up. You can tell me your story after dinner.”

The god calls himself Fuxing.

There’s a strange glint in his eyes when he tells A-Qing, as if he doesn’t really mean it. Even the way he says it is suspicious.

“You can call me Fuxing,” he says, his tone demonstrating that he’s introduced himself as such a thousand times over.

But A-Qing isn’t convinced. “I can call you Fuxing,” she says adamantly, “but what do you call yourself?”

For a moment, the god turns to her with wide eyes. It’s an expression of pleasant surprise. But he simply smiles and raises a finger to his lips. “Even gods are allowed to keep secrets. What about you, young maiden? How should I address you?”

A-Qing huffs. “You can call me A-Qing,” she parrots, annoyed.

Fuxing laughs, eyes bright. “Well, I guess that’s fair enough.”

Despite A-Qing’s insisting that Xue Yang needs to be stopped immediately, Fuxing brings her along to find new clothes. When he spots A-Qing’s bleeding feet, he frowns, takes off his weimao, turns around, and drops to one knee.

He makes a gesture with his hands while looking back. “Come on. I’ll give you a ride.”

“A what?”

At first, A-Qing rejects the offer because she’s pretty sure even touching a god is crossing some sort of line. But Fuxing keeps insisting, and A-Qing’s feet really do hurt, so she caves.
Fuxing hands A-Qing his weimao and grins when she puts it on her own head. He picks her up, and the two of them begin making their way down the streets, attracting a fair share of shocked looks.

It doesn’t take long for A-Qing to get changed into something that isn’t so torn up. Upon entering the shop, Fuxing gives a small “Hello, good sir” in greeting. The shopkeeper takes one look at Fuxing and A-Qing, goes pale, and scrambles to pull every suitable robe down.

The past few days have been particularly harrowing, but A-Qing’s new green and white aoqun improves her mood by leaps and bounds. Despite the very real danger of Xue Yang appearing from the shadows and cutting her up into pieces, Fuxing’s presence makes her feel safe.

Fuxing picks her up again, and they head off toward a hotel. The entire room goes quiet when they enter, but the owner simply exchanges an amused look with Fuxing and turns to speak to one of the wide-eyed employees.

A-Qing catches people staring at her and glares right back. It doesn’t matter what they think of her. These people don’t know anything, and they never cared to begin with. In the end, the only person in this entire town who listened to her was a god.

Well, it could’ve been much worse. For a god, Fuxing seems very kind.

Fuxing finally lets A-Qing down once they’re resting safely in a room. He seats her on the bed just as a young lady pokes her head meekly into the room, slides two servings of dinner onto the table, and escapes as quickly as possible.

“Let me take a look at your feet first,” Fuxing says, entirely unfazed. He’s probably used to being so divine to the point that people fear him. “You’ve been running for a while, haven’t you? It must be painful.”

“Uh-huh,” is all A-Qing can say as she lifts the weimao off her head.

The god raises a hand over her bloodied feet. A golden glow surrounds Fuxing’s hand, and with a whisper of something unknown, the same glow bathes A-Qing’s feet. She feels warm, she feels safe, and the glow subsides.
The cuts are gone. The pain is gone.

There... isn’t anything A-Qing can say. Fuxing’s a god. Healing such minor wounds and alleviating such pain must be child’s play for him.

It isn’t that A-Qing wants more, and she isn’t ungrateful. For Fuxing to turn away from whatever divine duties he has and listen to one tiny girl is already enough. To clothe her, feed her, and house her is far more than enough.

But if he truly is so powerful, why couldn’t he come sooner?

How many people could’ve been saved if he had just come sooner?

With a satisfied nod, Fuxing gestures to the table. “Now, if you’d like, you can tell me your story. But only after dinner.” The god smiles and runs the tips of his fingers over the smooth wood. “It’s always better to deal with pain on a full stomach.”

A-Qing has never been the sort of person to deny a free meal. Besides, she’s barely eaten anything over the past few days. After she gets rid of Xue Yang, who knows when or where she’ll get her next meal?

Without Daozhang here—

No. No. A-Qing has moped for long enough. She won’t let her emotions get the better of her, especially not when there’s a chance right in front of her.

Seating herself across the god, A-Qing grabs her chopsticks, picks up her bowl, and proceeds to inhale everything as quickly as possible.

Fuxing’s brows raise, but he says nothing. While A-Qing devours everything before her, he ignores his food, instead choosing to stare at the window and into the night. The gold stars remain stagnant as his eyes glaze over, lost in something nobody but him can see.

It’s weird. It’s really weird. Gods are supposed to be fickle and mercurial, but Fuxing’s different. His
mood comes and goes in gentle motions; one moment, he’ll be teasing, the next, he’ll be amused, and the next, he’ll be melancholic.

For a god, he looks awfully lost.

A-Qing points to Fuxing’s bowl of rice, still untouched. “So, are you going to eat or what?”

The god startles for a moment, then looks down at his food. “Oh,” he says. “No, I think I’ll pass. You can take my share.”

A-Qing narrows her eyes. She slaps her chopsticks onto the table and glares at Fuxing. “Eat. What kind of dumb person skips meals?”

Fuxing’s brows raise again. He breaks into an amused smile. “Well, if you insist, then I can’t possibly say no.”

A-Qing only goes back to her own food once she’s made sure that Fuxing’s actually eating and not just poking at his food.

If there’s one thing A-Qing knows, it’s that even when you aren’t hungry, you should eat when you have to eat. Losing your appetite is always a bad sign. It means that you’re sick, you’re sad, or you’re so distracted by something that you don’t see the point in eating.

It’s bad news all around, and A-Qing isn’t about to throw a god at someone like Xue Yang without making sure Fuxing can kill that bastard dead.

By the time they’re both done, it’s dark outside. A-Qing moves back to the bed while Fuxing exchanges a short conversation with the lady who’s picking up their plates.

The door closes, and Fuxing turns back, no discernable expression on his features. The moon lights up his pale features, and for a moment, he really does look like he’s above everyone else.

Then: “Now, why don’t you tell me your story?”
A-Qing wants to think, *About time!*

In reality, she thinks, *Oh.*

It’s always easier to say things in the heat of the moment.

The words are hard to find.

Pain is an easy thing to feel, but it’s incredibly difficult to explain.

The beginning is the hardest to tell. Hindsight’s a stupid thing that way. Everything was so much before the truth was revealed. It’s so comfortable, living in arrogance. Who wants to face the truth? What good does it do?

*(Then I’ll follow you from now on. You’re Blind Senior. I’m Blind Junior.)*

*If we travel together, we can look after each other!)*

A-Qing speaks of her first meeting with Daozhang, their cursed encounter with Xue Yang, their years of peace, her growing suspicion of Xue Yang, and—

*(Excuse me, has anyone in this area seen a sword-wielding, blind Taoist?)*

The ending is the easiest to tell.

*(Spare me. Just... spare me.)*

The words spill from her lips. She curses Xue Yang for being born into the world, laments the deaths
of everyone who he deceived, and wonders if things could’ve been different if only luck was on her side.

When everything’s been said and done, A-Qing falls silent. She’s tired. She’s tired of crying. She’s tired of running. She’s tired of being scared.

In her mind is that same question, repeating endlessly: Why? You’re a god, aren’t you? Why didn’t you warn us? Why didn’t you do something?

Why?

“I know.”

Fuxing’s voice jolts A-Qing out of her reverie. “What?”

The god kneels before her. Without a gold veil obstructing either of their eyes, A-Qing can see them clearly up close for the first time.

They’re so beautiful, but they’re so sad.

It’s a sort of sadness that piles on top of itself, over and over again, until the hurt fades into acceptance. He looks like he’s about to cry, but not because it hurts. He’s fighting to hold on, but A-Qing doesn’t know what he’s trying to hold onto.

And that’s the thing, isn’t it? Regardless of how strong you are, it’s so easy for something to slip from your grasp. If you’re about to lose one thing and you struggle to reach out and grab it, you’ll lose whatever else you held in your hands. If you want to take on the weight of the world, you need to let go first.

Maybe, just maybe, that’s why Fuxing laughs so sadly when he reaches to grasp A-Qing’s hands. It’s like he’s saying, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let go.

A-Qing swallows the lump in her throat.
“I know,” Fuxing repeats softly. “You want to know why, don’t you?”

What does she say? What is she supposed to say when a god asks something like that? What do you say to someone who can read you just as well as you can read them?

“Yes,” A-Qing answers. It’s what’s in her heart.

Fuxing closes his eyes. Without the stars in his eyes, he looks so very human. And humans are so very fragile.

“You aren’t the first to ask, and you won’t be the last.” His voice is tired. He looks tired. He releases A-Qing’s hands but remains kneeled on the ground.

A-Qing wants to tell him to sit on the bed beside her and rest, but she won’t. It’s not her place.

“I follow chaos. I chase it down and I grant power to those who wish to put an end to it. I try to mitigate it as best as I can, but in the end, I don’t get to control who lives and who dies. The more chaos there is, the faster humans die. And there’s no such thing as a world without chaos, so someone will always be left behind.” Fuxing laughs bitterly, his gaze scornful. “It turns out that luck isn’t life.”

It’s just as sad as it is terrifying to hear a god admit such things. It’s the same as saying, at the end of the world, you’ll have to save yourselves.

As Fuxing speaks, his gaze lulls and the stars in his eyes slowly fade, one by one. “I won’t make excuses for myself. I left you behind, and you suffered for it. For that, I’m sorry.”

When Fuxing looks up at A-Qing, his eyes are simply an empty gray. There’s no trace of divinity, no sign of a not-so-all-powerful god. Before A-Qing is simply someone who wants to do good, and yet he’s forced to clean up the problems this world makes.

It hurts to know that even a god of luck isn’t above the whims of fate.
But if that’s the case... then none of them are. Whatever happens—it just happens. All anyone can ever do is try to salvage what’s left and piece it back together.

A-Qing takes a deep breath. With an unwavering gaze, she raises both her hands.

Confusion replaces the awful look of resigned, exhausted sorrow. Good. Anything is better than that self-condemning spiral of doom and gloom.

Then, with as much force as she can muster, A-Qing brings her hands down on either side of Fuxing’s face.

The resulting slap is a bit more violent and a lot louder than A-Qing intended, but it does the trick. Fuxing yelps and falls back, his hands cupping his face.

“What—why—” Fuxing pouts accusingly, and for a moment, A-Qing wonders how old he really is. “Why would you do that? I was—I was—”

“You were being sad,” A-Qing snaps. “I asked you why you couldn’t come earlier, and you told me why. I don’t need an apology. Anyone who asks for an apology is out of line!”

With her newly-healed feet, A-Qing stands and jabs a finger at Fuxing’s chest. She looks down at his bewildered form and narrows her eyes.

“You. Are. A. God.” Every one of A-Qing’s words corresponds with a fierce poke, and Fuxing’s eyes grow wider and wider as she speaks. “Everything you do is righteous! It’s good enough that you’re here in the mortal realm! What about those other gods that sit on their hands and watch as we all drop dead? At least if we die, you’ll be here to give us peace!”

With one last push, A-Qing drops down to her knees, grabs Fuxing’s robes by the collar, and refuses to let him look away. The stars are back and they’re swirling more vividly than ever.

“I’m sick of feeling sorry for myself,” A-Qing says, voice rising in volume, “and I’m sick of seeing you feel sorry for everyone else! What’s wrong with fixing problems once they’ve already happened? At least we have someone to help make things better! At least—”
A-Qing breaks and shatters into tiny pieces, but she pushes on anyway.

“At least you’re here,” A-Qing says, choking on half a sob. Her eyes are wet, there’s something caught in her throat, but her grip only tightens.

No matter how hard she tries to bite the tears back, she can’t. Once they start, they don’t stop.

So A-Qing sits there, her fingers tangled in Fuxing’s robes, tears streaming down her face for the last time, strangled sobs crawling out of her throat.

Why is it that the strongest people are the most fragile? Why is it that the best people end up with the worst fates? Why do people like Daozhang, who only want to do good despite the fact that they can only do so much, who owe the world absolutely nothing but give so freely anyway—why do good people with bleeding hearts destroy themselves? Why does the world let them? Why does the world punish them and then laugh at them?

A-Qing cries and cries, but it isn’t the same as before. Before, when she cried, it was because of fear, sorrow, and anger. Now, it’s because of frustration.

Good people never listen to the people who care about them. They run so quickly toward their deaths. They destroy themselves and inadvertently hurt everyone around them.

“You’re all so stupid,” A-Qing weeps, her sore fingers finally releasing Fuxing’s robes.

Fuxing’s breath catches in his throat. Then his shoulders fall slowly, his expression crumples like the entire world has just come down upon him, and he reaches out to wrap A-Qing in a hug.

It helps. It doesn’t. A-Qing doesn’t know anymore. All she can do is bunch her dumb, useless hands in Fuxing’s robes again, grabbing onto the last hope she has.

“Don’t go,” she begs, to Daozhang, to the trembling god. It doesn’t matter. As long as someone hears her, it doesn’t matter. “I don’t want to be alone! If you all leave, what... what am I supposed to do now?”
The next breath that Fuxing breathes shakes his entire being. His arms tighten around A-Qing, and, very gently, he pats her back at a slow, steady pace. He continues running his hand down A-Qing’s back like he’s comforting a young child until the last of A-Qing’s sobs subside into sniffles.

It’s dumb. A-Qing isn’t a child. She doesn’t need to be treated like one.

But it’s good enough. Being here is good enough.

“Okay,” Fuxing finally says. “Okay. I won’t go. I won’t leave you alone. If you don’t know what to do, you can...” His voice trails off, but when it returns, it’s unwavering and firm. “You can come with me, and I can give you something to live for.”

A-Qing’s breath hitches sporadically, but she manages to bring the words forward anyway. “Then promise,” she whispers. “I’m tired of people leaving without saying anything.”

For a long moment, Fuxing is silent. Then he pulls away from A-Qing, grasping her arms gently in his pale hands.

“I promise,” Fuxing says. The stars in his eyes dance in endless circles. The kaleidoscope of grey and purple darkens and darkens until it becomes night. His smile is sad but soft, as if he’s still halfway lost. “I’m tired of leaving people behind. So let’s promise to stick together until the end of the road, okay?”

The end of the road could be tomorrow; it could be in a hundred years.

It doesn’t matter. At the end of that road has to be another road, and another, and another. As long as Fuxing can lead A-Qing to the end of this one, then these dark days will be over.

A-Qing nods. She sniffs and wipes away the last tears in her eyes. “Yeah. Promise. Until the end of the road.”

Fuxing takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. “Good,” he mutters. “Good.”

For a long time, there’s only silence to fill the room. Fuxing steadies himself while A-Qing sits until
her breaths finally come normally.

And then that she realizes how stupid the situation is.

A girl and a god, kneeled on the ground and exhausted in more ways than one, neither one better off than the other. A-Qing came here to find help, and yet all she’s done is cry all over a god’s robes.

Fuxing isn’t much better, either. Stupid self-sacrificing idiots, trying to save everyone while pushing everyone away. If the path is so hard to walk that you can’t bring anyone along with you, it’s not worth it.

A clap of laughter breaks the silence. Fuxing runs a hand through his hair, then rises to his feet. A-Qing follows suit.

“What a night it’s been,” he says, shaking his head. Despite everything, that familiar amused glint returns to his features. “But at the very least, I don’t need to convince you to stop acting so formal around me. I think we jumped that hurdle when you decided to give me a friendly wake-up slap.”

A-Qing huffs and crosses her arms. “I won’t apologize.”

“You don’t need to.” Fuxing grins, all teeth. “In fact, it’s refreshing to meet someone who doesn’t trip over themselves bowing when they see me.”

“I’m not going to bow to someone unless they’ve already done something for me,” A-Qing says, a little heated. That, and when somebody has died for her.

Fuxing hums in agreement. “You’re absolutely right. So let me stop wasting time and act like a god.”

A-Qing doesn’t know why she’s surprised when a glorious golden aura bursts from Fuxing. As he spreads his hands and drags golden strings into existence from nothing, her mouth drops open, and Fuxing’s lips curl into a smile.

“Young maiden who runs alongside the wind,” the god declares, his fingers dancing between ethereal golden strands, “unto you, I bestow five blessings.”
Oh.

“The first, for strength of heart, so you may face your enemies without fear.”

*I won’t let Xue Yang get away with this.*

“The second, for strength of will, so you may seek out the end to your journeys with your own two hands.”

*I’ll do this for all of us, Daozhang.*

“The third, for peace of heart, so you may lay to rest the ghosts that haunt you.”

*I’ll find a way to make things better.*

“The fourth, for a future of freedom, so you may carve out the roads that you desire to travel.”

*I’ll find a way to bring you back and give you the happiness you deserve.*

“And the fifth,” the god finishes, tying the last knot in a stream of ever-changing gold, “for hands made for mending and creating, so you may weave bonds that will never break.”

*Let’s travel together again one day, okay?*

With a brilliant burst of light, the strings burst into ephemeral flecks of stardust, disappearing into the endless night as if they were never there to begin with.

A-Qing watches the gold slowly fade, then looks down at her hands. She feels warmer. Maybe not stronger, but... better.
Fuxing’s gold aura fades along with the strings. He lets out a breath, clenches his hands a few times, then leans down and peers into A-Qing’s eyes. After a moment, he reaches for her wrist and presses two fingers down to—to check her pulse?

“Hm,” he says contemplatively. A-Qing has no idea what he’s looking for, but it appears he finds it. With a satisfied nod, Fuxing releases her wrist and steps back. “I think I know someone who can take you in.”


“Someone I know quite well,” is all Fuxing provides before he glances out the window and into the dark. “But we’ll leave that conversation for another time. It’s late, and we have a very big day ahead of us.”

A-Qing studies Fuxing’s expression carefully. Instead of his usual comedic grin, his lips are pulled upward into something sharp and thin and dangerous, like a knife. His eyes glint with an ominous tint, and for a split second, A-Qing swears she sees a spark of red light up the stars.

“Okay,” she says, choosing her words carefully. “I’ll go and sleep. What about you?”

Fuxing tilts his head to the side. It’s a strange motion, something not quite human. “Oh, don’t worry about me.” Lyrical: that’s what his voice is. Lyrical, smooth, and void of any genuine emotion. “Don’t you know? Monsters are most active at night.”

The god lifts his hand as if to study it. A dark hue clouds the tips of his fingers, swirling slowly, pacing, watching everyone and everywhere.

“Rest,” the god says, and no matter how hard A-Qing tries to stay awake, the lull of sleep tugs harder. “As long as I’m here, the nightmares won’t catch you.”

Before sleep takes her completely, in the corner of her eye, A-Qing sees a single red spider lily bloom.
Dawn has barely broken before A-Qing and Fuxing make their way out of town. Fuxing holds her hand in his grip, and A-Qing can’t find it in herself to complain.

They both feel it. Something’s following them, and it’s close.

“Fuxing,” A-Qing whispers, keeping close. “Where are we going?”

The god squeezes her hand but doesn’t look back. He keeps walking, and all A-Qing can do is follow.

That golden veil has never felt more like a wall than it has now.

They walk, walk, and walk, and for some time, A-Qing manages to convince herself that they’ve escaped, and that nobody, not even Xue Yang, would dare attack a god.

It happens the moment A-Qing hears the gentle trickle of a small stream.

A blur of black robes, the unmistakable sound of a blade cutting through air, and the inhuman grunts of a corpse.

A-Qing barely has time to scream before Fuxing snaps his sleeve outward.

It happens in an instant.

Eight golden coins fly out of the god’s sleeve. One moment, they’re nothing but tiny golden circles, and the next, they’re eight golden blades adorned with white flowers, catching the attack and returning it with ten times the force.

The figure smashes into a tree with a sickening crack, and A-Qing’s breath catches.

She’d recognize him anywhere. How could she forget, after sending him to his death?
“Song Daozhang,” she cries, her grip threatening to snap her bamboo pole in half. She looks up at the god and shakes his sleeve, begging him to the listen. “That’s Song Daozhang! Fuxing, you have to help him. You have to save him!”

Finally, the god peers downward. His eyes shine a brilliant gold as his swords dance around him, glowing with divine light. “I will.”

Song Daozhang makes an awful noise as he throws himself up and forward. Fuxing snaps his fingers.

A-Qing quickly learns why gods are not to be trifled with.

Even in death, Song Daozhang is elegant and immensely skilled. His sword flashes as he attacks relentlessly over and over again, leaving a streak of black behind him. If he were facing any lesser being, he would have them on the ground, bleeding, and in pieces.

But no matter how powerful a mortal is, gods will always be a step higher.

Without lifting a single finger, Fuxing watches with an empty expression as his blades land two blows after countering one. Regardless of which direction Song Daozhang’s Fuxue strikes, the god’s weapons refuse to leave even a single opening.

Then, suddenly, inexplicably, Song Daozhang slips, or trips, or hesitates. Fuxing sees it, and his eyes narrow.

A golden sword pierces through Song Daozhang’s bloodless chest and pins him to the ground. The earth beneath Song Daozhang’s struggling corpse bursts into light, painting an array that seals his movements entirely.

Bringing two fingers to his lips, Fuxing speaks a single word: “Purge.”

Brilliant gold light envelopes the array. Song Daozhang releases a series of awful roars that make A-Qing flinch, but as the light dies down, so does his grunts and spasms. When the light fades entirely, all that remains is a still corpse.
“What a shame,” Fuxing says calmly. His seven remaining swords return to float by his side. Slowly, almost lethargically, he reaches for one and wraps his hand around its hilt. “I’m not sure how long you thought you could hold me back, but you completely missed your opportunity for a sneak attack.”

At first, there is silence. Then, from the stillness, an eerie laugh winds and echoes out from the trees.

Rage and fear snap into place. A-Qing steps closer to Fuxing.

That laugh. That cursed, dirty, piece-of-shit laugh. The only people who should have to hear it is the murderers and demons that reside in hell, and if Fuxing doesn’t do it throw him down there, then A-Qing will kick him down herself.

From the shadows of the forest, Xue Yang steps out and into the early morning light, a smear of black against the dawn-lit trees, a monster wearing a pleasant smile on his face.

“How interesting,” Xue Yang says, light in both voice and demeanor. His steps are measured but bold. As he makes his way toward Fuxing, his eyes glint with hungry curiosity. “A gold veil, eight gold swords—why, you remind me very much of a certain god.”

Fuxing’s smile is sharper than any of his blades. He gently nudges A-Qing back with one hand and drags the tip of his sword in front of himself with the other. “Is that so? What a happy coincidence.”

Xue Yang turns to A-Qing, his smile widening. He bares his teeth and cocks his head to the side. Despite having a god’s protection, a violent shiver runs down A-Qing’s spine. “And if it isn’t A-Qing. You’re so good at making friends. You even earned the favour of a god!”

Disgusting, disgusting, disgusting. A-Qing’s expression twists, and her grip on Fuxing’s sleeve tightens. “Fuck you!”

“A-Qing,” Xue Yang says, his words honey-sweet with fake sadness, “why do you keep pushing me away? We’re friends, aren’t we? Come on, let me give you a hug.”

Xue Yang spreads his arms, his smile unfaltering. A-Qing feels sick to her stomach.
And that sword in his hand—

It’s Daozhang’s. It’s Daozhang’s!

“You filthy animal!” A-Qing doesn’t dare step closer, so she instead tugs Fuxing toward her. Rage boils inside her, threatening to consume her, yet the fear keeps her in place. “How dare you dirty Daozhang’s sword with your disgusting hands! If you have any human thoughts in that warped head of yours, you’ll cut off your own head before Fuxing skewers you like the pathetic sack of meat you are and shreds your black heart into pieces!”

Xue Yang’s smile widens into something more fitting, sharp and demented and something A-Qing would love to see hacked right off his face. “That’s quite the mouth you have! What happened to that stupid little girl who’d whine to Xiao Xingchen so often?” His features light up with a manic glint. “Or was that an act too? Congratulations, congratulations. You managed to fool me so well.”

Casually, deliberately, Xue Yang draws his own sword. He points both the blade and his gaze at Fuxing, who returns the motion as calmly as ever and with a confident grace.

“You’re a brave one,” Fuxing says. “It’s not often that someone decides to challenge me.”

“Oh, but don’t you know?” Xue Yang waves Shuanghua at Song Daozhang’s incapacitated form. “These past few days have been incredibly successful for me. Two of the world’s most renowned cultivators in the palm of my hand—it’s truly a dream come true!”

How dare he. How *dare* he.

A-Qing opens her mouth to unleash another stream of curses onto Xue Yang, only to fall silent as she sees the corner of Fuxing’s mouth inch upward. A low chuckle crawls out of the god’s throat, colder than A-Qing has ever heard. It isn’t friendly, and it most definitely isn’t kind.

She quickly shuts her mouth.

“Two,” Fuxing drawls. “Two, you say. Then pardon me if I’m counting wrong, but...” Fuxing leaves a deliberate pause, then makes a show of peering over to Song Daozhang. “Why, I only count one. Where, oh where is Xiao Xingchen?”
A-Qing freezes.

She remembers Daozhang’s death more vividly than anything. The fear that she’d be next to die, the pain in her limbs as she waited and waited for the nightmare to end, the gut-wrenching loneliness when she realized that she was truly and utterly alone again.

For some reason, Xue Yang couldn’t bring Daozhang back, and that hurt him more than any sword ever could. A-Qing won’t ever know why, and she won’t ever care. He killed Daozhang and then had the audacity to blame Daozhang for not coming back!

Fuxing makes an indistinct noise as if thinking to himself, then brightens. “Oh! Perhaps Xiao Xingchen was so disgusted by you that hearing your awful voice drove him away forever. Or maybe he shattered his soul into pieces knowing that you’d waste years and years trying to piece it together like a stupid dog who keeps returning to the master that hit him. Or...”

An expression of pity rises to Fuxing’s features. It’s so insincere that A-Qing draws back and holds her breath.

“My, my.” The god shakes his head, looking down at Xue Yang with cruel humour. “You really are a child. Don’t you know that if you hold onto something too tightly, it breaks?”

Xue Yang’s smile slides off his face. His expression falls terrifyingly flat, then darkens.

A-Qing lets out a scream as Xue Yang’s swords collide with Fuxing’s golden blades. There’s nothing but feral madness in his every swing, in his every step.

“You want Xiao Xingchen? You want to see him?” No sense remains in Xue Yang’s crazed laughter anymore. Between the shrieking of his voice and the shrieking of his blades, A-Qing isn’t sure which sound she detests more. “You’re a god, aren’t you? Bring him back, then! Bring his soul back, and we’ll ask him exactly why he left!”

Fuxing snorts. He holds his ground, one arm shielding A-Qing. “Why would I do that? After all, you went to such great lengths to send him on his way.” The god chuckles again. “But I have to admit I’m impressed. It’s exceedingly difficult to convince someone to send themselves off. Xue Yang, if there’s one thing you’re good at, it’s being such a disgusting creature that people would rather slit their own throats than listen to your incessant drivel for a single second longer.”
Xue Yang’s expression warps into something entirely inhuman and terrifying. If A-Qing were to face him alone, she has no doubt that she’d be killed in the most brutal, horrible way possible.

But as scared as A-Qing is that Fuxing is so readily provoking a crazed Xue Yang, with every word that the god says, she finds more and more respect for him.

Xue Yang stripped Daozhang and Song Daozhang of everything: their beliefs, their dignity, and then their lives. It’s only right that Fuxing does the same to Xue Yang.

What goes around comes around, asshole!

Fuxing’s words are sickly sweet, dripping with false emotion. “Xiao Xingchen, Xiao Xingchen. Don’t you know how to talk about anything else? At least when A-Qing cries for her Daozhang, it’s because she’s lamenting the death of family. But what about you? Why would a worthless murderer like you clutch so desperately to someone as righteous as Xiao Xingchen?”

In an arc of gold light, the blade in Fuxing’s grasp flashes forward.

It’s like when a sharp knife cuts skin—the blood has to catch up to the wound. Fuxing’s sword falls first, and for a moment, there is nothing. Then the forest itself seems to rend, folding inward as the god’s sword slashes open a golden wound into the forest floor and a flaying blow onto Xue Yang’s face with terrifying ease.

As Xue Yang hisses and steps back, Fuxing’s smile shapes into something cruel and hungry. If the blade had cut just a little higher, he would’ve taken out Xue Yang’s eyes entirely.

“What a loyal dog.” Fuxing praises, releasing A-Qing’s hand for what seems like the first time since they met. The god reaches to examine the blood on his blade nonchalantly, then swipes the sword downward, drawing an eerie red line in the forest floor with Xue Yang’s blood. “Why, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were in love with him!”

Silence. Xue Yang freezes and his expression goes completely blank.

A-Qing’s mind grinds to a halt.
Xue Yang, in love with Daozhang? That’s a joke, right?

In the silence of the early morning, Xue Yang’s ragged breaths rip through the shadows. “Don’t talk like you know a single thing about me,” he snarls. Blood runs freely down his face, painting a ghastly image of an insane creature. “You think you know me so well, don’t you? Who do you think you are?”

The words don’t need to be said. Xue Yang’s reaction says enough.

That... can’t be. It can’t be. That isn’t how love works. It isn’t how it works!

“Dream on!” A-Qing’s voice cuts through the battle. With one hand, she slams her bamboo pole down onto the ground, and with the other, she points accusingly at Xue Yang. “You think Daozhang would ever love someone as vile as you?” Despite everything, A-Qing lets out a laugh, a noise fuelled by hysteria and disbelief and anger. “He hated you until the very end! You’re so great of a liar that you even managed to fool yourself!”

Even when Xue Yang turns the full force of his monstrous gaze to A-Qing, she stands tall. How could Xue Yang ever think himself worthy of Daozhang’s affection when all he did was manipulate him and make him suffer?

“You bitch!” With a horrifying screech, Xue Yang brings Shuanghua down at A-Qing. She should be afraid, but she isn’t, because a gold blade parries it with ease, raising an ear-piercing ring through the clearing.

Fuxing raises an arm in front of her. He looks back with a strange expression. “Do what you believe is right,” is all he says before he turns back to face Xue Yang.

The battle is decided in an instant.

With a sword in hand, Fuxing makes quick work of Xue Yang. Although Xue Yang wields two powerful swords, and although a sharp sword is sharp no matter who’s cutting, if you don’t have hands to cut with, it doesn’t matter how hard you swing.
Fuxing opens gaping wounds with every attack. His blades dig into flesh and rip outward with terrifying force, spraying blood in every direction. With one stroke, Fuxing cuts Xue Yang’s right arm clean off. With another, Xue Yang’s left arm falls to the ground.

All it takes is one final cleave to his knees, not enough to sever but more than enough to incapacitate. Finally, Xue Yang drops to his knees, blood spurting from every new opening Fuxing has introduced onto his body.

Shuanghua and Jiangzai lie on the grass, free from Xue Yang’s grip, splattered with crimson.

A-Qing trembles.

Despite his mutilated form, Xue Yang somehow finds the will to laugh. He raises his head to stare down an approaching Fuxing, his crazed eyes glazed over with what can only be imminent death.

“Are you happy now? Well, your divine lordship? Have you derived enough pleasure from seeing me bloody and in pieces to live another day, or would you like me to offer you my head as well?”

The next burst of laughter brings a mouthful of blood up with it. Fuxing’s unflinching gaze reveals nothing.

“If that’s not enough to feed your self-righteous ego, then please, take my eyes, and my ears, and my tongue—whatever makes your gold heart shiver! Is that enough? Is it enough?”

With every word, Xue Yang sags more and more. His eyes narrow, not out of his own will, but because he simply can’t keep them open much longer. His insanity, his drive, all of it slowly fades.

“I hate you,” Xue Yang hisses, hatred bleeding from every facet of his person. “You gods must love sitting in your golden thrones, watching us all live and die and end each other. Is it fun? Is it entertaining, watching the world cut us open while you flay us alive? Doesn’t it make you laugh?”

Fuxing is silent.

Between struggling breaths, Xue Yang forces out empty laughter. “You would never know what it’s
like to suffer. You would never know what it’s like to be hated. You would never know what it’s like to watch the world turn on you. Yes, you’re truly a god of luck. So lucky. You’re so lucky.”

Fuxing stands so close to Xue Yang, and yet the two are so far apart.

Then, in one smooth motion, Fuxing kneels down. Slowly, carefully, he leans forward and whispers something in Xue Yang’s ear.

Xue Yang’s eyes widen. For the second time, A-Qing watches shock colours his bloody features.

“No,” he whispers. A strange anxiety comes over Xue Yang, puppeteering a crippled body. His voice rises, hoarse and shrill. “You’re lying. You’re lying to me!”

It’s terrifying, watching Xue Yang rise from the ashes. He twitches sporadically, struggling to force what remaining limbs he up to stand.

“How could you?” It’s childish. It’s desperate, the way Xue Yang crawls on his knees and begs Fuxing to answer. When Fuxing stands and turns away, Xue Yang’s despair turns to rage. “How did you do it? Why was it you? Why was it you? I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you, I—”

Enough.

A-Qing has had enough.

Xue Yang doesn’t understand anything about how much he’s hurt everyone, yet he blames the world for everything. Immature, naive, selfish, pathetic—

Enough.

The hilt is cold in her grip, but the blood is warm on her hands.

Oh, thinks A-Qing, watching Xue Yang’s eyes drop to see his own proud Jiangzai piercing through his chest. It really is too easy to kill people in this world.
At first, there is silence. Fuxing stares on, undaunted, and Xue Yang continues to die. A-Qing’s grip on Jiangzai is unrelenting.

With what little life remains in Xue Yang’s body, he laughs. His entire body shakes with humour only those already out of time can understand. It’s the closest A-Qing and Xue Yang have ever been. It’s the closest they’ll ever be.

Xue Yang’s last words are something that A-Qing will never be able to clean herself of.

“A-Qing,” he whispers, blood spilling onto the earth, onto Jiangzai, onto A-Qing. “You’re a better actor than I ever was.”

Xue Yang falls silent, and this time, there is no more laughter.

A-Qing breathes.

Her hands are shaking, but she can’t let go.

Fuxing kneels behind her. He is utterly silent as he places his hands over A-Qing’s. Together, they pull Jiangzai back and free from Xue Yang.

The sword clatters to the ground. A-Qing falls back into Fuxing.

Both of them are covered in blood, and none of it is their own. A-Qing lets out a shaky breath and feels the god against her do the same.

It’s over. It’s finally over.

Fuxing looks to the sky. The sun has risen at last. “You did well, A-Qing.”

A-Qing nods numbly. Her palms are sticky and smell of iron. “Yeah.”
What is she supposed to feel? What is someone supposed to feel after they’ve put an end to a feral beast like Xue Yang?

Relief? Elation? Pity?

She doesn’t know. All she feels is an aching emptiness.

*I did it, Daozhang. Xue Yang won’t ever hurt anyone else.*

The night has passed, but A-Qing has lost people forever while wandering the darkness. It’s a pain that will never go away, and yet—

Fuxing is the first to move. He rises, supporting A-Qing’s exhausted limbs. His expression is complicated, yet he is silent as he cleans the blood off Shuanghua and Jiangzai in the nearby stream. Once both blades are clean, he holds a sheathed Jiangzai out toward A-Qing.

“Take it,” the god says.

A-Qing stares at the sword, then looks up at Fuxing. Even among the blood and gore, he looks divine, his eyes burning a brilliant gold.

Maybe it’s out of fear, respect, or pride. Maybe all of them, maybe none of them. It doesn’t matter. A-Qing reaches for Jiangzai and wraps her hand around its sheath.

She almost drops it. The weight is strange; almost unnatural. Having wielded it only once, A-Qing has no right to make any assumptions, yet that one time pierced the heart of a monster unlike any other. Maybe the sword took on some unknown curse or power after killing its own master.

Maybe Xue Yang’s monstrous talent for ending lives so easily came from his sword. Maybe his sword was just another sharp edge for Xue Yang to cut with.

With Xue Yang’s corpse lying in front of her, A-Qing should feel relief. Jiangzai should feel light in
her hands, a trophy of her victory. Instead, it feel so much heavier than before.

As A-Qing struggles with Jiangzai, Fuxing makes his way over to Song Daozhang’s unmoving corpse. With a single flick of the wrist, Fuxing lifts his golden blade from this chest. The array collapses, and for another moment, Song Daozhang is still.

He... isn’t gone, is he?

At the very least, let one of them be safe.

“Song Daozhang,” A-Qing calls hesitantly, walking slowly toward the motionless corpse, clutching Jiangzai to her chest. “Are you there?”

Softly, so quietly that the sound of the river almost drowns it out entirely, Song Daozhang moans and lets his head fall to the side.

Fuxing rests his hand on Song Daozhang’s forehead, then turns to nod at A-Qing. “He’s still here,” the god says. “He just needs time. Let him rest.”

Time and rest. That’s what all of them need right now.

The night is over. Morning has come. Despite everything, the darkest hours have passed.

In the light of the rising sun, Fuxing stands, a figure of blood and gold that pierces through the shadows of the forest. He looks at the sky with stars in his eyes. He looks so lost.

A-Qing doesn’t know if he’ll ever find what he’s searching for.

Chapter End Notes

out of all the arcs in mdzs, i’d say yi city is my favourite. the audio drama does an especially amazing job at portraying all the awful things that happen, so if you haven’t checked it out yet, i highly recommend it!
about why wwx only intervenes after everyone dies: i thought it would be interesting for him to see how it feels cleaning up after everyone else, especially considering that his relationship with jc basically revolves around wwx accidentally making everything awful and jc having to pick up the pieces. also, pain is fun.

mdzs has incredible characters, and a-qing and xue yang are two of favourites. the latter because he's a super interesting character study, and the former because she's a badass who, unlike every other male character in the series, isn't emotionally crippled. if things were different, i'd like to believe that they would probably be close friends. the yi city crew is just great overall.

again, thanks for reading!
The journey back is always the hardest part.

Xiao Xingchen’s soul is so light, so small, and so silent. The spirit-trapping pouch pulses gently within Wei Wuxian’s robes, like a faint heartbeat, the only sign of life the feeble soul can give.

“Xue Yang was a monster, but he would never get rid of Daozhang’s body.” Though A-Qing’s steps are bold, it’s easy to see the weariness clinging to her petite form. Jiangzai rests on her back, tied and secured with a green sash. “I’ll lead the way. Just follow me.”

Wei Wuxian nods. A-Qing nods back. Somehow, despite everything, her eyes still burn bright.

(White on white in the dark of the night.

Limpid notes and limpid eyes. The sheen of a blade, pointed at him, challenging him?

Inevitable. That’s all it is. Inevitable, it can’t be helped, of course, of course. Hated by all, hating all, it doesn’t matter, it’s all the same anyway, isn’t it? Anyone and everyone—is there a single person in this world who sees him as anything but a monster?

No. Of course not.

Look at them, clamouring together and screaming like insects, bleeding red like the red he can’t believe still pours from his wounds—black, an endless void, maggots, nothing at all—but still red. The world is unravelling at the seams and he’s the one ripping out the string.

Who do you think you are? A bastion of hope? A hero in the moonlight? A friend, someone close, an enemy, an enemy, an enemy.

You’re just like the rest of them.
I always knew you hated me. If this is how it’s going to be, then everything can burn. You’ve come to kill me, haven’t you? You must be. You must be! Come at me, then! Kill me!

Wei Ying!

Don’t call to me; I won’t hear. Don’t sing for me; I won’t listen. Don’t look at me; I won’t look back. Don’t you dare get close, or I’ll kill you, I really will, I’ll ruin your life, I’ll bring calamity and destruction, and then you’ll wish you killed me from the beginning.

And I’ll wish you did as well.)

Wei Wuxian closes his eyes.

Ah, his head is a mess. Years of travelling and rewriting endings, yet he still can’t seem to shake it off. That isn’t him anymore, and yet it is, and no matter how hard you try, it’s impossible to live two lives at once.

It’s Xue Yang’s fault. Or, rather, it’s Xiao Xingchen’s fault.

When everything finally dies at your hands, when the world points the finger at you, accuses you of weakness, of failure, of ruin, what can you do but accept it all?

What an unwelcome reminder of the past. A noble soul, that Xiao Xingchen, playing the part of the hero not for fame nor wealth, but instead for a world that laughed at him and cut him down. Just like how originally, Wei Wuxian...

Xiao Xingchen, oh, Xiao Xingchen. Wei Wuxian’s head pounds and his heart hurts. Fate really is cruel to give you the same fate as it gave someone like me.

“I can’t wait to tell Daozhang how we took care of that bastard Xue Yang,” A-Qing says proudly. “One life isn’t a lot, but hopefully all the people who died at Xue Yang’s hands feel a bit more at peace now.”
Wei Wuxian hums a noise of agreement. “Let’s hope for the best.”

Through it all, A-Qing walks ahead of him, marching forward with her head held high. Her past isn’t a burden. It makes her stronger, gives her something to fight for. What an incredible feat of strength of heart.

To be perfectly fair, Wei Wuxian has never been particularly strong, whereas A-Qing is stronger than anyone he’s ever met. So it really isn’t surprising that he should fall in line with a girl who grabs everything the world throws at her and demands it work for her.

And if it refuses, she now has a fine blade she can use to cut down those who would threaten the people she loves.

After all, Xue Yang’s second chance has already started.

It must be nice. To try so desperately to make things better and actually succeed—that’s more impressive than any miracle a god can grant.

Wei Wuxian takes a breath. Releases it. Feels the wind blow, hears the gentle trickle of water.

(Feels blood on his hands much older than Xue Yang’s, hears the cries of his name that he never understood among all the rage and despair—)

The pain in his heart is just an ache. Just an ache. That’s all it is.

Yes. It must be nice.

A-Qing grumbles as the sword on her back begins to shift and slip. “Even in death, Xue Yang manages to find ways to annoy me. I’ll need to get a new sash.”

“You mean, I’ll need to get you a new sash.” Wei Wuxian shrugs helplessly when A-Qing turns around to glare. “Not just a sash, mind you. If anyone saw us now, I’m sure they’d run off screaming. You know, blood and all.”
“It’s not my fault! I mean, maybe it is a little, but I’m not the one with eight swords.”

She looks so proud, carrying Jiangzai. Surely she thinks that it’ll protect her, allow her to finally take action and bring down judgement on anyone who would hurt her loved ones. Surely she believes that she won’t be weak anymore.

Perhaps, one day, A-Qing will find it in herself to forgive him.

With a huff, A-Qing turns her head and directs her gaze toward their new companion. “Between the three of us, there isn’t one person who looks decent. What sort of bad luck is that?”

It’s yet another attempt to provoke some sort of reaction. And yet Song Zichen walks on, several paces behind, his head down, entirely silent.

He doesn’t need to stay silent. Tiny miracles like growing a new tongue are inconsequential to Wei Wuxian.

His silence is a choice. He’s punishing himself.

Healing is more than a process; it’s an uphill climb against every force in the world that tries to keep you down. And the most powerful enemy is always yourself.

Sometimes, the only thing that can piece together what remains is time.

But sometimes isn’t good enough. Wei Wuxian is sick of 

sometimes. He hates that word, as well as maybe and eventually. How many people have died to promises that are only fulfilled after everyone has already died?

(I’ll be loyal to you and only you, I swear—

I’ll watch over him even if I should die, I swear—
I’ll protect all of you from the world, I swear—

I’ll bring them back home, I swear—

I’ll kill you all, I’ll kill you all, I swear, I swear, I swear—

Patience is a virtue he’ll never have, and it’s one he can’t afford to learn.

“Song Zichen,” says Wei Wuxian, slowing his pace. A-Qing follows suit. “Song Daozhang. I know these days have been harrowing, but if you’re here with us, give us a sign.”

Song Zichen barely lifts his head. His grip around Shuanghua tightens.

He’s here, alright. They’re all here. Some of them just want to be here less than others.

“Song Daozhang, don’t worry!” It’s A-Qing who breaks the silence. She spins around, walking backward with equally as bold steps though she can’t see the path she’s treading. “Fuxing said he’d make things better, and he won’t go back on his promise.” A-Qing pins Wei Wuxian down with a gaze somewhere between desperate and demanding. “Right?”

Wei Wuxian nods. “I keep my promises.”

(Liar.)

A-Qing diverts her gaze back to Song Zichen, and Wei Wuxian breathes a sigh of relief.

She really does have an unbreakable will, doesn’t she?

Power and heart are on opposite sides of a scale, and if Wei Wuxian has anything to say about it, then it’d be better if everyone was a just little bit kinder.
Well, that’s wishful thinking. He’s never been good at granting wishes, mass murderer or god of luck.

“It wasn’t your fault,” A-Qing tells Song Zichen, running to him and clutching onto his sleeve. “You can’t do this to yourself! It was all Xue Yang’s fault. Don’t compare yourself to someone as disgusting as him!”

Corpses don’t need to breathe. They don’t need to feel. But Song Zichen takes a ragged breath and looks away.

It’s easy to tell someone they aren’t at fault. It’s infinitely harder to have them believe it.

“You feel terrible,” says Wei Wuxian. He looks back, and at the corner of his eye, he watches Song Zichen flinch. “I don’t blame you. It seems that you’ve convinced yourself that you’re to blame for Xiao Xingchen’s death.”

Song Zichen tenses and sinks even lower. A-Qing throws Wei Wuxian an acerbic look.

Wei Wuxian stops and turns, peering serenely through his veil. He smiles, tilts his head, and plays the part of the god he isn’t. “As impressive as your guilty conscience is... well, to be blunt, it’s a waste of time.”

“Fuxing!” A-Qing yells, shocked.

Not you, not you, it’s not you. That’s not my name. “If you keep blaming yourself, even after Xiao Xingchen wakes up, nothing will change between the two of you.” Take that guilt and break it into tiny pieces with your own hands, and then throw it into the deepest recesses of your heart. Crush it until it doesn’t hurt anymore. “Did you come here to repeat history all over again?”

“I—” It’s the first word Song Zichen has said since being freed of Xue Yang’s control, and it surprises all of them. Even Song Zichen startles, eyes wide, as if his heart has betrayed him.

It looks like Xiao Xingchen really is someone irreplaceable in Song Zichen’s eyes.
“If you run, Xiao Xingchen will chase after you,” Wei Wuxian continues. There’s something caught in his throat that he can’t dislodge. “You’ve seen how it ends ends. Which risk is greater: repeating a story you know ends in tragedy, or turning the page and writing something new?”

A-Qing nods adamantly, her grip unflinching. “He’s right. Don’t you want to talk to Daozhang? Xue Yang didn’t ruin things forever. Can’t you see?” She shakes Song Zichen’s sleeve, demanding that he look at her. “Fuxing isn’t here to make things how they used to be. He’s here to make a better future!”

Song Zichen grips Fuxue and Shuanghua even tighter, but he doesn’t pull away. Even in death, it’s so easy to see the despair in his eyes. “We’ll be safer if things return to how they used to be. After everything, I can’t... I can’t face him.”

Wei Wuxian hums in agreement. He steps closer, peering at the (unfamiliar, unfamiliar) corpse with bright eyes. “Well, you certainly aren’t wrong. It’s always easier to fall back into the monotony of a life you’re used to, as painful as it is, than to step into an unknown future.” He smiles at Song Zichen and finds that he can’t fully suppress the surge of bitterness that rises within him. It makes him sick. “Am I right, Song Daozhang?”

Song Zichen is utterly silent.

His eyes are familiar. They say, Even if it’s inevitable that tomorrow will come, I didn’t ever say that I wanted to live for it.

Well, too bad. If there’s one thing Wei Wuxian has learned from his years of asking and receiving nothing but silence, reflecting and regretting, stumbling on roads that lead to the future while carrying burdens of the past, it’s that your life is your own until you die. Then the burden of your death becomes everyone else’s burden.

But Wei Wuxian is being quite unfair to Song Zichen, isn’t he?

Maybe Song Zichen doesn’t want to face his problems. Maybe he believes that it’s better to let Xiao Xingchen live a life without him, return to the days of one always chasing the other, than to risk bringing tragedy upon them once again.

Wei Wuxian’s been running away from his own problems for years. It hasn’t worked out so well, but he certainly won’t stop running because he’s a fool and a coward.
Song Zichen is neither. The very least Wei Wuxian could do is show some empathy.

So he sighs and folds his smile back into an empty expression. A blank canvas. Let the people put the stars in his eyes and the gold in his steps. Heavens know they aren’t there anyway.

“I don’t blame you,” Wei Wuxian says. “We all have days we’d like to return to, don’t we? But the one thing you can never take back is time.” He rests a hand on Song Zichen’s shoulder, feels the cold of death beneath his fingers. “Don’t punish yourself. No matter how far you run, your troubles will catch you one day.”

The words are bitter on his tongue, but it’s better to say them before it’s too late to turn back.

“You might believe that you’re doing everyone a favor by isolating yourself. You aren’t. When you fall, nobody will be there to catch you, and when you go, nobody will be there to see you off.” Don’t be a fool. You don’t deserve it. When he calls your name, don’t turn away. You’ll regret it for eternity. “You can’t imagine how much others will suffer if you make the decision for them.”

It’s so hard to look Song Zichen in the eye, but when Wei Wuxian lifts his gaze, he sees something curious and sad staring back at him.

“That isn’t divine knowledge,” says Song Zichen, his voice trembling. “You earned the right to say those words. You lived them.”

Wei Wuxian draws his hand back. For a moment, he hesitates, and his hand wavers, as if he’s grasping pathetically for something. He snatches his hand back, his sleeve snapping forward.

Ah, this is bad. Between A-Qing and Song Zichen, it seems that everyone can see right through him.

Turning away, Wei Wuxian walks forward and tilts his weimao downward. “Go ahead and make whatever narrative of me you want. My advice still stands, Song Daozhang. Take it or leave it. You don’t have many options.”

A-Qing tugs Song Zichen forward. “Come with us,” she urges. “I don’t know you as well as Daozhang, but if you’re anything like him, then I know the last thing you want to do is to let him
wake up alone.”

Song Zichen reels back like he’s been attacked. A-Qing might as well have struck him; her words are so much heavier than someone her age should be able to say.

While Song Zichen mulls over the latest wake-up call he’s been given, A-Qing drags the stumbling Taoist over to Wei Wuxian and nods firmly. “Good work. But you could’ve been nicer, stupid.”

Her demeanor, her tone of voice, her unswerving expression—all of it comes together to form someone more mature than a god who keeps slipping into the past and a Taoist who wishes he could do the same.

Wei Wuxian laughs. For what seems like the first time, it’s genuine, light and clear and so, so thankful for the immovable rock that is A-Qing.

“Well, you heard her.” Waving his hand dismissively, Wei Wuxian grins, raising an eyebrow when a startled Song Zichen gapes at him. “I don’t make the decisions around here. I’d like to say you do, but...”

Wei Wuxian gestures to A-Qing, who puffs her chest out. With surprising ease, she draws Jiangzai from its sheath, flips the blade around, and stabs it into the ground. It’s equally as impressive as it is worrying.

“You’re coming with us, and you’re going to have a nice long talk with Daozhang.” A-Qing narrows her eyes. Though she’s short compared to both Wei Wuxian and Song Zichen, It’s very difficult to ignore the fact that she’s somehow terrifyingly adept at wielding a sword for a civilian. “And then you can try to run off. If you can.”

Normally, Wei Wuxian would laugh. Right now, he’s genuinely concerned that A-Qing might stick Jiangzai somewhere unfavourable, like his gut. The good news is that regardless of who A-Qing might skewer, neither Wei Wuxian nor Song Zichen can die. Not again, that is.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head helplessly. “You heard her. It seems you’ve been vetoed, Song Daozhang.”

Having made her point very clear, A-Qing huffs again, pulling Jiangzai from the ground with both
hands and sheathing it. She trails after Wei Wuxian, then frowns when she sees that Song Zichen hasn’t moved.

Wei Wuxian smiles as he watches A-Qing drag a renowned, powerful, respected cultivator down a dusty, barren path with her small hands.

“Come on, come on,” says A-Qing. Her gaze is aimed ahead, down the road, and into a future that she doesn’t fear at all. “Let’s go see Daozhang together.”

She’s so strong. Just like—

*(Protect him even if you die! Do you understand?)*

*(I’m sorry. And thank you.)*

*(I... I’m here to tell you...)*

—Like three people Wei Wuxian brought ruin to.

Is this another chance, or is it a test? Has he grown at all? Has he learned?

No. This isn’t his choice. It’s A-Qing’s. Whether she wants to follow Xiao Xingchen or Wei Wuxian is no one’s decision but hers.

The five blessings that he gave to A-Qing are nothing compared to the strength she already possesses.

“I—this—” Through words choked by guilt, Song Zichen barely manages to form a coherent sentence. “You two—why are you doing this? You have nothing to gain. You...” Song Zichen’s expression twists. “Why are you going to such lengths?”

A-Qing frowns. “Daozhang always said that he fought to try and make the world a better place. He said that you didn’t need money or fame to do good.” With something akin to acceptance colouring
her features, she wrings her hands together. “At first, I didn’t understand, and I still think it’s kind of stupid, but... it’d just be cruel to leave people when they’re suffering right in front of you, wouldn’t it?”

Wei Wuxian looks Song Zichen in the eye. “As for me, I’m not particularly fond of watching history repeat itself. Also, I am a god, and it’d be rude of me not to grant the wish you can’t bring yourself to ask for.”

“You and Daozhang should take a break,” A-Qing continues. “Instead of chasing each other’s backs, you can protect each other instead! Isn’t that great?”

Song Zichen’s eyes go wide, and he opens his mouth as if to say something. He hesitates, and hesitates, and hesitates again.

There’s nothing Song Zichen can say that hasn’t already been said. It’s his will against A-Qing’s, and the outcome of the battle has long been decided.

Strength is useless without heart. Believing in yourself, believing in your ability, grasping onto that pitiful belief even as the world falls apart around you—it culminates into a spectacular fall.

Sometimes, all you need is someone to catch you. But why fall if you have others to stop you from taking the road in the beginning?

Wei Wuxian refuses to let those right in front of his eyes make the same mistake. The path to isolation is a long and cruel one.

With a flourish of his robes, Wei Wuxian spreads his arms. Morning has come, and the sun is warm against his skin. “Rest easy, Song Daozhang. It takes time to trust, yes, but if we’re walking together, there’s no reason to remain so distant.”

The grin that rises to his lips is something from before, and even before that. From when careless laughter was reflex and his halcyon glow came from within.

Going back to those days is impossible, but he’d give anything to recreate them.
“When we get back, we’ll get a nice change of clothes and some food,” A-Qing declares. “With Fuxing here, I can finally eat at all the fancy restaurants! I’ll drag Daozhang along and finally show him that good money can buy good food!”

“Hey,” Wei Wuxian says, a little offended. A-Qing certainly moves on quickly, but how did she make the change between god of luck and cash cow so easily?

“You can make money from nothing. I saw you pay for food and clothing, you know. Stop being so cheap!”

“Wh—cheap? Pardon me, but I’m a god. It doesn’t matter how much money I have. If I go around town throwing money at everything that moves, how am I supposed to keep my serene, graceful image?”

“The only reason people think you’re serene is because you keep zoning out! Seriously! Are you even living in the present?”

“Come on, now. Don’t you think my face is gorgeous no matter what sort of expression I put on?”

A-Qing kicks Wei Wuxian in the shin, and wow, that actually hurts, why is this tiny girl so good at smacking him around?

“You’re so mean,” Wei Wuxian whines, skittering away. “Can’t you show me some face?”

“You literally wear a veil all the time,” A-Qing hisses. She jabs at Wei Wuxian with her bamboo pole, which he moves to avoid. “And you just said your face was the best thing to grace the mortal realm! If you want me to show you face, then stop making yourself look like a dumbass!”

Laughing, Wei Wuxian circles forward and backward as A-Qing chases him down with furious but well-meaning jabs. Her personality, her strength, her youth—it leaves a bittersweet taste on his tongue.

“Stop, stop,” he says, mostly laughs, when A-Qing catches up to him and slaps his arm for good measure. “What’ll we do if someone walks up on a girl, covered in blood, assaulting a god, covered in blood?”
A-Qing stares him down flatly. “Place bets.”

It’s been so long since Wei Wuxian had someone to share banter with. Mie Yu is one case; she’s so wise and world-weary that she must be some sort of divine beast in the shape of a human. But with A-Qing, it’s almost as if he’s sixteen again and living his life as loudly as possible, breaking rules, doing whatever he wants, giving smiles to everyone and everything.

The road to Yi City isn’t the longest, but walking any road alone is cold. A-Qing’s heated responses to Wei Wuxian’s teasing makes the journey infinitely warmer.

“You put chilis in congee?” A-Qing stares at Wei Wuxian with horror. “Are you an animal or just a masochist?”

Wei Wuxian makes a show of shrugging. “What can I say? I like my food as red as my eyes on a bad day. As for the second question—” He raises a finger to his lips and winks. “They say teachings that don’t speak of pain have no meaning, and I am very wise. I’d love to elaborate further, but unfortunately, that’s for adults only!”

A-Qing flushes a deep red, and this time, she swings Jiangzai off her back—still sheathed, thankfully—and proceeds to whack Wei Wuxian as hard as she can, screeching as she chases Wei Wuxian in circles again. “Then if you like pain so much, stand still!”

“I was just kidding, I didn’t mean—ow, ow, how is a sheathed sword so painful—give me a break, show me some mercy!”

Finally, inevitably, the despair in Song Zichen’s eyes gives way to something sad but peaceful and so very faintly amused. For the first time, he takes a step forward of his own volition and catches Jiangzai as it swings down to hit Wei Wuxian once more.

“It’s best not to resort to violence,” Song Zichen says, his voice subdued but still there. “We’ve... all had a harrowing week. Save your energy for when you need it.”

In a complete reversal of emotions, A-Qing looks Wei Wuxian in the eye and flashes a wide grin. He returns the favour.
Sadness isn’t always best dealt with by countering with smothering happiness. But Song Zichen doesn’t seem like the sort to lose his way forever; when there’s a will, there’s a way, and Wei Wuxian already has the way ready to go. It’s up to Song Zichen to decide whether or not he has the will.

(Oh, he does. Of course he does.

You’ve killed someone you love. Of course you want to say, I’m sorry. I can’t face you. I don’t need your forgiveness, but I just want you to know that I’m sorry.

Of course you want to be with them again. But you’ve ruined them once; what if it happens again?

Love is a special kind of suffering.)

“Let’s not waste Song Daozhang’s advice,” Wei Wuxian says. “After all, piecing together a soul isn’t just a matter of slapping fragments together until they stick.”

The mention of Xiao Xingchen’s soul immediately grabs both A-Qing and Song Zichen’s attention.

Surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly at all, Song Zichen is the first to speak. He takes a deep breath of air he doesn’t need. “His soul, it’s—” There’s a hesitation so strong it’s almost a flinch. “It’s shattered beyond repair. The body is one thing, but there is no life without the soul.”

Wei Wuxian hums in agreement. “You’re right about there being no life without a soul. But in case you’ve forgotten, I’m a god.”

Spreading his hands, Wei Wuxian grins. Golden strings snap into existence at his beck and call, echoing with faint whispers of the souls that chase after his warmth and the prayers of those who have already passed.

“When humans want to do the impossible, they pray to the gods. The stars are within your reach, Song Daozhang. Let me guide the way.”

*The stars are always closer than they seem,* he wants to say. But that’s knowledge that only comes
It’s something Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen will be learning very soon.

With a flick of his wrists, Wei Wuxian dismisses the strings and continues down the road. “You can trust me. I’ve always been good at calling upon the souls of the dead. Or, rather, they’re good at calling to me.” He glances back at Song Zichen. “Either I find them or they find me. Xiao Xingchen isn’t as lost as you believe him to be.”

It’s like the weight of the world has been lifted off Song Zichen’s shoulders. He closes his eyes and releases a breath he doesn’t have.

A-Qing simply nods along. Her trust in Wei Wuxian is incredibly special, but also so fragile.

“Thank you,” says Song Zichen, bowing from his waist. Fuxue and Shuanghua come together as he brings his hands in front of him. It almost seems cruel to let such a renowned cultivator bow to him. “I can’t thank you enough. I’m forever in your debt.”

Ah. That’s a phrase he doesn’t like.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “Please, no formalities. I only put on an act because it’s entertaining. So no ‘thank you’, alright? And I don’t need your debt. You and Xiao Xingchen have been apart for long enough. Do me a favour and spend the rest of your lives however you please.”

To his discomfort, Song Zichen only bows deeper. “I...” He no doubt wants to give his thanks again, but goes silent. Then, with an unwavering voice, he lifts his head and says, “I won’t ever forget you.”

Forget him?

Forget him?

(Somewhere right now, you’re the same as me.)
If you’re existing in the midst of loneliness, if you’re lost in your tears—please, just forget everything about me.

I pray from the bottom of my heart. Please.)

It really is better to forget than to remember. All Wei Wuxian can do is laugh.

“Well, you can do whatever you want, but I suggest you forget about me.” He tries to convey amusement and finds himself absentmindedly tugging on the braids that dangle by his face. “My memory is notoriously bad, and I would hate to return your favor by treating you like a nobody the next time we meet. So—”

“No,” Song Zichen says, standing straight to his full height, an unbudging determination in his eyes. His posture is formal, well-trained, and perfect. Familiar. “Those who do good never remember the good they bestow unto others, but those who receive their generosity will always remember.”

As if it isn’t enough, A-Qing swings a fist at Wei Wuxian’s arm again. “That’s right! Besides, do you think you’re getting rid of us that quickly?”

Yes, he thinks. Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen will go down their own road. A-Qing will most likely follow them. And then Wei Wuxian will keep walking.

But he can’t bring himself to hate the possibility of having some travelling companions. The world is a big place, and the silence is overwhelming at times.

He sighs.

“You can do whatever you want,” is what he decides to say.

It’s a conclusion. Whether it’s the right one is something only time will decide.

As Wei Wuxian walks forward, he waves for A-Qing and Song Zichen to follow. “Come on, then.
For now, you’re stuck with me. After that, I won’t argue with whatever it is you choose to do.”

“Of course you won’t,” A-Qing mutters. “You’ll just complain about whatever we choose.”

“Complain? No, no, I’ll just gently persuade you to consider other options, like the good and gracious god I am.”

“Don’t push it!”

“That’s, uh, a pretty scary face you’re wearing, A-Qing. Maybe you could put Jiangzai down?”

“What, is this good and gracious god scared of a tiny girl?”

“I don’t want to repeat myself, but perhaps you two could save your energy for when you need it.”

“You’re a respected cultivator, Song Daozhang! Can’t you see that my life is at stake here?”

“With all due respect, your divine lordship, you sometimes act much younger than you seem.”

Companionship. It’s something Wei Wuxian hasn’t felt for a long time. He’s always been a proud, arrogant fool. To find people who neither look up to him as an all-powerful god nor fear him as a demon is a miracle.

If anyone wants to stay, despite everything, then maybe, just maybe, it’s worth taking the risk.

Things will be better this time.

Calling a soul back, in theory, is incredibly simple.
Around him, a cloud of stray souls peers in curiously, undoubtedly attracted by the divine warmth of a god. Wei Wuxian smiles at them when they float closer, whispering faint questions: *Who are you? Who is this? What’s going on?*

And the more familiar ones whisper gently: *What an unfortunate young man. He’s not too far gone. Don’t bother him; come on, give him some space.*

And a particularly familiar one: *Don’t think you can get away with staying up for eight days straight because you’re a god. You couldn’t get away with it then; you aren’t getting away with it now. Don’t give me any of your excuses. I’ve heard all of them by now.*

Wei Wuxian sighs. “I know, I know, I’ll try to take better care of myself. Is that better?”

The glowing orb slaps him upside the head, and that really hurts, souls are supposed to be incorporeal, why is he getting bullied so much today?

*I am your doctor,* she says not so kindly, a very obvious and very dangerous warning in her voice. *Do you remember what happened last time you didn’t take care of yourself?*

Wei Wuxian grumbles.

*I didn’t hear you,* she snaps.

“I died,” he grumbles, only slightly louder.

She smacks him again. *So why do you keep destroying yourself, you idiot?*

Wei Wuxian sighs again.

In the corner of the room, A-Qing coughs awkwardly. She shuffles a little closer, stepping around the cloud of gold. “Uh, Fuxing, is everything going okay?”

“Everything’s just fine,” he says, waving his hand dismissively. “A friend of mine is just getting a
little restless.”

Restless, my ass, she snorts. Hovering above Xiao Xingchen’s immaculately preserved corpse, she peers down at the wound on his neck. Now let me have a look and do half the work for you.

There’s nothing Wei Wuxian can do when Wen Qing’s made up her mind.

So he steps aside, sweeping an arm to the side. “Be my guest.”

It happens quickly. Wen Qing’s had years’ worth of experience materializing herself, and if there’s one thing she would be good at, it’s using the sheer power of anger and determination to snatch back her human form long after her body has been turned to ash.

In a flash of bright light, Wen Qing huffs and rolls up her flame-licked sleeves. She glares at Wei Wuxian, then nods at both A-Qing and Song Zichen. “Thank you for keeping this idiot in line. His sense of direction is so bad that he gets lost in his own head.”

A-Qing grins, completely unfazed by the spirit before her. “It wasn’t much!”

Song Zichen, on the other hand, freezes when he sees Wen Qing’s robes. His hand inches toward Fuxue’s hilt.

“You don’t need to say anything,” says Wen Qing, tying her hair up with a ribbon. She fixes Song Zichen with an unflinching gaze, burning with steady flame. “But don’t bother asking any foolish questions either. Yes, my last name is Wen, but I’m also the best doctor you’ll ever meet, alive or dead.”

Wei Wuxian nods. “Rest easy, Song Daozhang. I can attest to her medical prowess. After all, not many people can cut your chest wide open and keep you alive for three days!”

“Quiet,” Wen Qing snaps, and Wei Wuxian clamps his mouth shut.

Slowly but surely, Song Zichen settles down.
It’s nice, having someone like Wen Qing around—that is, when she can be around. She’s a pillar of stability, unflinching and unmoving, but she’s also a raging fire, snapping at everything that stands in her way, burning those who try to lay their hands on those she loves.

But she’s dead. She’s dead, and all that’s left of her is her soul. And when Wei Wuxian loses himself to the currents of the past, not even Wen Qing can reach him.

It’s always been that way, and it’s unlikely to change. They both know it. All they can do is move on with what this new life has given them.

Wen Qing frowns as her fingers brush over the blood-stained blindfold. Song Zichen tenses.

But Wen Qing simply passes it over. “This isn’t nearly as bad as you’d expect. It’s a deep cut, yes, but it’s clean and it’s precise. It’s also been cleaned well, though I won’t leave anything to chance.”

“So he’ll be alright?” A-Qing asks. “But there was so much blood. You can’t replace that, can you?”

“That’s up to our resident god to do,” answers Wen Qing. “He can explain while I close the wound.”

Nobody breaks rules set by the world than Wei Wuxian. With a grin, he pulls his hands apart, weaving thin goldens strings from nothing. Wen Qing snatches them once they’ve materialized to a state which she can manipulate them, then proceeds to pull a set of thin, sharp tools from her sleeves.

Taking a seat on a nearby table, Wei Wuxian holds out his palm, gathering gold to supply Wen Qing’s surgical sutures. She works silently but diligently, and they ease into a practiced rhythm of weave, pull, stitch, weave, pull, stitch.

Wei Wuxian waves A-Qing and Song Zichen down to sit by the table. “Since you insisted on staying, let me explain how this whole ‘bringing back to life’ thing actually works.”

They don’t as much do it themselves as get nudged toward the chairs by the eavesdropping souls. A-Qing has to pull Song Zichen to sit, but they sit.
“First,” Wei Wuxian begins, “let me make things very clear. When a cultivator pulls someone back from the dead, it isn’t necessarily a revival. It’s simply reanimating. I hate to prod at an open wound, but Xue Yang’s strange talents are a perfect example.”

It’s a hell of a lot better than pointing at Song Zichen and saying, *look at your body, which should be stiff and still.*

If Song Zichen had any blood to spare, his knuckles would be white around Fuxue. “Demonic cultivation.”

A-Qing sneers. “Of course someone like Xue Yang would follow in the footsteps of a monster like the Yiling Patriarch. The worst thing you could do to someone after killing them is not letting them pass with dignity!” She slams her bamboo pole onto the floor in frustration. “People’s lives aren’t playthings!”

Wei Wuxian’s smile falters.

Wen Qing takes a long breath.

There’s nothing they can say. Sometimes, the apology never comes when it’s wanted, and when it comes, it’s neither wanted nor needed.

It hurts, but it’s an old ache. So Wei Wuxian clears his throat and continues. “Yes, well, no matter the method, once a human dies, they can’t be brought back to life by another human. As far as I know, not even the so-called Yiling Patriarch was able to find a way to force life back into a corpse.”

“But he came close.” Wen Qing turns to fix Wei Wuxian with a gaze that demands, *Stop it. You’re doing it again.*

Time to get back on topic, then. “Simply put, only gods can grant new life to someone who’s lost theirs. Cultivators have already figured out how to manipulate the body and the soul—that isn’t where the difficulty lies.” He tilts his head toward Wen Qing. “In our case, I’ve got the soul covered, and my friend’s working on the body right now.”

A-Qing shifts in her seat impatiently. “Then what is it? You told us to wait for eight days and eight nights. Why? For what?”
Wei Wuxian smiles. “Piecing Xiao Xingchen’s soul together, and then easing him into accepting my blood.”

“Wait, wait—doing what with your blood?”

Wen Qing rolls her eyes.

“I’m not too well connected with other gods,” says Wei Wuxian. “But as far as I know, the safest way to bring someone back is to give them a divine touch.” He lifts his arm, letting his sleeve fall down to expose his skin. “Why not give them some of my blood, then?”

Song Zichen is silent, but the way he sits as if he has a metal rod for a spine speaks for itself.

Fair enough. Wei Wuxian hasn’t met a single divine being since he was revived as one, but he doesn’t need to think too hard to realize that what he’s doing is most likely walking the line between making a miracle and challenging the fundamental workings of the world.

“You’re being insufferable,” Wen Qing snaps. Though her gaze is still trained on her work, it’s clear that she’s fully involved in the conversation. “Don’t listen to him. A god’s blood has incredible rejuvenating properties because they’re immortal. If you spill his blood over dead crops, they’ll flourish. It’s the same idea as passing spiritual energy to someone, but in this case, the source is from someone who can cultivate miracles.”

Wei Wuxian shrugs when A-Qing swings back to glare at him.

“This is... wrong.”

When Song Zichen finally speaks, Wei Wuxian isn’t surprised. The Taoist looks incredibly conflicted, denial going one way in his eyes and careful hope going the other.

“Life isn’t something given that easily,” Song Zichen says. “Even if the gods should choose to give life to someone who has died, it shouldn’t be through such unnatural means. What you’re doing now—repairing the body, inserting the soul, and sparking new life with blood—what makes it different from demonic cultivation?”
Guilty as charged.

To be accurate, it isn’t demonic cultivation simply because Wei Wuxian’s a god. It would be if he were brought back as a demon, which would make so much more sense and help align his worldview, but no, fate is fickle like that. As it is, all he’s doing is subverting the natural order a little.

(He’s always been good a breaking things. His hands weren’t made for nurturing, for caring, for saving—no, everything he tries to hold onto shatters in his hands.

The very least he could do is break something for the good of others.)

Wei Wuxian catches a thin string and twirls it gently around his finger. “I understand your concerns, but keep in mind that I’m a god. Demonic cultivation and miracles only look similar because everyone thinks they’re impossible. As for Xiao Xingchen…”

He looks Song Zichen in the eye. This is the one thing he can’t deny.

“I’m reviving him because I believe his life is too precious to be cut short so early.”

The despair in Song Zichen’s eyes ebbs forward like the tide. He looks away.

*I’m reviving him because I see myself in him,* is what Wei Wuxian doesn’t say. *I’m selfish, I’m arrogant, and I’m foolishly hopefully. I want to believe that it’s possible to move on even after dying and coming back.*

*Someone has to have a happy ending.*

“Settle down,” Wen Qing says, irritation seeing from every word. She finally raises her hands from Xiao Xingchen’s neck, rolling down her sleeves and stepping away. “Regardless of what you think, I’m done here.”

A-Qing jumps up and scurries to peer at Xiao Xingchen. She gasps. “It’s gone! The cut’s gone! It’s
like—” Running her fingers over his neck, A-Qing trembles. “It’s like nothing ever happened.”

Wen Qing, in all her methodical, steady glory, has already moved on. “Once he wakes up, you’ll have to make sure he gets plenty of rest, drinks plenty of water, eats well, and doesn’t do any rash, like bleeding out all the blood he’s been given back.”

Wen Qing throws a completely unjustified glare at Wei Wuxian before scribbling something down on a piece of parchment. She hands it to Song Zichen, who frowns once he reads it. “These are... dishes?”

“You know one fool, you know them all.” Wen Qing crosses her arms, her stare flat. “Being brought back to life ruins your appetite. I don’t mean to sound cruel, but I have no doubt that Xiao Xingchen won’t feel well once he realizes he’s alive and has to face the problems he was trying to run away from.”

What she doesn’t say is, *His memories will try to destroy him, and if nobody’s there to hold him up, he might as well die again.*

With a sigh, Wen Qing gestures dismissively to the parchment. “It can be hard to get anything down when your mind’s working against you. Soups and broths tend to work well, and medicinal teas can’t hurt. Watch him carefully. Make sure he eats.”

A-Qing frowns. “You’re not staying?”

Wen Qing pauses.

“Ah, about that,” says Wei Wuxian, hastily interjecting, “She’s a special spirit. She’s powerful, but she can’t stay for long. So we have to do what she says, because she knows best.”

“You’re right about that,” murmurs Wen Qing, not quite under her breath. She blinks slowly, then yawns. Her form flickers like a flame. “I hate to be rude, but I think my time’s nearly up. A-Qing, Song Daozhang, it was nice meeting you.”

A-Qing bows. Song Zichen nods his head.
Flicker, flicker, flicker. Wen Qing wavers a little. “Oh, and do me a favour and look after this idiot.” She levels her gaze at Wei Wuxian. The corners of her lips curl into a thin smile. “He’s always been awful at taking care of himself. I’ll be counting on you to make sure he doesn’t destroy himself or do anything equally as stupid.”

Ah, it’s cold. The night has passed, the sun in the sky has risen, and the sun on the ground is falling —

“Hey,” is all Wei Wuxian can say, his voice shaking.

In the corner of his eye, he sees Song Zichen give him a strange look. The Taoist moves to usher A-Qing out, and the two dismiss themselves quickly and quietly.

Wen Qing sighs a breath of stardust. With steps so confident, so unfaltering, so characteristic of everything that makes her her, she moves to stand in front of Wei Wuxian.

She lifts her hands and parts his veil. She rests her hands on either side of his face, and for a moment, they can fool each other into believing that everything’s alright, that everyone’s okay, that their troubles only reach as far as finding potatoes that aren’t too shabby and making sure A-Yuan’s eating properly.

Slowly, methodically, Wen Qing brushes Wei Wuxian’s hair from his face. Her fingers work out knots, always steady, always fixing. It’s a rare gesture of affection that says, Look at yourself. What are you doing?

“You idiot,” she murmurs, hands following his braids down to his shoulders. Her grip is firm and warm. “Just because you’re a god now doesn’t mean you get to tear yourself to pieces trying to give everyone their happily ever after.”

Wei Wuxian smiles. There’s nothing else he can do. “That’s me. An overachiever in every sense of the word.”

“I know that better than anyone else.” Wen Qing steps back. “You have a big, bleeding heart. You couldn’t fool me then, and you won’t fool me now. But you’ve managed to fool yourself all over again, and you know it.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Wen Qing gives him an impressed look. He clenches his hands.

Eventually, Wen Qing sighs. She’s tired. He’s tired. They’re running on time they shouldn’t have.

(Wei Wuxian doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to forget the gut-wrenching panic at the thought of losing one of the only people who stood by him until the end.

So small, so cold, so broken—souls aren’t supposed to be like that, they aren’t, and yet there she was, by some miracle, still hanging on.

Piece by piece, one by one, but there was something wrong, something very, very wrong, warping and distorting, and what Wei Wuxian managed to salvage was nothing more than dying embers.

But embers can still burn.)

“Fuxing,” Wen Qing says. Wei Wuxian, she doesn’t say. “Don’t you want to be alive?”

Of course he does. Of course he doesn’t. He doesn’t deserve it. He’s fooling himself. He isn’t.

He doesn’t know anymore. Perhaps he never really knew.

It the end, Wei Wuxian doesn’t get to give his answer. Wen Qing’s form flickers violently, jerking the colour from her eyes, and she sighs.

“Find yourself to find the answer.”

In a burst of brilliant white light, Wen Qing scatters into golden fragments, small and warm and silent.
The souls rush to catch the tiny particles, and slowly, one by one, they fade away, whispering reassurances Wei Wuxian doesn’t want to hear.

It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay. As fragmented as Wen Qing’s soul is, she’s always been incredibly strong. She’ll be back before they know it, and then she can slap Wei Wuxian upside the head again and tell him to figure out what he wants from life. Again.

(You break everything you touch.)

Wei Wuxian lets out a breath. He’s breathing. He’s alive, and he isn’t sure if he wants to be at all.

He tries a smile on. He’s always been good at smiling. He’s a handsome, stupid thing. He’ll smile even when people don’t want him too. He isn’t sure what else he can do.

As Wei Wuxian pulls himself together, he forces the ache back. He steps past the cold walls of the coffin home and into the sunlight. A-Qing and Song Zichen are waiting for him, after all.

The world is beautiful but cruel, and Wei Wuxian is a fool for falling in love with it. The world is vast. The world is cold. The world doesn’t care for love. The world takes love and trades it for tragedy.

It’s good nobody ever loved him as he was before. He’s caused enough pain.

(And yet—

And yet—

Why do you still want to be loved, you idiot?)

__________________________

Wake
Up.

Wake

Up.

Wake up.

Wake up.

So you can hear me, can you?

This isn’t a request. It’s an order, you fool.

You’re lucky enough to have people who love you, who’ll die for you, who have died for you.
This is your second chance. A second chance! Do you know how rare that is? Do you know how stupidly lucky you are to be able to keep walking onward?

Don’t run. Don’t push them away. What do you expect to achieve? What do you think you’ll gain?

Do you really want your story to end in tragedy?

Do you want their story to end in tragedy?

Yes? No?

It doesn’t matter. It isn’t your choice to make.

So why are you making the choice for them?

You’re lucky. You’re so lucky. The world may not love you, but the people who suffer through it do.

So why are you still hiding?

Burn away your unfulfilled wishes. Burn away your unrealized dreams. Burn away your fruitless despair. Burn away the nights that never fully died. Even there’s no such thing as absolute, we made a word for it anyway.

So to you, who can’t quite die: go on and live!

Wake up.
(I can’t say for certain that we’ll be the ones defeated, nor can I say with any certainty that we’ll stand victorious.

All we can do is simply rise to the challenge.)

And yet—

Even so—

Despite it all—

On the morning of the ninth day—

Xiao Xingchen opens his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

listen. i just really love the yi city arc. the parallels. the irony. it hurts so much but it's so great.

xiao xingchen and song lan are super tragic characters. xiao xingchen left after carving out his own eyes and giving them to song lan, and song lan chased after him. then they both gave their lives to each other, in a way. it's the "tragedy follows you" sort of situation that just punches me in the face with feels. In general, the fact that "i'm sorry" (对不起) in chinese can more or less translate to "i can't face you" makes me feel things.

also, i used a quote from chica umino's march comes in like a lion, my all-time favourite series: "I can’t say for certain that we’ll be the ones defeated, nor can I say with any certainty that we’ll stand victorious. All we can do is simply rise to the challenge." on a completely unrelated note, if you like character-focused shows that cover topics like
mental illness, struggles with adopted family, and found family, please go watch it! now that i'm listing what i like about it i'm beginning to see a lot of similarities with mdzs...... if that sounds interesting, please please please watch it, i need someone to talk to about it!!

feel free to talk to me on twitter about mdzs or any other series! chances are i might be interested.

as always, thanks for reading!
interlude: the curious case of the night-eating sun

Chapter Summary

The Lovers:

Ash blossoms fall amidst a desolate spring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Long story short, people have been going missing because of the night-eating sun!”

A-Qing is both very tired and very unimpressed.

She stares down the vendor with flat impatience. The vendor glances nervously to A-Qing’s hand, which just so happens to be deliberately placed on Jiangzai’s hilt. He clears his throat in a rattle of *a-hem-hem*, then moves to quickly package two servings of congee. He throws in an extra egg for good measure when A-Qing narrows her eyes.

“Oh, alright,” says A-Qing, feeling that it’s way too early for this, “I know rumours can get blown way out of proportion, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard of people getting eaten by the sun.”

“No, no, no!” The vendor shakes his head aggressively. “*Not the* sun. *A* sun.” He points up and at the mountain range in the distance, where the early morning sun is just starting to peek over the ridges. “See where the two tallest peaks meet? Every day, a dark sun rises over the valley. And someone always goes missing right after it sets! Even stranger is the fact that all of them are cultivators!”

That’s... probably the weirdest thing A-Qing has heard yet, and she’s been travelling with a god of luck for a full year.

“Give me two steamed buns while you’re at it,” A-Qing says, tossing a few coins over to the vendor. “Thanks for the information, sir. We’ll look into it shortly.”

The vendor hesitates, but his curiosity gets the best of him. “Uh, ‘look into it’?”

A-Qing huffs. She lifts the jade ornament by her waist just high enough so the vendor can see. Even in the bustle of the early morning market, the crystal bell chimes high and clear, an undeniable sign of divinity from anyone who knows anything about recent happenings.

The vendor’s eyes go wide. He tries and fails on three separate attempts to speak, sputtering and tripping over his own tongue. “You—you’re—you’re a vassal of the golden god?”

Oh, here we go again.

How Fuxing introduces himself so casually to people who look at him like he put the stars in the sky is a complete and utter mystery. Stiffly, A-Qing bows. “Wei Chengfeng, the first disciple.”

The vendor’s jaw drops. He scrambles and practically folds in half at the waist in an attempt to bow
lower. He apologizes over and over again, and as funny as it is, it’s kind of annoying.

If there’s one thing Fuxing’s right about, it’s that formalities are a pain. They’re stupid, they’re useless, and they’re a waste of time. It’s not like strength or respect from others makes you better than anyone else. Everyone bleeds the same blood, right?

“This undeserving servant was unaware that the golden god returned,” the vendor says, his head still dropped down low. “It’s an honour to host his divine lordship again!”

A-Qing frowns. Fuxing did say he was familiar with this town, but it seems like everyone in the town is intimately familiar with him. It’s probably one of those things Fuxing doesn’t bother saying because he knows A-Qing will figure it out sooner or later.

For someone who loves running his mouth so much, there sure are a lot of things he won’t tell her.

Eventually, A-Qing manages to pull herself away from the vendor, who seems intent on offering his business, his firstborn, and his life to the revered golden god of fortune, which is actually starting to get kind of creepy. And then it just gets weird when he runs into his house and comes back with an expensive and ancient-looking comb, saying something about how it’s been passed down his family for generations.

“No—no, I don’t want your family heirlooms, seriously, let go, I’ll tell Fuxing, and then you’ll really get it then!”

At that, the vendor breaks into hysterics, which makes no sense whatsoever. What’s Fuxing going to do to him? Talk him to death? Flirt with him until he cries? Strangle him with his ribbons?

Nope, nope, nope. This is weird and A-Qing wants none of it.

So A-Qing sprints down the street, putting a year’s worth of training to use by keeping every drop of congee in their respective bowls while juggling steamed buns between her arms.

As she runs back to the hotel at breakneck speed, people give her strange looks. Some people stare at her with something between fear and reverence, which is disturbing, while others smile like they know more than they’re letting on, which is even more disturbing.

When A-Qing steps back into the hotel, maneuvering the steamed buns onto a table with justified annoyance, the hostess gives her a sly grin. She leans casually on the counter, eyes glimmering with amusement. “Had some trouble with the locals?”

“No,” A-Qing says adamantly, stomping her way toward the stairs. “The locals had trouble with me!”

The hostess hums an indistinct note of agreement. “Well, it isn’t too surprising. After all, Fuxing was born here.”

A-Qing almost chokes on her own tongue. “Fuxing was what?”

With a sigh, the hostess shakes her head. “He’s still as tight-lipped as ever. Really, you’d think he’d at least tell his disciple a bit more. But...” She trails off, then fixes A-Qing with a strange look. It’s a look that Fuxing wears a lot. “It could be a lot worse. It was a lot worse. So I guess I can’t complain!”

Then the hostess laughs a good, hearty laugh, like she’s just told the best joke in the world.
It’s unfair to be mad at her, but A-Qing’s mad anyway, because that’s the exact laugh Fuxing loves to throw out when he says something completely nonsensical that he knows only he understands.

A-Qing wants to grab someone by the collar, shake all the answers out of them, and yell, Wow, so funny, I’d love to be in on it, too!

Instead, she stands her ground and glares at the hostess. “I don’t know how it can get worse. I had to set a bedtime for him. A bedtime! That idiot doesn’t know when to sleep!”

The hostess doesn’t look surprised at all. In fact, her smile only widens.

“And he just forgets to eat,” A-Qing continues heatedly. Just talking about Fuxing’s bad habits makes her angrier. “Maybe if he spent less time complaining and more time shoving food into that big, dumb mouth of his, he’d remember that something needs to feed him other than his ego!”

Sometimes she’s mad, and sometimes she’s not as mad, but travelling with Fuxing is like watching over the world’s biggest baby. On a normal day, it’ll be, go to sleep, eat this, clean yourself up. On a weird day, it’ll be, don’t touch that, don’t activate that demonic array, stop bleeding all over your food. On a bad day, it’ll be, stop throwing chilis into the pan, I can’t see or smell anything, you dumbass, are you trying to clear my sinuses or kill them, get that death sludge away from me, it literally looks like something crawled into a pool of blood and died, you could feed that to a fierce corpse and they’d die again, incinerate that immediately or I’ll incinerate you.

So maybe Fuxing says that A-Qing’s reckless and hasty. No matter what, it’s still better than actively practicing self-sabotage, right?

A-Qing hasn’t met any other gods, but if they’re anything like Fuxing, then maybe it’s better if they all stay as far away from her as possible.

While A-Qing fumes, the hostess chuckles.

“You’re very reliable,” she says, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. “For someone so young, you do a good job of looking out for others.”

“I really think you need to raise your standards if you think I’m doing a good job.”

The hostess shrugs. “Standards are always relative. Before Fuxing became, well, Fuxing, I don’t think he took good care of himself. He’s always been the sort to ignore what others tell him if he thinks he knows better.”

That’s spot-on. Fuxing’s the sort of person to stay quiet about a wound if he thinks he can deal with it himself no matter how much it hurts, which is exactly why A-Qing sits him down after every scuffle with bandages in one hand and poultice in the other.

“But things are different now,” the hostess continues, contemplative. Why she’s contemplating Fuxing’s multi-part life is a mystery. “He didn’t take care of himself, and he didn’t let anyone else take care of him. Now, he still doesn’t take care of himself, but he’s letting you take care of him.”

The smile the hostess gives is genuine and proud. “I’d say that’s a big step forward. Wouldn’t you?”

And, well, it’s hard not to agree.

Although Fuxing’s first impression wasn’t the most accurate demonstration of his character, it was still him. That first meeting between a girl desperate for justice and a god drifting aimlessly through life is something A-Qing will never be able to forget.
He looked so lost. He still looks lost, sometimes.

It’s better now that A-Qing’s around. It sounds selfish and arrogant, but at least Fuxing has someone to train and protect. Any reason is better than no reason. Maybe it makes him feel better. It makes A-Qing feel better.

She huffs and looks away. “He’s got a long way to go.”

“Oh, for sure,” the hostess agrees. “Anyhow, I don’t want to keep you any longer. I’m sure you two have a busy day ahead of you.”

Then the amusement drops from the hostess’ face like a stone, and something severe takes its place.

She folds her hands over each other. Her nails are short and her hands are calloused. “Be careful,” she warns. “I’m no cultivator, but even we civilians can tell that something dark and powerful is living up on those mountains.”

“We can handle dark and powerful,” A-Qing says. In fact, they basically specialize in dealing with dark and powerful. On a bad day, Fuxing’s the one who’s dark and powerful.

“Just because you can handle it doesn’t mean you’ll come out in one piece.” With a tired expression, the hostess’ gaze wanders up the stairs. “But I’m sure you’ve realized that already.”

It’s still early into the morning when A-Qing creeks open the door to the room. She sighs, dropping their food onto the table, then turns her attention to their resident god.

As usual, he’s buried in yet another book, using the glow of his divine aura as a source of light, which still seems blasphemous no matter how many times A-Qing catches him doing it. His gaze flickers once upward, then down, and up again when he finally processes that A-Qing has returned.

“Oh, nice,” Fuxing says cheerfully, tossing the pages onto the bed. They flutter haphazardly over the sheets he’s twisted into some sort of messy hybrid between of a nest and a tent. He trudges over to the table with his robes dragging off his shoulders and his hair strewn in every direction. “It’s been a while since I last visited Yinhe. I was hoping they’d have forgotten all about me, but...”

“But now they’re rabid believers who would set themselves on fire if you told them to,” A-Qing grumbles, pushing the window open to let some real light in.

Fuxing squints and shies away. He only gets as far as the edge of his bed before A-Qing grabs a fistfull of his hair and pulls him down into a chair.

“Oh, ow, that’s not nice,” he whines, seating himself petulantly. He yelps when A-Qing pulls a comb through his infuriatingly long hair in one swift tug, yanking his entire head back. “Wait! I can do it myself, stop, are you trying to rip my neck off?”

A-Qing hurls the comb at Fuxing. “When it happens, it’ll be your fault!”

She throws a handful of red ribbons at the god, followed by the white flower pendants he hangs from his braids, and finally his weimao, which smacks him square in the face.

He’s so annoying, he’s insufferable, but A-Qing suffers him anyway, and she hates herself for being so dumb and she hates Fuxing for being so stupidly and unjustly likeable.

The god wails despairingly, combing his hair with such dramatic and fake sadness that A-Qing wants to tie his hair to the bedpost and leave him there. “I know that we argue sometimes, but I
A-Qing grumbles. Fuxing’s expression flips from contemplative to cheerful in an instant. “What a curious situation. Then I suppose we have a mountain to climb, don’t we?”
Oh.

Slowly, silently, A-Qing moves to peek out the window and up, up, up at the looming mountain range around them.

That is certainly a very tall mountain. That… yeah, that’s probably the tallest mountain A-Qing’s ever seen. It wasn’t always that tall, was it? It has to be the perspective, or the angle, or something.

When she turns back with a stiff grimace, Fuxing simply beams.

A-Qing hates her job sometimes.

They’re halfway up the mountain when something clicks into place in A-Qing’s mind.

“Wait,” she demands, her breath coming in wheezes. She keels over and clutches her knees for a long moment, then swings around to glare at Fuxing once her lungs start cooperating again. “You’re training me to be a cultivator, aren’t you? Why haven’t you taught me how to do that sword-riding thing yet?”

It’s silent for a while.

Fuxing blinks. He stares for a moment, then blinks again.

“Oh,” is all he says, like he’s just realized something very important.

A-Qing wonders how far Fuxing would roll if she threw him off the mountain this instant.

As she storms ahead with righteous fury, Fuxing scampers after her, rambling and wasting precious air. “To be fair, I haven’t done it in a long time, and I’m not even sure I remember how!”

He throws out a golden coin, summoning one of his swords in a quick flash of gold. His brow furrows, but he hops onto the thin blade anyway—

And he immediately rises into the air and starts flying circles around A-Qing’s head.

It’s like when a fly starts buzzing around your head. Your first reaction is to want it dead.

“Um,” says Fuxing. “Okay, so we all make mistakes sometimes—“

A-Qing breathes. In, out. In, out.

Then she unsheathes Jiangzai, swings her arm back, and hurls the blade as hard as she can at Fuxing, who shrieks and dives out of the way.

The ebony sword cuts across the afternoon sky and arcs downward far, far away in the distance somewhere below them. Fuxing looks over his shoulder.

“Uh,” he begins.

“Shut up,” A-Qing snaps, feeling a twitch rise to her eye.

“That’s your sword,” Fuxing says for good measure.
I will cut your entire face off.

Fuxing wisely decides to clamp his mouth shut. He’s silent even as A-Qing scrambles up the tallest tree she can find, takes a deep breath, and yells, “Get back here, you dumbass!”

She hears it before she sees it: the sound of metal flying through the air, followed by a streak of black. It almost knocks Fuxing clean off his sword, which would be for the best, but the world is cruel and the god narrowly dodges out of the way and regains his balance.

A-Qing holds up her sheath, and Jiangzai shoots back in with an irritated grumble.

“Stop complaining.” A-Qing snaps, smacking the hilt of the sword and receiving a hiss in reply. “If you really wanted to be useful, you would’ve opened a hole in his stupid gut.”

It’s not like Fuxing would die from such a small injury, anyway. In fact, all he’d do is wail dramatically and dance around a little, bleeding over everything like an idiot just because he can, and then he’d pass out and leave A-Qing to drag him somewhere safe.

She knows this because it’s happened before. It’s happened before, and it’s happened way too many times to just be brushed off. So next time Fuxing tells A-Qing to stop throwing herself at people with swords, maybe he should take a good, long look at himself first.

(At least he trusts her.

That’s something. His trust isn’t easy to earn. He doesn’t even trust himself, for heaven’s sake.

He’s the sort of idiot who tries not to trust because it hurts when that trust is broken. It doesn’t matter who’s breaking it.

The thing is: yes, it hurts. Of course it hurts. But it doesn’t hurt as much if you’re expecting the pain, right?

Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. It hurts all the same. You can never get used to pain. You simply learn how to tolerate it, how to nurse your aches and your wounds quietly.

So, yes, it’s stupid. Trust is a precious thing, but it’s something that has to be given to someone. Otherwise the whole world is your enemy, and the world isn’t kind.

Step by step it is, then.

Someone’s got to keep you alive.)

Fuxing spends the next few minutes trying to gently coerce A-Qing into just hiking up the mountain normally, saying something about it not being safe to practice hovering on a sword on a mountain. He offers to carry her on one of his own swords when A-Qing falls face-first into a tree.

She tells him to go gut himself and refuses to budge until she’s standing atop Jiangzai confidently, staring the brainless god down with vengeance in her eyes.

Among the many things she’s seen and done over the past year, her greatest achievement is instilling a semi-permanent sense of fear into the so-called golden god.

Fuxing floats further as A-Qing moves forward. “Hey there, my treasured vassal, my honourable disciple, my, uh, sword-wielding prodigy.” Star-dotted eyes shift nervously as the god raises his hands in surrender. “We’re here to solve this, um, curious case of the night-eating sun, aren’t we?
Don’t you think it’s a little early to start bleeding already?”

“If you know you’ll end of bleeding eventually,” says A-Qing, her voice as sharp and thin as a knife, “then what’s the problem?”

“I think the problem lies in the fact that I don’t like getting stabbed.”

A-Qing hurls a handful of explosive talismans at Fuxing, who leaps out of the way with a scream and lands on another one of his golden swords.

The god immediately darts off after regaining his balance. “I don’t like getting blown up, either!”

“Great,” says A-Qing, with no particular inflection. She reaches into her sleeves and pulls out every talisman Fuxing told her she wasn’t allowed to use because of collateral damage and excessive force and other stupid reasons that she can’t be bothered to think of. It’s hard to think of anything else when you’re fixated on murder. “Now stay still! You’re going to make me waste a whole bunch of talismans if you keep moving!”

“How about you just don’t use them to begin with?”

The rest of the trip up the mountain goes by in the blink of an eye, partly because Fuxing’s infuriatingly fast on his swords, mostly because A-Qing’s called the Wind-Swept Maiden for a reason, and entirely because panic and fury are both great motivators.

There’s a lot of screaming and yelling involved, but they fly up in record time.

A job well done is still a job well done no matter how said job goes about getting done. You’re welcome, you ungrateful god.

Can you hear me?

My flower—

If you’re here, then speak, please, give me a sign, anything at all.

I’ve waited for so long.

(Tonight, we dance again.)

A-Qing gapes. She stands there, mouth hanging wide like an animal that’s seeing the sky for the first time, staring up at a sun that has eaten the night sky.
"It's just the sun," she tells herself, except it’s not.

Up there, up where that golden orb should be, is a hole. Black on black and swirling with tiny stars that glimmer in and out of existence, dipping their toes into the waters of the mortal realm.

They stand on the rocky shores of waters that stretch on and on, far into the distance, where clear blues become inky blacks. The waters are still as death, undisturbed by mortal touch, a mirror of sorts, peering into the mortal world that’s so imperfect and warped and rejecting all that it sees, inverting everything within its reflection in some immature attempt to fix what isn’t broken.

A-Qing knows better than to touch those waters carelessly. She’s seen innocent people get dragged into a world that they don’t belong to, and she’s beginning to suspect that’s exactly what’s been happening.

The remnants of life around them give a good hint as to the cause of the recent disappearances.

Hanging in the air, suspended in time, are thousands of shattered, golden shards. They’re silent and unmoving, pulsing with a heartbeat that doesn’t belong to them.

It leaves a cold sort of nausea in A-Qing’s stomach.

There’s no saving them. Something crushed all those souls into pieces and left them here, in a place where the mortal realm crosses over into something stranger, in a place where time and space mean little under the domain of something that doesn’t want them to exist.

This, of course, is happening all while they stand under warmth and light that’s coming from somewhere and something, and wow, this is probably what they mean by eating your words, isn’t it?

The words just barely rise to her lips, stumbling over her tongue in an attempt to find some sort of coherence or sense. “What—who is this?”

Fuxing laughs. With a sweep of his arm, he gestures upward. “Can’t you tell? It’s the sun, A-Qing. You haven’t forgotten what the sun looks like, have you?”

A-Qing lands a solid hit on Fuxing’s arm. “Last time I checked, the sun didn’t look like that! This is —” She gestures wildly and helplessly. Her fingers brush the unnaturally cold glow of a broken soul, and she snatches her hand back. “The sun’s gone, there’s a hole in the sky, and the world’s turning like everything’s perfectly fine!”

Behind his golden veil, Fuxing smiles. It’s something weird, something uncanny and otherworldly, begging for more questions while warning any foolish, loose-lipped fools with bared teeth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Fuxing. His eyes glow just like the sun above their heads: two vast, empty holes with only the light of the stars to guide the way. “Stay focused. Remember, we’re here to investigate a few disappearances. Just that. No more.”

A-Qing holds Fuxing’s gaze. She’s gotten a lot better at it over the past year.

Something weird’s going on, and they both know it. It doesn’t matter if Fuxing won’t tell her. He doesn’t tell her a lot of things, but A-Qing figures them out anyway.

Just how it always is.

With a deep breath, A-Qing peers into the waters. She hates crossing over, but she’ll be damned if she runs away from her responsibility. People have gone missing (have died in the worst way
possible, their souls crushed and shattered, never to be reborn or saved) and something wicked is at work.

Well, at least the food’s good. Not everything in the Other Side can be bad.

“Fine,” A-Qing says, her grip on Jiangzai tightening. “Then let’s hurry up and get something to eat first. I’m starving, and I’m not working on an empty stomach.”

The human spark returns to Fuxing’s eyes, and A-Qing relaxes a little.

“Of course,” the god agrees, smiling. He steps forward and into the waters, breaking the silence, sending ripples in every direction. Just like that, the serenity shatters, and the reflected image distorts more and more until all that’s left is something entirely unrecognizable.

Fuxing holds out his hand. A-Qing takes it. With one swift tug, he pulls them below the rift and into the darkness below.

It’s cold.

---

Is that you?

No.

You are—

One of us?

Where have you been all this time?

Why have you come?

What misfortune has befallen you, my friend?

---

“That’s a very pretty sword you have there, young maiden.”

A-Qing takes a breath. It smells of death, impossibly old and cold, hanging in the air so tangibly that she swears she can feel the haze of rot around her. The weight of death pulls at A-Qing’s robes, eagerly beckoning, whispering foul promises of peace and rest.

Lies. All of their sweet words are lies. If there’s one thing she’s certain of, it’s that death is never the end.

(Look here, A-Qing.

They’re like fireflies, aren’t they? Lighting up the night sky, bright and beautiful. I’ve always found it amazing how mortal souls burn so brightly, even after death. And they sing so loudly. How can I
ignore them?

All these lost souls, struggling, crying... can you hear them? Can you see them?

Can you save them?

Don’t look at me like that. Come on, give me an answer. Can you save them, my disciple? Can you give them peace—or, at least, can you lead them to salvation?

Well, Wind-Swept Maiden?

You’re fast. You’re swift. But can you find run quickly enough to answer their prayers for deliverance before the night takes them?

Ha ha! I didn’t mean to offend you. I just wanted to ask you. I ask myself that every day. There’s no answer to that question. What you do is simply what you do, but of course, we’re all partial to wanting to be heroes. Isn’t that right?

We live so they can die. We don’t decide who dies. Humans do that well enough for each other, burning each other to ashes, cutting each other into pieces, burying each other beneath the weight of their sins. Do you understand? We clean up what’s left.

Ah, humans really are cruel.

The worst thing you can do to someone after you’ve killed them is leave them to die again.)

Death isn’t necessarily an ally or a companion, but on this strange, twisted road that A-Qing’s chosen, it walks close beside her.

“It’s not for sale,” A-Qing says carefully, turning to face the... lady, monster, spirit, thing.

She’s pretty like all inhuman things are. Skin as pale as death, robes as pale as her skin, long ebony hair, blood-red eyes and lips.

The woman shifts, and her robes shift with her. She raises one hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, allowing her sleeve to slide down and reveal a skinless, fleshless limb, all brilliant white bone. When she steps closer, her leg peeks out, just as undead as half of her body.

Great. Wonderful! It’s so kind of Fuxing to leave A-Qing to deal with someone who’s only half undead. She’s going to kill him when he gets back.

“Oh, my apologies. I didn’t mean to upset you.” The woman smiles, her lips curling upward without moving the rest of her face. Her skin doesn’t even stretch. It’s like she’s taking off one expression and putting on another one. “I was just curious, you see. It isn’t everyday you see such a powerful sword in a city like this.”

This particular city is by far the biggest settlement on this side that A-Qing’s ever seen. Though the sun shines a bright gold, the skies are pitch black. Tens of thousands of coloured lanterns—red, yellow, blue, purple, everything and anything—light up the bustling streets. Everyone’s dressed in fine clothing, wearing intricately patterned robes that even Fuxing would hesitate to shovel out coins for. The sound of music is everywhere at once, playing the same song.

It’s a nice song. The problem is that it’s been playing on repeat for half a day, and A-Qing’s starting to get a headache.
But people walk by, talking and laughing without a care in the world, because existing of any kind is too short to be taken seriously, in life or in death alike.

A-Qing frowns and shifts to the side, blocking Jiangzai from the woman’s view. “It’s not all that powerful. It just has a bit of spiritual energy.”

“Yes, that’s what I mean,” the woman says. With a ceramic smile, she leans down, her entire form contorting and warping like ink in water. She stares directly into A-Qing’s eyes, two endless voids trying to find... something. “How interesting. How curious. Are you a cultivator, young maiden?”

A-Qing refuses to look away. Jiangzai shivers beneath A-Qing’s grasp.

Yeah, I know, she snaps. I’m not an idiot like you, dumbass.

So she breathes. In, out, and again and again. She’s alive in this world of death, and she refuses to be scared. After all, she knows someone much more terrifying than anything this realm can throw at her.

Formality is something she’s never bothered with, but even she’s not stupid enough to draw her sword before knowing what she’s up against. Luckily, Fuxing happens to be a master of wearing masks of all sorts, and A-Qing learns quickly.

(Listen up, now. What I’m about to teach you is very important.

You’ll be asked all sorts of questions in this life that you won’t want to answer. Who are you, for one. What’s your name, for another.

Of course, there are also questions nobody else will ask you. Why do I have to go through all this? Why did I choose to walk this path to begin with? Why did I make myself like this? What do others see me as? Just what have I gained?

Have I gone mad? What’s left for me now?

No one will ask you. Sometimes, you’ll want someone to ask. But you won’t want to answer, and that’s what’s important.

So I’ll teach you a magic phrase: nobody needs to know.

It’s the answer to everything. Who are you? Nobody needs to know. What am I supposed to do know? Nobody needs to know. Does my life mean anything? Nobody needs to know.

Hm? Why nobody needs to know instead of nobody knows?

Well, that’s a simple question.

It feels much better to pretend like you already know the answer than to admit you have no idea what to say.

So, repeat after me—)

A-Qing brings a smile to her lips. With a little dip of her head, she spreads her arms and recites, “Nobody needs to know.”

Running away isn’t always cowardly. Sometimes, it’s the smartest choice. Fuxing’s great at running away. A-Qing’s great at running. So maybe they’re both running away from something that’s chasing after Fuxing, but it’s not that bad. All they need to do is cut it down when it comes searching.
“Yes, very true, very true,” the woman agrees easily. “But you must at least be a mercenary of some sort, no? Work for hire, chasing chaos, all very heroic and noble.”

A-Qing shrugs. “I guess you could say it’s something like that.”

The woman cocks her head. There’s a sickening crack that comes with the jerking motion, like her entire neck is about to fall off. “Really? Even with eyes like yours?”

It’s been a long time since anyone’s asked about A-Qing’s eyes, and for a moment, she feels offended. Then she lifts a hand to her face and remembers that, oh yeah, her eyes have been bleeding since she stepped into this stupid realm, haven’t they?

A-Qing leaves the blood where it is. It’s not real, anyway—at least, not now, and not ever.

It could’ve been very real. Things could’ve ended very differently. Things could’ve started very differently.

She beams at the woman, offering a golden smile for a golden girl. “It’s not so bad once you get used to it!”

Fuxing mentioned something of the sort. *This realm twists what you are,* he had said. *It takes your reflection and turns it into something horrible and disgusting.*

And A-Qing took one look at his black robes, the crimson flames licking at his sleeves, the single red ribbon in his long black hair, the ebony dizi tucked into his sash. She took one look into his blood-red eyes, the bitterness and exhaustion hidden behind a fragile smile that wanted nothing more than to simply disappear, and thought, *why do you hate yourself so much?*

This realm doesn’t turn you into a monster. It inverts your best traits and your appearance. It turns you into the exact opposite of what you truly are. For A-Qing, it’s taken her eyes and made her appear as if she’s completely blind.

(What A-Qing wants to say is, *doesn’t this prove that you’re a good person?*

But she doesn’t say it. Because if she does, it’s the same as saying, *the person you were before is unforgivable, a monster, someone who will be hated forever by everyone, who deserves nothing, who died alone, who bears the hatred of the entire world because nobody else will take it, and without a common enemy, humanity turns on itself—*

It’s an awful thought. Everyone loves a martyr and hates a villain. So they pretend that those two aren’t the same thing and raise the flag of war.

*It’s for the greater good!*

You don’t even know what good is, you cowards.)

Maybe it’s best to just leave it at that. Besides, A-Qing has a job to do.

“If it’s not too much trouble, I want to ask about that weird thing up there,” says A-Qing, pointing up at the sky.

The woman looks up. Her robes slip below her collarbones, and A-Qing can see nothing but bone below her shoulders, which is a wonderful sight that isn’t disturbing in the slightest. “Oh, the day-eating moon? It’s strange, isn’t it?”
Strange doesn’t even begin to explain it, but sure. “Yeah! It’s really weird. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Of course not,” the woman says. “It’s a blessing of sorts around here.”

Raising her flesh arm to the sky, fingertips trailing the image of blazing gold against endless black, the woman sighs, and for a moment, she looks incredibly human.

Then she lowers her arm, and an awful, wide smile tears through her pale complexion, carving a deep gash of red into her porcelain skin. “The favour of the mighty and generous Shouxing rains upon us, young maiden. Only one night a year—that’s all. Isn’t that why you’re here? To celebrate with us and honour the revered goddess?”

It takes a decent amount of effort not to choke on nothing.

Shouxing? As in the god of longevity, Shouxing? Shouxing, who’s practically on par with Fuxing? Wouldn’t they sort of be family, in a weird way? And what’s this about only one night a year? Haven’t people from the other side been going missing for weeks now?

“Of course,” A-Qing says, a little too quickly. She clears her throat. “I mean, it’s only half the story. I just heard about some day-eating moon, and I didn’t know anything about it, so...”

The woman nods understandingly. Her eyes, two pools of crimson, soften in a way that A-Qing’s only seen on one other person. “Ah, yes. I’m not surprised. After all, cultivators love sticking their noses into strange happenings.”

There it is again. Every other moment, the woman flickers between monstrous and perfectly human. Is it one of the realm’s workings, or is she just out of her mind?

Just as A-Qing’s about to continue with her questions, someone plows directly into her, sending her sprawling forward and into the woman.

And, oh wow, those are definitely bones under her robes, so fragile even to someone as small as A-Qing. Faintly, hidden somewhere in the woman’s robes, A-Qing smells orchids.

The woman laughs lightly, propping A-Qing up with her flesh arm. She seems completely unbothered. “Careful, now.”

A-Qing spins around to tell off whatever blind idiot can’t see two people talking in the middle of the street and finds herself glaring at a panicked Fuxing.

It’s still jarring, seeing him dressed in such ominous robes. No white or gold on him at all; just red on black, no divine aura, either; just a haze of resentful energy that A-Qing’s more or less become accustomed to.

Either way, it’s about time. Where has he been? And why does he look like he’s just pissed off every canine in existence?

“I’m supposed to be the blind one,” A-Qing snaps, slapping Fuxing on the arm. “You’re finally back, are you? Done wandering around like an idiot?”

The god doesn’t even flinch. Instead, he looks around wildly, moving in full-body jerks, which in turn makes A-Qing try to glance at whatever he’s looking at. Before she can find anything unusual, Fuxing grabs both her wrist and the woman’s flesh wrist, dragging them into a small space between two stalls. The stall owners peek over for a moment, but don’t seem to care at all.
“Hey!” A-Qing wrenches her wrist from Fuxing’s grasp. What’s going on with him today? “What do you think you’re doing?”

The woman stares at Fuxing for a while, trailing over his black robes and red eyes. There’s something uncomfortable about how she surveys the god, dragging her gaze over his entire being with no expression at all on her pale features.

But she says nothing. Instead, she shifts her gaze. A-Qing follows it. Fuxing tries his best to melt into the wall.

There, in the middle of the street, is a man dressed entirely in white robes patterned with clouds. Going by the ribbon tied around his forehead and the sword by his side, he’s probably part of the Gusu Lan Sect, which is kind of strange. Nobody in Yinhe mentioned anything about other cultivators getting involved, but it’s not like they’re obligated to tell them anything.

Teamwork is fine, but not when it turns into meddling. Besides, there’s something weird about this particular cultivator. It’s the aura he carries with him; it’s not quite sad, more melancholic if anything, like he’s been mourning for a long time.

A-Qing doesn’t know who he is, and frankly, she doesn’t care.

(But what a resolute will they must have, to be the same person within and without.)

She and Fuxing never hang around other cultivators for too long: all others do is get in the way. The Yunmeng Jiang Sect and the Gusu Lan Sect are typically no-goes due to, uh, personal reasons, and the Lanling Jin Sect is just one giant, shiny, expensive headache. Out of the big four, only the Qinghe Nie Sect’s worth considering. They do have cool sabers, after all.

“Looks like we have some competition,” A-Qing huffs, annoyed. She turns back to face Fuxing and freezes.

That’s a look she never wants to see on his face.

Panic. Sheer, unadulterated panic. It’s a sort of fear that’s gut-deep and cuts like a knife. It’s a vice grip, a chokehold that cuts breath short and won’t let go. Fuxing’s terrified out of his mind, eyes blown wide, breaths stuttering, limbs locked in place.

(But beneath all that fear, there’s an expression that she recognizes. No one should ever die wearing that expression. No one should live wearing that expression.)

A-Qing immediately reaches for Jiangzai. Even the woman tenses, her eyes bleeding with the aura of blood. If a god is scared of something—no, if Fuxing’s scared of something, then that something needs to be taken care of immediately.

The Gusu Lan cultivator passes by without even sparing a glance in their direction.

Fuxing lets out a strangled breath.

The three of them are silent for a little while. Surprisingly, it’s the woman who breaks the silence.

“Tonight is just full of surprises,” she says, lifting her sleeve to her lips. There’s something strange about her remark, her tone a little off-kilter, a little too knowing. “It’s not everyday you get to see the revered Hanguang-Jun.”

Huh. That’s a name. That’s... a name A-Qing knows. In fact, that’s a name she explicitly remembers
Fuxing labelling as someone they should stay away at all costs.

It was funny at first. Fuxing’s one of those people who’ll drink everyone under the table and flaunt his superiority in everyone’s faces. He’s probably made just as many enemies as friends using his stupid tactic of downing alcohol until he’s the last one standing, and there’s really no guessing how many people he’s humiliated by destroying them with his indomitable liver and unfortunately high tolerance.

It really is funny. A-Qing doesn’t care for alcohol, and someone needs to be sober to make sure they all get home in one piece, so she likes watching people who’d normally be terrified of Fuxing relax and exchange heated but well-meaning banter with the god, talking and laughing over food and drink.

It’s funny until Fuxing drinks and drinks until he can’t remember his own name, can’t remember where he is or why he’s alive at all. It’s funny until A-Qing has to hold him up and help him to someplace lonely and quiet so no one will hear him cry.

It’s funny until Fuxing cries and clutches onto A-Qing’s sleeves, eyes unseeing, begging, No, I’m sorry, Lan Zhan, Lan Wangji, Hanguang-Jun, please, please, give me another chance, I promise I’ll do better, I’ll be better, don’t leave me alone.

And that’s how you learn to hate someone you’ve never met.

Whoever this Hanguang-Jun is, he’s dangerous. He’s a threat. If A-Qing can’t get rid of him, the very least she could do is make sure he never, ever does anything to hurt Fuxing again.

Jiangzai shivers beneath her grip. A-Qing turns to the woman, who raises an eyebrow.

“You know what’s going on,” A-Qing says, eyes narrowed.

The woman’s smile widens. She tilts her head a little to the side, gaze glimmering with some convoluted layering of amusement and unspoken knowledge, which is another look A-Qing hates seeing, because it means she’ll effectively be trying to fact-check with a wall.

It doesn’t matter. Her silence is just as good as an answer.

In one swift movement, A-Qing snatches Fuxing’s coin pouch from his sleeves, drags him to the nearest accessory stall, and glares down the vendor until he reluctantly hands over a weimao.

A-Qing holds the weimao out toward Fuxing. The god, still rattled, stares for a moment. Slowly, he takes the weimao and places it gingerly on his head. His hands shake.

It’s not a good night for this sort of business. Maybe Fuxing will feel better after a meal, a bath, and a good night’s sleep.

Turning to the ghostly woman, A-Qing bows quickly. “Sorry, but you’ll have to excuse us. It’s been a long day.”

“Of course,” the woman says. Her expression hasn’t changed one bit. “Then you’ll be needing someplace to stay, won’t you? I know a very nice hotel around here. Would you like me to take you there?”

A-Qing hesitates. She’s not too eager to follow a woman who looks like a ghoul and knows more than she’s letting on, but wandering around aimlessly among these bustling streets and stumbling into that nasty Hanguang-Jun is an even worse prospect.
Behind her, Fuxing takes a deep breath. “A-Qing,” he says, a faint tremor still in his voice, “it’s alright.”

The smile that rises to his lips doesn’t reach his eyes. It’s a fragile thing, easily given and easily broken.

He’s doing it again. He’s doing the stupid thing where he pretends like everything’s perfectly fine even though he’s coming apart at the seams, and A-Qing isn’t having any of it.

“Sure,” answers A-Qing, snatching Fuxing’s sleeve violently when he tries to interject. “That’s very kind of you, miss, um…”

“Hui Hua.” The woman smiles again, but it’s different, kinder in a weird way, softer around the edges. “I take if you’re A-Qing?”

A-Qing nods.

The woman—Hui Hua, what a strange name, Ash Blossom, must be a title—turns to Fuxing, and bows deeply.

“My lord,” she says reverently, posture perfect despite her disheveled appearance, “it’s an honour to host you.”

Fuxing’s panic fades in part to suspicion. “You recognize me?”

It’s hard to blame him. Usually he’s much more courteous, but as he is now (a demon dressed in the black of death and the red of blood, walking among the hatred of malevolent spirits screaming for revenge), nobody in their right mind would assume he’s anything divine.

Hui Hua keeps her head down and her expression hidden behind her white sleeves. “This humble servant believes both names your prosperous self carries deserve respect.”

Both A-Qing and Fuxing stare in silence.

That’s impossible. Fuxing’s divine aura is so utterly smothered in resentful energy that not even someone like Hanguang-Jun would be able to identify him as a god.

And… for some reason, Hui Hua knows. She knows about Fuxing’s other name. His true name.

Fuxing didn’t have a lot of friends, but he sure made a lot of enemies, and a lot of those enemies would love to see him dead for good. Well, too bad for them! If they want at Fuxing, they’ll have to go through A-Qing and Jiangzai first, and she’ll lop off the hands of every idiot who even thinks about digging up the sins Fuxing’s already paying for with his immortal life.

A-Qing moves to unsheath Jiangzai. Fuxing reaches for the dizi at his waist.

“I mean no harm,” says Hui Hua. “I have no ill intentions toward you or your disciple. There is nothing for me to hide, and there is nothing from you I wish to take.”

The ghostly woman finally rises. Her eyes are flat and empty.

“I simply wish to guide you through this realm, and pray for your success in your endeavours here.”

“Don’t try and pretend like you don’t want something from us,” A-Qing snaps, unsheathing Jiangzai in one swift motion. The sword laughs. Leveling the blade at Hui Hua’s chest, she narrows her eyes and prepares to stand her ground. “Of all people, you chose to talk to us. You know too much about
Fuxing, and I’ll bet you know exactly why we’re here!”

Something’s very wrong with this realm, and A-Qing hates how it feels. She literally has a sword pointed at a lady missing half the flesh from her body, and nobody seems to care. In fact, they don’t even spare a glance.

This doesn’t feel like all the other times A-Qing’s visited the Other Side. Something vile is at work here.

Before A-Qing can do anything else, Fuxing lays a hand on her shoulder. “Calm down,” he says, not so much gentle as exhausted. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions yet. Remember: some people keep secrets not because they want to, but because they have to.”

He’s right, and that’s what makes it annoying. “Fine,” A-Qing grumbles, reluctantly sheathing Jiangzai, who snorts. “Whatever. It’s too late for this, anyway.”

“We’ll take your offer for boarding,” says Fuxing. “For now, you have our thanks.”

Returning to glare at Hui Hua, A-Qing sneers. “But don’t think I trust you even for a second! I don’t know what you are, and if it turns out you’re lying, then it won’t matter, because you’ll just be food for Jiangzai!”

Jiangzai shakes eagerly. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Hui Hua simply bows again, unfazed. “Of course. Now, shall we be off?”

The fact that she isn’t even remotely threatened is both annoying and concerning.

A-Qing isn’t sure how late it is, but the celebrations are still going strong. It’s almost hard on the eyes to look around; lanterns of every colour dot the streets and flowers rain from the balconies and roofs, as if someone keeps throwing them down. Everyone’s laughing and enjoying the festivities, eating and drinking and singing, and something feels very fake about it all.

Nobody bats an eye as they weave their way through the crowds. Even with A-Qing’s bleeding eyes, Fuxing’s ominous robes, and Hui Hua’s warped form, they continue to make merry, all while the same song plays:

Ash blossoms fall amidst a desolate spring,
A stone-cold heart catches fallen stars,
The fools weeping crimson and laughing gold
Have nothing but bleeding fingers and broken souls!

Hark! The song of the golden gods, three strong, three fallen
Pierces through the endless abyss and goes unheard!
Ten thousand flowers for the hands clasped in prayer
That wilt and are born again!

In circles, in circles,
Repeating, repeating,
We’re breathing, we’re crying,
And healing, and dying—

Behold the majesty of the golden gods!

It isn’t a happy song. For such a vibrant celebration in the name of a god of luck, isn’t it sort of out of
A-Qing sighs in irritation as the voices fades away only to start all over again. “Don’t they have any other songs to sing?”

“None,” Hui Hua says succinctly. She twists her head in an awful jerking motion. “It’s a song that the venerated Shouxing wrote herself. To honour her greatness, we sing her song until day comes.”

“Yeah? And when is that?”

Hui Hua’s expression is terribly empty. Even though her lips carve an unnaturally wide smile through her face, she looks like she feels nothing. “It comes when it comes. But until it does, we sing.”

The crash of drums startles A-Qing into tripping over her own feet. Fuxing steadies her, staring onward with blank eyes.

As if the festival wasn’t lively enough, a procession of red and gold breaks through the crowds with ease. Everyone immediately breaks into near-manic cheers, scooping up fallen flowers and tossing them into the air again with frightening vigor. Orchids and lilies drown out the night sky, swept up in the frantic waving of silks and banners.

What a weird night to get married. Whoever the bride is, she has serious guts, celebrating her own happiness before her patron god’s.

Someone tosses a peach in A-Qing’s direction. She grabs it out of the air and takes a bite out of it, because it really is a very nice peach, but are these people really throwing fruit around?

The women in the procession toss out peonies in waves. They empty their baskets, then reach into their robes, grabbing and throwing, grabbing and throwing, until their cheerful smiles turn into rigid half-grimaces.

It’s difficult to see among the parade of red, but A-Qing swears she sees a trickle of blood drip from a flower-bearer’s sleeve. It falls to the ground, where it’s immediately trampled by the marching feet of those who follow behind.

A-Qing feels nauseous. The peach in her hands feels like a stone.

These flower-bearers are ripping flowers from their skin.


“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

The look Fuxing gives her is one she recognizes immediately. It says: something is very wrong, but if you call attention to it, it’ll make things worse.

So A-Qing pretends like everything’s okay, because she’s a fast learner. “Yeah! If the wedding procession is this big, the bride must look absolutely divine!”

“She does,” says Hui Hua, who watches with unblinking eyes. No annoying flowers or fruits come her way. “The maiden is the merciful Shouxing’s vassal-turned-goddess.”

A-Qing chokes on her peach. “This is a wedding procession for a goddess?”
Hui Hua nods. “The goddess of lanterns and flowers, Ying Huohua.”

That does make sense, in hindsight. So this city isn’t just obsessed with lanterns and flowers. Well, maybe they are, but for a reason.

And then the marriage sedan rises into view, and A-Qing almost chokes on her peach again.

Red and gold, woven into delicate patterns of flowers and dragons and intricate paintings somehow made of thread. Golden ornaments adorn every corner and edge in a blinding and gaudy show of wealth, glistening with an eye-aching shine under the light of the lanterns. The satin curtain sways with each step the carriers take, and in the moment that the marriage sedan passes by, A-Qing swears she can smell orchids.

The three of them stand there for a while, watching as the procession marches into the distance and the cheers subside to their usual volume. The shower of flowers eases as well, and the sickly floral scent returns to just barely tolerable.

“Well then,” Hui Hua says, turning with a gentle wave of her robes. “We should be off.”

Without the hysterical energy of the marriage procession, the walk to the hotel is short. Hui Hua walks through the streets like she’s walked them a thousand times. Maybe she has.

“Please, let me handle this.” Hui Hua waves at them to stay by the door, then moves to speak with one of the employees.

He nods eagerly, then motions for Hui Hua to follow. Hui Hua in turn beckons to A-Qing and Fuxing.

And, uh, the hotel really is something.

For a small establishment, it’s awfully shiny. Red and gold decorations are practically plastered on every flat surface or hanging off the tables. Some sort of dragon winds up the stairs, entirely constructed out of paper and flowers. Patrons chat cheerfully, calling for more dishes and alcohol.

A waitress passes by with a jar of alcohol, and heavens, what on earth is that stuff made of?

Even Fuxing’s expression twists, with confusion going one way and surprise going the other. “That’s some fragrant stuff.”

A-Qing watches with horror as the waitress pours a cup for a customer. The liquid that comes out looks like water and smells like perfume, which is great, but then an entire peony plops out and into the bowl.

“Sorry,” A-Qing choke out, unable to look away as the customer downs the bowl in one go, peony and all. “But did that man just swallow a flower?”

“It’s tradition,” is all Hui Hua says. She grins, and something black trickles from her lips.

Great. Everybody in this city is crazy, and not just in the weird way. They love their Shouxing and Ying Huohua so much that they’re willing to eat flowers. And if those flowers are grown from flesh and skin—

What in the world is going on?

Hui Hua directs to their room. “Here you are, honoured guests. Please don’t worry about payment.
From such a revered being such as yourself, none is necessary.”

“How kind of you,” Fuxing says, words honey-sweet. “Then if you’ll excuse us.”

The ghostly woman bows deeply, posture perfect as always. A-Qing follows after Fuxing, and in the moment before the door shuts completely, she sees Hui Hua raise a finger to her crimson lips.

The door shuts, and A-Qing lets go of a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

As usual, Fuxing’s the first one to collapse onto a bed. This time, though, there’s no breathy laugh as he begins his battle with the sheets; instead, he folds his robes neatly underneath him and settles down onto the bed in silence.

A-Qing rests Jiangzai by her own bed. She tries not to look too much. It feels wrong, like she’s seeing something she shouldn’t, and she won’t betray his trust like that, but it’s impossible to miss how Fuxing reaches for the dizi at his waist.

A-Qing's fingers brush the ebony instrument. Maybe it’s a trick of the light, or maybe A-Qing’s just tired, but he looks paler than he normally does.

Time for food, then.

At least Hui Hua was right about the hotel being nice. A-Qing barely takes a step out the door before she comes face-to-face with a young man holding a tray of food that looks like it’s more expensive than all of A-Qing’s belongings combined.

For a moment, A-Qing just stares. Two enormous peaches sit on beds of flower petals, both of them half the size of her head, and that’s not normal, is it? There’s no way that’s normal.

“That’s the biggest peach I’ve ever seen!”

“It’s a local specialty,” the man chirps, eyes sparkling, way too happy about peaches. “The golden god of longevity, divine Shouxing, blessed our land with bountiful fruit!”

The man continues to wax lyrical about the almighty Shouxing and her abundant mercy, which is really starting to get old. A-Qing pretends to listen and manages to pry the tray from the man’s hands as he continues with his spiel. He keeps talking until A-Qing shuts the door in his face.

“Food’s here,” she says, placing the tray on the table.

Fuxing blinks, then looks up. “Oh,” is his simple reply. He doesn’t move.

Of course he doesn’t move, because he’s the world’s biggest idiot.

A-Qing picks up her spoon. Fuxing stares blankly. A-Qing tosses it up and down; it’s heavier than it looks. Fuxing’s gaze follows the up-and-down motion.

Then A-Qing hurls the spoon at Fuxing’s face. The ceramic utensil greets Fuxing’s forehead with a mighty and solid *thwack*.

“Ow, ow, ow,” cries Fuxing, curling into a tiny ball. He raises his hands to nurse his battered forehead and gives A-Qing an accusing pout between his arms. “That was a ceramic spoon, you know? Ceramic! And you threw it at my face!”

“Why else do you think I threw it at you, dumbass?”
“I didn’t raise you like this,” Fuxing wails, scrambling up the bed and against the wall. “What went wrong, A-Qing? Was it me? Am I a bad father?”

A-Qing reaches for the second spoon. Fuxing clamps his mouth shut.

The two of them stare in silence. To be accurate, A-Qing glares and Fuxing tries his best to keep her gaze. Doesn’t matter. It’s a silent standoff that A-Qing has never lost.

After a few moments of silence, Fuxing sighs. It’s long and deep, like he’s squeezing out all the breath in his lungs.

Good. He doesn’t need any painful memories dragging him down. Fuxing is just Fuxing, the most insufferable person A-Qing’s ever met and will ever meet, and he’s fine just the way he is, because people can grow, and they will grow. It just takes time. Luckily for Fuxing, he’s got all the time in the world.

(There’s remembering, and then there’s being remembered.

Someone who loves the world will want the former and won’t care too much for the latter. Someone hated by the world will have the latter thrust upon them and reject the former with all their might.

Then there’s someone like Fuxing, who wants neither.

How can you blame him? For him, the past is a curse. Maybe if he was reborn as someone with more freedom, he’d be happier.

But he’s Fuxing, the golden god of prosperity, and he has a duty to this world. If he won’t be there for the people, no one will, and the thought of even more innocents dying as a result of his incompetence is one of his greatest fears.

For a god, there sure are a lot of things Fuxing’s afraid of. That’s what makes him so human.)

A-Qing gestures impatiently at the table. “Food’s here,” she repeats.

Fuxing’s black robes drag across the white sheets as he pushes himself up. “Sure, sure. But you didn’t need to be so violent. I can take care of myself.”

“So you’ll lie to my face, but not Wen Qing-Jie’s,” A-Qing snaps, catching the spoon when Fuxing tosses it back.

“Oh, no,” Fuxing interjects. “I lie to everyone. Don’t take it personally.”

Unamused, A-Qing crosses her arms. “I’ll go ask for more spoons.”

The god pales instantly. “Wait, no, don’t!” He practically scrambles to the table, seating himself and shovelling food into his bowl, peeking up at A-Qing every so often. “See? No harm done. It’d be a shame to let all this go cold, wouldn’t it?”

That’s one of the only reasonable things he’s said all day. But food is still food, and good food is good food.

The night passes without much fanfare. Outside, the streets are somehow still packed with singing festival-goers. Lanterns pass by their window, occasionally lighting the room up in strange hues, all while the same song echoes on.

_In circles, in circles,_
Repeating, repeating,
We’re breathing, we’re crying,
And healing, and dying—

Behold the majesty of the golden gods!

“Doesn’t seem like Shouxing has too much faith in herself,” A-Qing murmurs.

She rests on her bed, fresh out of the bath, rolling her jade ornament back and forth in her hands. The crystal bell jingles lightly, its ethereal chime drowned out by the neverending chorus of upsettingly cheerful voices.

Across the room, Fuxing sighs. He’s been reading the same page for a while now.

For another moment, A-Qing is silent. She wants to ask, she really wants to ask, but she knows she’s walking a fine line.

“Why are you running away from Hanguang-Jun?”

Fuxing looks up slowly. His eyes glow blood-red in the dark of the room.

“I think,” the god says, his voice bleeding with lost emotion, “that you already know why.”

Exhaustion and grief are painted across his pale features. He looks tired, bone-achingly weary, sick of the world and everything in it. He looks like all he wants is to drift off to sleep and never wake up.

The past always makes Fuxing like this, and A-Qing hates that she can’t do anything about it. She doesn’t know as much about Fuxing as she wants to, and she doesn’t know a single thing about Wei Wuxian.

See, the problem isn’t that Fuxing’s scared that Hanguang-Jun will punish him or capture him. It’s annoying, it’s infuriating, but Fuxing’s never been afraid of getting hurt.

The problem is that Fuxing looks at Hanguang-Jun with the same expression Song Daozhang wore when Daozhang struck him down.

Muffled cries of pain, a mantra of he mustn’t know, he mustn’t know, all while lamenting the fate that’s been given to them, burying the truth where it’ll never be found, accepting that a happy ending will never come.

Fuxing—no, Wei Wuxian—looks at Hanguang-Jun like he’s terrified that if they should ever meet again, an even worse fate will befall them.

A-Qing can’t say anything. She doesn’t know enough. It isn’t her place.

But when she does know enough, oh boy, is Fuxing in for the lecture of his dumb, divine life.

(If Wei Wuxian and Hanguang-Jun were anything like Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen—)

As much as she doesn’t want to, it’s probably best if A-Qing actually, you know, talks to Hanguang-Jun.

“Don’t worry about it,” says A-Qing, patting Jiangzai’s hilt. Game face, game face. Fuxing can’t know. “If that nasty, stuck-up Hanguang-Jun tries anything, I’ll gut him and roast him like a pig!”

Fuxing tries to smile. It’s more of a grimace than anything else. “No. No matter what, don’t fight
him.” His expression falters, and he looks down at his hands. “Especially not for me. We’ve... fought enough.”

He’s sad, and A-Qing hates it. Sadness is exhausting. It’s draining, it’s heavy, and it doesn’t do anything to help at all.

So she does what she knows how to do.

With a snap of her sleeve, A-Qing puts the lamp out. Darkness falls over the room like a blanket.

“It’s late. If we want to get an early start tomorrow, we should sleep.”

There’s no reprieve for those lost in the past in sleep. But there is rest, and that’s all that matters.

On the other side of the room, Fuxing breathes.

“You’re right,” the god says. His glowing red eyes close. “Let’s get some rest. Good night, A-Qing.”

“Uh-huh. Good night.”

It isn’t the first time A-Qing’s stayed up later than Fuxing. On nights like these, she always makes sure to wait and listen until Fuxing’s short, measured breathes slow and fall into the realm of dreams.

Outside, the lanterns burn bright and the flowers fall slowly.

In circles, in circles,
Repeating, repeating,
We’re breathing, we’re crying,
And healing, and dying—

A-Qing wakes up to the sound of fireworks.

Needless to say, it scares her to death and back, because for the love of all that is good and just in this stupid world, who lights fireworks this early in the morning?

By instinct, she leaps up, snatching up Jiangzai with one hand and grabbing a handful of talismans with the other. For some reason, it’s still dark outside, and the glow of lanterns and smell of flowers is impossible to ignore.

“Quite a rude awakening, wouldn’t you say?”

Oh, you have got to be kidding.

Sitting calmly at the table, legs crossed over each other, is Hui Hua. She doesn’t even flinch when A-Qing draws Jiangzai.

“You,” A-Qing snarls, ready to run her through if need be. “What are you doing here? Why are you still here?”

It’s oddly silent. A-Qing looks to the other bed in the room, which is tidied neatly and devoid of a certain god of prosperity.
She’s going to kill that asshole when he gets back.

While A-Qing seethes silently, Hui Hua slides a plate of assorted fruit across the table. Screw the fireworks—waking up to a half-undead lady with pools of blood for eyes is the stuff of nightmares. “As you’ve noticed, the generous Fuxing has chosen to investigate by his lonesome. In order to ensure your safety, he asked me to watch over you as you, inevitably, conduct your own investigation.”

How kind of him to send a ghoul lady after her. Apparently this Hanguang-Jun business was a bigger blow to the head than A-Qing originally anticipated, because Fuxing’s gone full rogue in what she knows is an attempt to stay as far away from the supposedly terrifying Second Jade.

“I’ll tie his hair to a dog and throw spoons at him until he dies,” A-Qing spits, pulling her robes on violently.

Hui Hua laughs. It’s a high, bell-like sound, entirely unfitting for someone as ghastly as her. “I have no right to interfere with matters between a god and his vassal; however, I’d advise you leave that for after you end matters here.”

She’s right, and that makes it even worse.

Breakfast is a plate of fruit so abnormally large that even A-Qing pauses to consider how exactly they were grown. Then she remembers the flower-bearers and decides that it’s probably best if she doesn’t know at all.

As A-Qing finishes off an apricot, Hui Hua sighs.

“That song really never stops,” she murmurs, resting her head in her flesh hand. Her other hand, the fleshless, dead limb, taps lightly on her leg.

A-Qing frowns, wiping her mouth. “I thought you liked that song.”

Hui Hua laughs again. Now that A-Qing listens closely, her voice really does sound like bells. “A tragic hymn like that? Who in their right mind would like such a sad song?”

“It sounds nice,” A-Qing argues. She might not be the most avid musician, but she can appreciate a pretty song when she hears one. The more she learns, the more she and Fuxing have to pass time on the road. “It’s just they only sing that one song. Does Shouxing not want any other songs or something?”

A strange expression drapes over Hui Hua’s face like a veil. Her smile, her gaze, everything about her seems very distant and almost ethereal. “Only for one night.”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed yet, but it’s been one night already. Besides, why’s everyone still celebrating? Didn’t you say—”

A-Qing cuts herself off.

One night a year.

The lanterns, the flowers, the eternal night, in circles, in circles—

No way. There’s no way that’s possible, right? Not even for a god. Not... not even for a god.

Tripping over herself to slide the door to the balcony open, A-Qing bursts out and into the
celebrations. The sleeve of her robe catches onto a nearby lantern, and she shakes it out into the street, where it’s swept up by the manic energy of the festivities.

Everything looks the same as it did last night. That’s fine, right? Maybe there’s something special about this realm in particular. Sure, maybe it doesn’t make sense because the Other Side is supposed to be a reflection of the real world and therefore should reflect everything into its opposite, but maybe things are just weird like that sometimes.

Or, of course, there’s the absolutely ridiculous idea that this realm is repeating the same night over and over again.

If this realm is under the domain of Shouxing, then everything within it should be under Shouxing’s command. And if she’s the one looping time, then there’s no way any of these fake civilians would admit anything’s off.

There is one person, though, who’s been an anomaly from the very beginning.

“A-Qing calls, steadying her voice, “how long has the festival been going on for?”

Silence.

Then: “One night. One thousand years. It depends how you choose to look at it.”

A city of red and gold, of lanterns and flowers, perpetually trapped in a festival that celebrates a goddess who refuses to see the sun rise.

A-Qing swallows the lump in her throat. “A thousand years.”

The laughter around her is grating. The same song rings into the skies, begging for help from the gods that’ll never come, because it’s the gods themselves who’ve condemned the people.

Then what about all those missing townspeople from Yinhe? And all those shattered souls along the border of the realms—was that a god’s work?

Would a being like Fuxing be capable of such tremendous cruelty?

A-Qing turns, her grip on the balcony railing tightening. “Fuxing said you’d help me, so start helping.”

Hui Hua rises to her feet and bows. “Of course. I can be very helpful. What would you like me to do?”

“Answer my questions,” A-Qing demands. “Answer them truthfully. Or, at the very least, answer them to the best of your ability.”

“Questions,” Hui Hua repeats, as if testing it on her tongue.

There’s always something off about Hui Hua, but not in the same way as the rest of the people in this god-forsaken city. While the others sing and cheer like puppets, with smiles painted onto their faces that have been eroding away for years under the light of day-eating moon and a song stitched onto their lips that’s long become an elegy, Hui Hua walks through the streets, a twisted figure among a beautiful celebration; an exception, free from the will of the goddess who rules over the domain.

Why is her form so twisted? Why is she here?

But those aren’t the questions A-Qing needs to ask right now. She doubts Hui Hua would be able to
answer them. Free will is only as free as your masters let it be.

“Let’s get the pressing issue out of the way.” A-Qing gestures to the festival. Behind her, more fireworks light up the night sky, lighting up her silhouette. “This city, this realm—is it stuck in time?”

“Yes,” answers Hui Hua.

The woman smiles when A-Qing’s eyes narrow. So she can answer questions about the realm. That’s already much better than standing in the corner, twisting unnaturally, bleeding black.

“Next question. Is Shouxing the manipulating time?”

Hui Hua smiles pleasantly, but remains silent.

That’s a yes, then.

“Next. Why is she repeating this one night?”

No change. Hui Hua tilts her head to the side a little, raises her shoulders.

She can’t answer questions about Shouxing, then. Fair enough. It makes sense. But why would Shouxing keep her intentions hidden? Gods can do whatever they want. They’re entitled to whatever they please, as long as they maintain divine order.

If Shouxing’s hiding something, that means she’s doing something very, very wrong. A-Qing has a few ideas, but there’s no way she’s going to spit on a god without knowing the full story.

“Next,” A-Qing continues. “Do you know about the Yinhe disappearances?”

Hui Hua shakes her head. “I’m not familiar with them.”

And why would she? A-Qing isn’t sure how much information travels in and out between realms, but if Hui Hua’s being held here against her will, then this realm must be completely sealed off. It doesn’t matter how powerful or weak she really is; desperation is a powerful motivator. Try hard enough, and with time, even the weakest person can fell a god.

Could it be that Hui Hua... doesn’t want to escape?

No, that’s impossible. A thousand years is a long time, and living the same chaotic night for that long would drive anyone insane.

(Then how does she know about Fuxing? About Wei Wuxian?)

A-Qing studies Hui Hua for a moment longer. She’s unhinged, alright, twisted in both appearance and behaviour. But her personality seems perfectly intact, and despite the occasional display of ghoulish behaviour, she seems normal. As normal as someone stuck in his hell of a place can be, that is.

“Alright.” There are a few more questions A-Qing needs to ask, and then she’s off to get her feet on the ground and see what’s happening for herself. “The rift between this realm and the real world—is it as it should be?”

The Other Side doesn’t have protective boundaries. People slip into it all the time and manage to live out their entire lives without ever finding their way back.

“It isn’t.” Hui Hua’s answer is succinct. “The almighty Shouxing protects us from outsiders. In her
endless kindness, she has chosen to play the role of gatekeeper by her lonesome.”

So the answer is basically, *Shouxing gets to choose who comes in and who goes out.*

Which of course spurs on the next question: “Then why let in three strangers?”

Hui Hua’s shoulders fall with her breath. She brings her hands together in an awful contrast of life and death. “The divine Fuxing is a god of equal standing to the merciful Shouxing’s. Though he may not be able to manipulate this realm, he can still come and go as he pleases.”

And A-Qing came with him, so that’s two accounted for. “Then what about Hanguang-Jun? Why let him in?”

Finally, inevitably, Hui Hua is silent. Her gaze trails the floor, where the shadows of lanterns drifting by paint a sea of flickering images.

“Everybody loves a happy ending,” is what the woman says, something forlorn and so hopelessly lost in her voice. “If you’ve lived a tragedy all your life, wouldn’t you want prove to yourself that happiness exists somewhere?”

A-Qing doesn’t answer. She isn’t obligated to, and she doesn’t want to. This isn’t a question for her to answer; the person who should be facing such an inquiry isn’t even here right now.

So A-Qing snatches her belongings up and ties her pendant neatly to her sash. It sways gently against her hip, ringing out with a promise and an oath Fuxing and A-Qing have both given to the world:

*I’ll save you, but it’s up to you to hold strong until I reach you.*

“Anyway,” A-Qing quips, walking over to whack Hui Hua on her flesh arm, “that’s enough for now. You’re with me until we figure this out. So let’s go endure that stupid festival once more.”

It’s impossible to describe, but Hui Hua’s features soften like she’s leaving something behind. A-Qing recognizes it, that strange not-quite-acceptance of something new over something old, but where has she seen it before?

Whatever. It doesn’t matter now, anyway.

“Into the depths we go,” A-Qing mutters, pushing the door open.

“Again,” Hui Hua adds, and if that one word doesn’t sum up this mess they’ve taken the leap into, then nothing does.

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A disturbing discovery occurs almost immediately after they leave the hotel.

A-Qing wants to punch herself in the face for not noticing earlier. She wants to punch Fuxing in the face for not saying anything, because of all people, he’s the specialist when it comes to demonic cultivation.

The orchid in her hands is perfectly normal, if not unnaturally fragrant. It looks exactly the same as all the other flowers that fall from the sky.
It was out of frustration, really, but results are still results. One of A-Qing’s bad habits that even Fuxing told her off about is her tendency to channel her qi into her hands whenever she gets upset.

Usually, it’s just Jiangzai in her hands, so it’s not a problem. She only found out when she punched a tree during their travels and the entire dumb thing decided to snap in half.

But she’s gotten better! Things don’t explode in her hands anymore, but her hands can still make things explode. It’s useful for dealing with cultivators who think they’re way stronger than they actually are. Internal bleeding is fine because that’s where the blood’s supposed to be, and no, Fuxing, complaints aren’t being accepted right now, shut up, it’s for your own good.

A-Qing forces some of her qi into the flower. The moment she sparks the connection, tendrils of resentful energy lash out at her hand, too weak to cause any damage, but the fact that this one tiny flower carries resentful energy is enough to send A-Qing into a controlled but anxious frenzy.

Hui Hua passes more flowers to A-Qing. For once, she’s thankful that everyone in this city’s out of their minds, otherwise she’d definitely be chased away for her frantic behaviour.

“This one too!” It’s impossible not to curse in this kind of situation. Tossing a lotus flower over her shoulder, she picks up an iris, and then a lily, and a magnolia, and a peony, again and again. All of them carry the same haze of resentful energy.

Behind her, Hui Hua asks, “What do you think?”

And really, what does she think?

As far as A-Qing knows, Gods of luck can’t harness resentful energy. In fact, they’re resentful energy repellent. She knows this because Fuxing’s accidentally dispelled too many curses not to get the hint.

(Of course, if gods fall, or if the core of their identities change, it’s a different story.)

Regardless of who or what’s behind this, resentful energy is no joke. There’s only been one case of someone mastering demonic cultivation, and that story didn’t end well.

“I think,” A-Qing finally decides, “that I need to talk to the local goddess of flowers.”

It theory, it’s a great idea. It makes perfect sense to talk to the being that all these demonic flowers are for.

In practice, it makes A-Qing want to wring the necks of every one of these goddamn puppets, because they refuse to let her see Ying Huohua.

“Get off,” A-Qing demands, pushing yet another wailing idiot away from her. She struggles up the steps leading to the temple, forcing her way through the crowd of people who apparently can’t live with the idea of someone even talking to their honoured goddess. “This is urgent! Your flower goddess has some explaining to do!”

“You mustn't,” the festival-goers screech. Their voices are an assault on the ears, crying and shrieking and all repeating the same phrase over and over again. “You mustn’t! You mustn’t!”

Despite the fact that the entire city has apparently decided to try and stop A-Qing, they barely put up a fight. All they do is grab her sleeves and wave their limbs around uselessly, which is irritating, but hardly the most troublesome obstacle she’s had to deal with.
Hui Hua walks a little away from her. For some reason, everyone avoids her like she’s about to eat someone. To be fair, she does look like she could unhinge her jaw and start popping people down like candy, but A-Qing gets the feeling that it’s not just her appearance that’s driving people away.

After a short fight with the entire population of this garbage city, A-Qing stomps into the temple and unsheathes Jiangzai.

“Alright, you mindless dogs,” she snarls, levelling the blade at the terrified attendants. “The next person to tell me what I can and can’t do becomes a smear on the wall. Get out, or I’ll personally escort you to the hell!”

Fear is always more powerful than fake devotion, and nowhere is that on better display than now. The girls scramble to make their escape, tripping over their long red robes and each other.

Except for one, that is.

A single figure kneels on a plush golden cushion, entirely silent. The robes hanging off her shoulders are by far the most extravagant clothing A-Qing’s ever seen, and she travels with a god who can afford every material pleasure in existence. Gold and gold and even more gold on red that never ends, flowers and phoenixes stitched into winding patterns, a long veil that hides a smile A-Qing knows the goddess is wearing.

“Ying Huohua,” A-Qing says, bowing curtly. “My name is Wei Chengfeng. I’m the first disciple of Fuxing, the god of prosperity.”

The goddess doesn’t speak. She doesn’t even move. All she does is sit there, her hands folded on her lap.

Okay, that’s rude, but gods are like that sometimes. “I’m sorry for the rude entrance, but I need to know why your flowers are imbued with resentful energy.” Raising a peony as evidence, A-Qing tries to force her qi into the flower, then tosses it in front of the goddess as inky tendrils begin to pour out. “What do you think you’re doing? Just what do you think you’re messing with?”

Ying Huohua is utterly silent.

Oh, so it’s like that, is it?

The good thing about travelling with Fuxing is that A-Qing isn’t scared of gods. The bad thing about travelling with Fuxing is that A-Qing isn’t scared of gods.

So when she swings Jiangzai across the room, cutting a deep gash into the pillars and banners while also slicing the goddess’ veil in half, A-Qing doesn’t feel the tiniest bit of fear. She has a question, and she wants answers. That’s all there is.

The two halves of the red veil float gently onto the cushion.

A-Qing gapes.

“Hey there, Hui Hua.”

“Yes?”

“When where you going to tell me that Ying Huohua looks exactly like you?”

The resemblance is so uncanny there’s no way it’s a coincidence. The pale of death on Hui Hua is
the pale of fine beauty on Ying Huohua. Startlingly red lips and red eyes, hair as black as night, the
same vacant smile—it’s all the same. It’s all the same.

A-Qing can’t help but look between the goddess and her ghastly doppelganger. Why do they look
the same? Why does such a venerated goddess have such a warped lookalike? What does this mean
for Shouxing, who has to know of all this?

Through it all, Ying Huohua sits peacefully. While Hui Hua also wears her crimson eyes, their gazes
are as different as they could possibly be. Ying Huohua’s eyes are glassy and distantly happy,
whereas Hui Hua’s swirl with vivid emotion A-Qing can’t identify.

Approaching the goddess with unfaltering steps, A-Qing sheaths Jiangzai. “Looks like you have
even more to answer to, Ying Huohua. Answer my questions, and I’ll leave you in peace to enjoy
your wedding.”

The goddess is silent and silent as a stone.

“Hey,” A-Qing snaps, impatient. “You aren’t ignoring me, are you? You used to be a disciple, too,
so don’t think you have any right to just pretend I don’t exist!”

“A-Qing.”

At the sound of her name, A-Qing turns. Hui Hua’s face is carefully devoid of any emotion, but the
way she presses her lips together tells A-Qing that she’s putting a substantial amount of effort to look
like a blank slate.

“Perhaps you should try giving her a little shake,” the woman suggests, her voice just as blank as her
expression.

Well, if Hui Hua’s the one suggesting it, that means A-Qing can’t be blamed for being blasphemous.

So she reaches out to the goddess, lays a hand on her shoulder, and jostles her around a little.

Despite how beautiful the robes appear, they feel old. “Hi,” A-Qing tries greeting. “You can hear
me, can’t you?”

Ying Huohua is surprisingly cold—too cold, actually. She’s cold and as stiff as death, unmoving,
unblinking, unbreathing, oh no, no way, no way—

A-Qing jerks her hand back as if she’s been bitten. She stumbles back into Hui Hua, who steadies
her with both hands.

It can’t be. There’s no way.

“Is she—” The words catch halfway up, and A-Qing has to take another breath to force them out. “Is
she dead?”

Hui Hua sighs. There’s no surprise, no shock, nothing to demonstrate that she didn’t already know.
Only exhaustion and acceptance. “No, she isn’t.”

She isn’t?

Ying Huohua is stiff and cold as death, alright, but when A-Qing presses her hand against the
goddess’ wrist, she feels the faint pulse of life and the unmistakable beat of a golden core.

Impossibly, inexplicably, She’s alive. Or rather, this body is being preserved by a powerful blessing
of life, nowhere near as powerful as Fuxing’s but still incredibly potent, and a golden core that’s so shattered it’s a miracle it hasn’t dissipated into nothingness.

The golden core, the golden core, something terrible has happened and cracked it into tiny pieces. No—no, it was in pieces to begin with. It writhes under A-Qing’s touch, trying to escape, to go back to what it used to be, but it can’t. The divine touch of eternity traps it together, stitches it up into some horrible abomination of a thing.

What in the world happened here? This—this shouldn’t be. This is wrong! Nobody deserves to have half a life forced upon them, flaunted for everyone to see through a city cursed to never die.

It’s wrong, it’s disgusting, it’s the most awful sort of fate someone could ever be bound to.

A-Qing moves her hand away. She takes a few steps back, breathes in, breathes out.

“Change of plans,” she says, finally turning. “We’re trashing the wedding procession.”

Hui Hua blinks in surprise. “Pardon?”

“We’re trashing the wedding procession,” A-Qing repeats heatedly, marching out of the temple and onto the goddamn warpath. Hui Hua follows after her, much closer than before. “We’re burning the entire thing down if we have to. I’m going to mess it up so bad Shouxing will need to kick me out herself!”

“I don’t think that’s a particularly good idea,” Hui Hua says, and is that tension A-Qing hears in her voice?

It doesn’t matter. A-Qing has a plan, and she’s going to figure this all out in one fell swoop.

The attendants that fled flinch violently when A-Qing passes by the door. They whisper to each other as they hurry back into the temple, no doubt to prepare the unresponsive bride for a wedding that’ll never come.

All the wailing festival-goers turn and stare nervously. They fidget and mumble, fidget and mumble, and this is all energy that A-Qing thinks they should be spending worrying about their meaningless existence, or at least preparing for the procession.

So she lets her qi flow to her right hand and punches a nearby statue. It shatters into thousands of tiny pieces in a glorious bang, which sends the crowd screaming and scattering in all directions.

“Yeah, you’d better run!” A-Qing yells after the fleeing civilians.

Now that her head’s a little cleared up, A-Qing can put two and two together.

Yes, Ying Huohua’s fate leaves a lot to be desired, and yes, whoever made her that way deserves to burn, but the fact that the goddess doesn’t have any real life in her is a particularly interesting mystery.

The thing about the Other Side is that it reflects the real world. Specifically, it inverts life in the real world and creates an opposite image of it. Night is day, rich is poor, and so on.

But it can never reverse life and death. The Other Side only inverts the appearances of the living; the dead have no place here. The dead don’t have souls to invert, so they’re absent. It’s a simple rule that makes sense.
It’s just like a mirror. If there’s nothing to reflect, there won’t be a reflection.

But Ying Huohua is an anomaly. She’s alive in the broadest definition of the word, barely clutching to the life that’s been thrust into her, and even then, it’s not her life to live.

To put it simply: functionally, she’s dead. She has no life of her own, and even her golden core is of questionable origin. There’s no way the Other Side would even give Ying Huohua a reflection when she might as well be a corpse.

It doesn’t make sense! In other words, Ying Huohua is an anomaly, just like Hui Hua. They’re both alive in very vague terms, and they both shouldn’t even be in the Other Side to begin with.

Obviously, that means they were brought from the outside in.

With all that said and done, what’s the best course of action? Wreck the wedding procession, see if that’ll draw Fuxing out, and demand answers.

The wait for the procession to start is almost unbearable. Now that A-Qing has a plan to get some answers, listening to that same stupid song and watching the same stupid lanterns float by makes her want to gut herself. The fact that Fuxing isn’t here to entertain her with his usual dumb antics makes it even worse.

So they wait it out on the rooftops, watching as the last of the fireworks fade and lanterns take over the night sky. Up above, the blazing gold moon shines brilliantly, a reminder that A-Qing has a place she needs to return to.

Hui Hua is the first to stand. “It’s time.”

Drums, manic cheering, endless showers of flowers—yeah, it’s time, alright.

“This isn’t the most cautious plan,” Hui Hua warns, trailing behind A-Qing. She pulls two fans from her sleeves, pretty little things.

A-Qing unsheathes Jiangzai and grabs a handful of flame talismans. “I mean, that’s sort of the point. I’m going to see just how patient this Shouxing is!”

If there’s one thing A-Qing’s gotten exceptional good at, it’s causing havoc for the sole purpose of getting people to run. Civilians just get in the way when it comes to dealing with monsters and ghouls, so it’s easier to drive them away first.

With a flick of her wrist, A-Qing commands Jiangzai to just go wild, which, knowing Xue Yang and his love of seeing people panic, is the easiest command she’s ever given.

Jiangzai shoots forward in a streak of black, cutting across the red and gold of the procession. The blade cuts into anything that isn’t flesh: robes, fruit, flowers, nearby buildings and stalls.

Needless to say, a flying sword hacking and slashing its way through town is terrifying no matter what god you serve. Everyone starts screaming like it’s the end of the world and A-Qing’s set Jiangzai loose on them with a personal vendetta, but it’s all for a very good reason.

No reaction from Shouxing, yet. Then it’s time to up the ante.

A-Qing throws the flame talismans forward. They dart into the sky, forming a five-pointed formation, and light ablaze. Every flower that passes through immediately becomes a flaming projectile, dropping down and in turn lighting everything around in on fire.
“Ghost fire,” A-Qing says to a disapproving Hui Hua. “It’s just a trick. It acts like real fire, and it hurts like real fire, but it doesn’t actually cause any real damage.”

Hui Hua sighs. It’s the familiar sound of someone conceding because they know they can’t win an argument with A-Qing. “Very well. Allow me to help speed up the process.”

With a snap of her fans, Hui Hua spreads her arms and steps forward, steps back, and oh, she’s dancing, isn’t she?

It’s something simple and reserved, but the way Hui Hua moves speaks of years upon years of practice. She’s fluid, graceful, and confident in every action, and when she snaps her fans closed, a storm of flowers drops from the sky like every blossom in the world happened to fall in the same place.

The shower of flowers turns into a torrent, spreading the ghost fire onto buildings, and then to neighbouring streets, all while people below scream in phantom pain, and come on, Shouxing, isn’t this enough?

The flames lick the wedding sedan, and everything twists.
A-Qing wakes up to someone calling her name.

Immediately, she prepares for a fight, because when Fuxing needs her, it means he can’t deal with something himself, and that’s never good news, because it means something from his past wants him dead.

She jerks up and slams her head directly into Hui Hua’s. They both go tumbling back, one hissing in pain and the other decently startled.

“You certainly have a hard head,” Hui Hua mumbles, smoothing out her robes.

A-Qing glares venomously. “Can you please stop waking me up so rudely?”

“Do excuse me,” Hui Hua says blandly, standing and pulling A-Qing up with her, “but I did try my best to keep you here in this realm when Shouxing tried to throw you out.”

So the mighty Shouxing has her limits, does she?

Chest puffing with pride, A-Qing crosses her arms and grins a wide grin. “There you have it! All it took to convince the merciful Shouxing to breach her own border was a bit of arson.”

This is a huge victory! They’ve put cracks in the thousand-year system, and now all they have to do is keep kicking.

Now that A-Qing takes the time to look around, she notices that they’re back in the hotel room. The same song, the same floral scent, the same view of the balcony with lanterns drifting by, the same looping time, it’s all there, and it’s really starting to grate on her nerves.

“We’re back at the start,” A-Qing notes with some annoyance. It isn’t surprising, but it does mean they’ll have to go through this hell of a night again.

Hui Hua sighs. With every passing minute, she seems more and more human, and it makes A-Qing think strange thoughts.

It doesn’t matter right now. Once they figure out how to shatter this fake realm into pieces and drag Shouxing from her divine throne, this fanciful illusion will finally dispel, and Ying Huohua and Hui Hua will be able to walk free.

And then A-Qing will give Shouxing the the longest, most brutal lecture of her immortal life. Fuxing can watch and throw in his own quips every now and then. Alternatively, he can keep running away
from this problems. Which one’s more likely? Nobody knows.

As A-Qing spreads her talismans onto the bed, checking how many she has left and wondering how angry Fuxing would be if she wrote up some more without his supervision, she fully processes Hui Hua’s words.

“What do you mean, ‘try your best to keep me in’?”

Hui Hua looks down at her hands. “It means what it sounds like,” she says. For some unknown reason, her voice shakes, and her hands tremble. “Shouxing tried to throw you out, and I couldn’t allow that.”

That’s interesting for a few reasons. First, because it proves that Hui Hua has enough control over the realm to fight against Shouxing’s attempt to kick A-Qing out, but not enough to break herself free. And second, because it definitely puts Hui Hua on the opposing side to Shouxing.

But they aren’t enemies. It doesn’t sound like it, and it doesn’t feel like it, either. Their relationship is more complicated than that.

Something about her reminds A-Qing of Fuxing. “Why couldn’t you let that happen?”

“This night must end.” The ghoulish woman clenches her hands, both flesh and bone. Black blood drips from her lips as she looks up, two crimson orbs gazing into still-bleeding eyes. “There are promises that must be kept and broken. For the good of the world, for the good of the innocents who’ve already been sacrificed.”

A-Qing listens silently. Hui Hua knows exactly what’s happening here. Either she can’t or doesn’t want to explain. Maybe it’s a bit of both.

Most importantly, her words are just like Fuxing’s. They say, something very sad happened here, people were hurt because of me, and they’re my problems to resolve.

At least Hui Hua isn’t as stupid as Fuxing. She’s willing to reach out and find help—or, at least, accept the help that’s fallen into her lap.

“Well,” says A-Qing, stacking her talismans and shoving them back into her sleeves, “I guess we should keep at it until Shouxing gives in!”

“The divine Shouxing hasn’t given in for a thousand years.” Hui Hua laughs bitterly. “It will take much more to convince her to stop.”

That’s not so difficult to deal with. Why? It’s simple, really.

Slamming open the doors to the balcony, A-Qing reaches out to the nearest lantern and snatches it down. The flame wavers violently, but still burns bright. Behind her, Hui Hua watches. Her expression softens as A-Qing runs her fingers gently over the fine paper.

It’s just a single lantern out of thousands, floating through the night with no destination, no possible end. But they still light up the darkness, and even though the wishes that were made on that very first night have long since died, the lanterns don’t know that. They keep searching, braving the night, forever carrying the memories that the hands that once held it have forgotten.

“You can’t go at it alone forever,” A-Qing says. “No matter how strong you are, there’ll be a day where you can’t keep on fighting. When that happens, it’s okay to reach out to others. It isn’t weak. It’s human.”
Before all this, A-Qing thought of the gods as some distant deities, too divine to ever breach the mortal realm. Then she met Fuxing and realized that the gods are too human for their own good.

A-Qing holds the lantern out to Hui Hua. The orange flame illuminates the woman’s face with the hue of life, giving a faint glimpse into what she might’ve looked like. “I don’t know about you, but I believe that nobody truly dies alone. In life, your life isn’t just your own. People come, people go. And that’s the thing, isn’t it? When someone you love leaves—when you push them away—it’s the most awful kind of pain.”

Hui Hua takes the lantern. Her hands shake, as if she’s afraid it’ll break in her hands.

“That sort of pain can drive you crazy. It’ll eat away at you until it kills you, and when that happens, all the words you left unsaid won’t mean much to anyone.”

A-Qing knows very well that sometimes, no matter how much you say, in the end, it’s useless. Sometimes, they’re too far gone. You can dig and dig until your hands bleed and there’s nothing but stone beneath you, but you’ll never find them again.

The thing about second chances is that they’re always sad, because it means the first one ended in tragedy.

And yet—

“I’m not going to give up,” A-Qing declares, “and neither should you.”

Pulling Hui Hua to the balcony, A-Qing lights a flame talisman. It burns a brilliant, true gold. When the woman stumbles forward, the lantern still in her hands, A-Qing holds the talisman to the steady orange flame.

It immediately bursts into a halcyon gold, warm and kind, one single wish that’s been beaten and broken, but never forgotten.

With her hands over Hui Hua’s, A-Qing raises the lantern to the sky. It drifts up gently, far past those that drift too close to be called prayers, up and up into the sky, toward the day-eating moon, where not even Shouxing will be able to extinguish it.

“A chance is always a chance!” A-Qing gives a wide grin. “You never know, right?”

For a long moment, Hui Hua is silent. She stares up at the lantern until its golden flame is too distant to be seen.

Then the woman sighs something deep and old. The smile that rises to her lips is the most human expression A-Qing’s seen on her yet. “A chance is a chance,” she repeats. “I suppose I’d have to be the world’s greatest fool to give up on it after all we’ve done.”

There it is. What sort of idiot walks halfway and then turns back? It’s the same distance to the end, so you might as well march forward.

“Obviously,” A-Qing says, already moving to leave. “What until I tell Fuxing about this! ‘Don’t set things on fire’, he says. Well, take a look and how far we’ve come and say that to my face!”

With Hui Hua beside her, A-Qing marches into the same night.

She has a few ideas. Shouxing won’t like them at all, but she’s not really an unbiased party here. Then again, neither is A-Qing, but murder is murder no matter what it’s for.
It’s time to raise hell for the second time.

Things go much smoother now that everyone’s terrified of A-Qing.

When she looks in their direction, they flee. When she approaches them, they clear the way. Time may have turned back, but they seem to remember exactly how terrifying A-Qing is.

So she holds her head up with pride and walks through the streets like she owns them. It’s a good feeling.

“I’ll say it again, even though I highly doubt you’ll listen.” Hui Hua looks incredibly tired and exasperated. “Doing anything to Ying Huohua is sure to antagonize Shouxing.”

“So what? I’m Fuxing’s disciple. She messes with me, she messes with Fuxing.”

The woman rubs her temple like she’s having the headache of her life. “Perhaps it’s slipped your mind, but at the moment, Fuxing isn’t as divine as he usually is.”

And what about it?

What Hui Hua has apparently forgotten is that Wei Wuxian and Fuxing are the same person. Godhood hasn’t changed who he is. He’s just as big of an idiot as he was before, cutting his heart open and giving it to people who don’t deserve it.

Besides, who said the Yiling Patriarch isn’t as powerful as a god? He did literally raise hell, after all. In the end, the only person who managed to kill him was himself.

A-Qing snorts. “Divine, demonic, it’s all the same.” She crosses her arms. This is the one thing she won’t back down on. “I trust him. If I’m in trouble, he’ll come, and he’ll save me, no matter what sort of god or demon wants me dead.”

The way Hui Hua’s features twist is familiar. “You trust him with your life.”

“I gave him my life,” A-Qing says. She gestures to the jade ornament and crystal bell hanging by her waist. “I’m his first disciple. You see, he saved me from a terrible fate. So wherever he goes, I’ll follow, because he said he’d give me somewhere to belong.”

Hui Hua’s expression is so, so melancholic. She listens with rapt attention as A-Qing describes even the smallest details of their journey so far, from her favourite cheap snacks in every city to Fuxing’s incredible ability to summon crowds of stray souls with his voice alone.

The past year has been more than A-Qing ever expected out of life. Looking back isn’t as hard as should be because things turned out alright in the end, which is a miracle by itself.

Things have changed. People who died are alive, people who have killed are taking the road to redemption, and things could’ve been so different.

“Here we are again.”

This time around, there’s no crowd in their way. The crowd is behind them instead, whispering fearfully from a respectable distance.
A-Qing rolls her eyes. They’re acting like Shouxing’s going to smite them all, which isn’t going to happen yet. “Let’s go mess with our resident god of luck, then.”

Hui Hua hesitates, but follows after A-Qing regardless. She tucks her sleeves together, walking up the steps with rigid formality. “What do you plan on doing this time around?”

“Nothing much,” A-Qing says dismissively. “I slapped Ying Huohua around a little last time, so you’ll do it this time.”

Watching the fear unravel in Hui Hua’s blood-red eyes is kind of disturbing. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re both anomalies, and you know it.” When Hui Hua tries to argue, A-Qing stares her into silence. “Ying Huohua’s the centre of attention, whereas nobody here even looks in your direction. Plus, she’s half-alive, and you’re half-dead.”

Hui Hua looks away, and A-Qing knows she’s hit home.

People have a habit of underestimating A-Qing just because she’s young, which is hilarious, because it shows just how dumb they are. Apparently they’ve completely forgotten the fact that a certain young cultivator mastered demonic cultivation when he was seventeen, but whatever.

A-Qing survived all those years on the streets for a reason. Despite everything, she’s alive. There’s no way she’s getting taken out by a god, of all things.

“I’m not sure how much you know about gods, but as far as I know, they’re kind of like ghosts.” A-Qing waves around an exorcism talisman for good measure. “They’re split between soul and body in a way that’s a lot more defined than the normal human, probably because they’re so powerful.”

“Is that so,” says Hui Hua, her voice measured.

“Yeah! I mean, they’re supposed to be knit together, but if they come unraveled, the soul takes on a form of its own.”

“Like a ghost who haunts its grave in seek of rest.”

A-Qing studies Hui Hua’s expression. The woman’s face is carefully blank, but not blank enough. Travelling with someone who loves keeping hurt to himself has taught A-Qing some very useful tricks. “That’s exactly my point. So, basically, what I’m trying to say is—“

“You think I’m Ying Huohua’s soul.”

That was a lot easier than A-Qing expected. It’s great that she didn’t need to coerce Hui Hua into just spilling the truth, because then things get awkward, and then they get annoying, and then coercing turns into threatening.

“You didn’t let me finish, but yeah,” A-Qing says. “When I touched Ying Huohua, I could tell that her soul was badly damaged. Almost, you know, like it was ripped in half.”

Hui Hua is utterly silent.

“So if the body isn’t completely vacant and still has half a soul, then wherever the other half Ying Huohua’s soul went, it’s bound to be in pretty poor condition.” A-Qing quickly adds, “No offense.”

“None taken,” Hui Hua says distantly.

“I’m saying the soul would reflect an appearance of being half alive, half dead.” A pause. A-Qing
frowns. “I don’t need to get a mirror, do I?”

Hui Hua sighs in defeat. The steel in her spine folds, and her shoulders slump. “No, you don’t.”

“Great!” Clapping her hands together, A-Qing beams. It’s so nice working with someone so cooperative for a change. “Then, Hui Hua, Ying Huohua’s tattered soul, let’s get you pieced together, okay?”

For a long moment, Hui Hua is silent.

Which, in hindsight, makes sense. Her body’s been sitting in the same place for a thousand years, yet she hasn’t attempted to take it back until now.

The obvious question is short and simple: why?

For a god ruling over this realm, Shouxing’s awfully lenient. Even when A-Qing terrorized the entire town and broke into Ying Huohua’s temple, she didn’t react. It was only when Ying Huohua was put at risk of harm that Shouxing decided that, hey, maybe this is a bit much.

Long story short: the centre of this whole mess is Ying Huohua. More specifically, it’s Ying Huohua’s relationship to Shouxing.

And isn’t that just a bundle of fun.

Why this night, of all nights? Why repeat a wedding procession that never reaches its wedding? In fact, who’s Ying Huohua being married to? Why does nobody seem to care?

The answer is obvious.

Shouxing wants to see Ying Huohua happy, but can’t bear to see her be married to someone else.

Who doesn’t like living an illusion? It’s peaceful, it’s pleasant, it’s happy. And most importantly, it’s all a dream.

That day-eating moon up there in the sky, the night-eating sun back in the real world—it’s all a distortion, a sign that something is false and wrong, that evil is being done for good.

A-Qing would bet anything that Shouxing’s wearing red robes right now.

Love is an awful thing. It drives people mad, it makes them reach desperately for things they can’t have, and when they realize they can’t have it, they destroy everyone, including themselves, to even live the possibility of attaining it.

Why do people say love is a blessing when all their tragedies end the way they do because of love? The heart is a weapon and a burden. Wield it carelessly, collapse under its weight, and it’ll destroy you.

“Can I ask you another question?”

Hui Hua bows her head. “Of course.”

“How exactly did you earn the title Ash Blossom?”

The breath Hui Hua takes is sharp and quick. Her breath catches in lungs she doesn’t have, and she focuses all her energy on looking downward. It’s a question she can’t answer—no, it’s a question she doesn’t want to answer. The only one keeping her secrets is herself, this time.
It’s a rude question, but it’s one A-Qing has to ask. At least she asked nicely this time; just spitting out how exactly did you die? doesn’t always go so well.

Anyway, if Hui Hua isn’t going to help, then A-Qing will go right ahead and help herself.

“Let me throw out a few wild guesses,” A-Qing says. “Something obviously happened to Ying Huohua while she was alive to make her, well, dead.” When Hui Hua turns to stare flatly at her, A-Qing crosses her arms. “Just getting it all out of the way! Seriously, for someone immortal, you’re impatient.”

It’s a debrief, and besides, what’s the rush?

Clearing her throat, A-Qing continues to lay it all out on the table. “Going by how messed up Ying Huohua’s soul is, I can only guess that she died. While her soul was separated from her body, something got to it and tore it up.”

Hui Hua flinches, a full-body jerk. Spot-on. But also, ouch, because if she remembers what happened even after a thousand years, it couldn’t have been something enjoyable.

“Obviously, without a soul, her golden core disappeared. But that doesn’t explain why Ying Huohua’s golden core is so nasty right now, does it?”

“No,” Hui Hua admits. “It doesn’t.”

Golden cores die when the soul dies. They... um, shatter isn’t really the right word. The point is, they break irreparably and disappear, leaving no trace behind. So the very fact that Ying Huohua has a golden core to begin with is a horrible prospect, because it means that travesty of a thing inside her was put there by someone else.

It isn’t hard to guess who managed such a thing. After all, there’s only one person in this realm capable of something like that.

“You know, there’s something really weird about golden cores,” A-Qing comments, almost casually. “They’re supposed to be incorporeal, but if you have the know-how, it’s actually possible to kind of do surgery on them. You know, cut them up, put them somewhere else.”

Hui Hua doesn’t even flinch when A-Qing swings Jiangzai through a nearby statue. The blade rends the stone like water, splitting the entire thing in half.

“And would you look at all those shattered souls at the boundary, not dead, not alive, perfect for picking and choosing golden cores like you’re picking potatoes.”

Gods. Who needs them? The only gods worth saving are the ones who’ve already died. At least they know what’s at stake.

Fucking Shouxing. You think you can do whatever you want? Devotion, love, no, that’s no it at all. This is obsession, a child who can’t let go of something that’s already been lost, so they trample over everything in their path trying to chase an illusion.

How can someone devote their entire being to someone without wanting anything in return? Or—no, it’s not quite right. How can someone devote their entire being to someone without receiving anything in return?

It doesn’t make sense! You can only give so much to one person, and if they don’t even turn back to look at you, what’s the point?
“And you,” A-Qing snaps, leveling Jiangzai at Hui Hua, who, for the first time, flinches. “How’d you harness resentful energy? What are you planning to do with it?”

Hui Hua actually has the nerve to pull out one of her fans and nudge Jiangzai away with it. Her red eyes burn with something between indignation and guilt, which is so conflicting A-Qing wants to smack her over the head and just tell her choose one or the other. “I’m honoured you assume I have the ability to control such dark powers, but if you wish to find the source, perhaps you should be looking somewhere else.”

So this mess is even bigger than A-Qing thought. “This is Shouxing’s doing?”

Gods of luck can’t harness resentful energy! Their whole thing is purging negative energies and warding them away, which obviously means better luck.

Fuxing can only make use of his past talents when he’s in the Other Side, but that doesn’t apply to Shouxing, because if she had the same oops-I’m-human-now reflection, this realm would just fold in on itself like a crappy bamboo hut.

So if Shouxing somehow has the ability hold up this realm and mess with resentful energy at the same time—

Oh.

Oh.

“Oh, shit.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. If this is going where she thinks it’s going, then they need to end this as quickly as possible.

A-Qing would love to run Hui Hua through right now, but she doesn’t have time. Instead, she takes the steps two at a time, and why the hell does the temple seem so far away?

“You know, for someone who said they were going to help me, you’re being really unhelpful right now,” A-Qing spits, glaring at Hui Hua with murder in her eyes. “When were you going to tell me that we’re being played around with by a demon lord?”

Hui Hua looks away, almost as if she’s ashamed.

She should be! A demon lord! A demon lord!

Hindsight is great and all, but right now, it’s arming itself with a thousand knives and telling A-Qing to draw her stupid blade, because everything makes sense if Shouxing’s a demon lord.

The resentful energy, the shattered souls, the god-like ability to hold up a realm for a thousand years.

If Ying Huohua died when Shouxing was still a god of luck, then Shouxing would obviously want her back. And if a revered god of luck tried to revive someone by stealing the souls of cultivators, hacking them into pieces, and building a demented golden core to give to her beloved Ying Huohua, there’s no way the other gods would just sit around and let that happen.

Ying Huohua must’ve died an awful death. If Shouxing had to go find a golden core for her, it means that something happened to Ying Huohua before she died that destroyed all possibility of her cultivating a new golden core.
Worse still—

Can you even replace one god’s golden core—the literal core of their being, what makes a god who they are—with another god’s? That’s not possible, is it?

Mortal cultivators have golden cores, but there’s no way they’re on par with a cultivator who’s reached immortality. And to recreate a god’s golden core, just how many immortals would it take?

Who exactly did Shouxing steal souls from?

Did she actually kill off would-be gods? Did she actually kill gods?

A-Qing’s beginning to get a good idea of exactly who tore up Ying Huohua’s soul, and why they did it. A flame can’t burn if it doesn’t have kindling, and A-Qing’s willing to bet that the gods decided to just grind the kindling into nothing.

From there, well, it’s just a story of a goddess falling and then falling even further, retreating into the recesses of the Other Side, creating a realm where she can live under the illusion that Ying Huohua’s enjoying her happiest day, all while she begins her work all over again, working slower this time, picking off small-time cultivators that the gods can’t be bothered to care about, travelling the land in search for new prey, luring in innocents with the allure of the mysterious night-eating sun.

And her beloved Ying Huohua, a goddess of flowers and lanterns, falls with her. Hui Hua, indeed.

That’s it. A-Qing’s going to skewer Shouxing.

It could’ve been so different!

Why couldn’t Shouxing have just been happy living with a mortal Ying Huohua?

Reviving someone as a mortal is simple! Take the soul, mess around with it a little, convince it to wake up with some divine elements, and you’re done! One perfectly fine, mortal human, coming up.

Immature, naive, selfish, pathetic—

This is exactly why love is a special kind of suffering!

“You know, I’ve put together a really nice picture of what’s going on,” A-Qing says, her grip on Jiangzai tightening. “It involves a goddess who loved someone so much they ruined everything for them. Sound familiar?”

Hui Hua looks so, so tired. Her breaths rattle and her hands shake. “It does.”

A-Qing presses onward. “Does this someone love the goddess—the demon lord—back?”

Say no, say no, say no, it’s for the best, let go, you idiot, let go before she pulls you under for good —

“Yes.”

When A-Qing’s expression twists into confusion, Hui Hua simply shakes her head. It’s the same reaction she gives when A-Qing asks her a question she can’t answer.

There’s nothing A-Qing can say to that. She’s not surprised. She’s just disappointed, and angry, and lost.
Love is—love isn’t that hard! If you love someone, you love them for a reason. A-Qing loves Song Daozhang for his unwavering strength, Daozhang for his unending kindness, and stupid, stupid Fuxing for how he’s given her a home, a mission, and a life!

(At the same time, A-Qing really does understand, and she hates it.

Shouxing’s committed unforgivable crimes, and while the gods may hate her, Hui Hua still loves her. How can you love someone when the entire world hates them?

You have to see something in them worth saving that nobody else does.)

A-Qing takes a deep breath. “Hasn’t she broken your heart enough?”

“You can’t break a heart you don’t have,” Hui Hua says softly. “I gave mine away a very long time ago.”

It’s an answer A-Qing doesn’t understand. It’s an answer she hopes she’ll never have to understand.

After what seems like an eternity, they finally arrive at the temple. The attendants are long gone. Ying Huohua sits vacantly, as always, smiling like nothing’s wrong at all.

“Oh, A-Qing! You made it here, did you?”

That’s a voice and a face A-Qing would love to punch.

Fuxing stands casually by a pillar, twirling his dizi in one hand. The cheap weimao A-Qing bought for him still rests neatly on his head. He smiles brightly even as A-Qing stomps toward him.

“Where were you?” she demands, landing a solid punch on his arm, to which Fuxing whines.

“There’s no way you don’t know what we’re up against!”

“Nice to see that we’ve both done come to the same conclusion,” Fuxing says lightly, gesturing at Ying Huohua’s body. “Shall we get on with it, then?”

There’s no use arguing with Fuxing when he doesn’t want to talk. “Fine,” A-Qing grumbles.

Walking back over to Hui Hua, she tugs on the woman’s sleeve to get her moving. “Okay, we’re all set. Go get your body back.”

Hui Hua jerks her sleeve free violently. Surprisingly—or maybe not so surprisingly, who knows at this point—she looks panicked. “I shouldn’t. I... I can’t.”

Fuxing laughs something low and melodious. He moves like the shadow he casts, the darkness that follows in the footsteps of his brilliance no matter where he on this earth he walks. His smile is beautiful but flat, a single red flower pressed between the pages of a book nobody will ever read again, that, by a miracle he didn’t ask for and never wanted, lives on.

“Oh, please.”

A-Qing steps away.

She doesn’t like when he gets like this. It’s hard to describe why. It’s not that he feels bad or evil, that’s not Fuxing, not ever, but seeing him confront people he sees himself in and watching as he slowly tears them apart is just... tragic.

Fuxing feels so much all the time but tries to feel nothing, and nobody can live like that forever.
“Of course you can. You’re Shouxing’s beloved flower, her lantern in the night, the very reason she’s survived for a thousand years on a broken dream.” Every one of Fuxing’s words cuts like a knife, and with each gash, Hui Hua’s gaze flickers and falters. “Shouxing waged war with the heavens for you. She led countless immortals to a fate even worse than death for you. She killed for you, she bled for you, she challenged the entire world and lost for you.”

Whatever it is that lifts Fuxing’s lips into a smile, it’s sickly sweet and leaves his eyes cold.

“Why is it, then,” Fuxing asks, “that you can’t find it within yourself to end this awful cycle?”

Hui Hua moves too quickly for A-Qing to follow.

A resonating, sharp noise echoes across the empty temple as Hui Hua strikes Fuxing across the face in a shocking display of both blasphemy and guts that makes A-Qing’s jaw drop.

For a moment, Fuxing just stands silently.

Then, as he turns back to face Hui Hua, he lets out a clap of laughter. “Well, I can’t say I expected that.”

Yeah, neither did A-Qing!

Is A-Qing supposed to be doing something? She really doesn’t want to get between Fuxing and Hui Hua, especially not when the former smiles with warning in his eyes and the latter burns with justified fury.

“How dare you,” Hui Hua says, her voice shaking violently. Her hands are clenched into fists, her shoulders raised in defiance, and she looks so unbearably human next to Fuxing, who plays the role of a god so well. “For you, of all people, to say that to me—”

Fuxing’s expression falls dangerously flat. “I can say whatever I want to you.”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know what I’m talking about, merciful Fuxing.”

“You’d do well to watch your words.”

“Perhaps you ought to heed your own guidance, o golden one!” With a snap of her white sleeves, Hui Hua spreads her arms wide. Black drips from her awful, twisted smile. “You tell me to end this cycle, but what have you done but run away? You tell me to face the one who’s sacrificed everything for me, but what have you done but push him away?”

A-Qing can’t say anything. It’s not her place, not when she doesn’t have the full story, and especially not when the god inhales sharply, the darkness around his feet clawing at the hem of his robes in a burst of inky black.

“As for my words,” the half-goddess says with finality, “in your last moments of life, even in death, what did you leave with him but scars?”

Silence. The faint song of broken prayers marches onward.

Slowly, inexplicably, inevitably, two trails of bright red blood trail down Fuxing’s face, falling onto his robes, which have already known too much blood, and onto the floor of the temple, which was built upon blood.
A-Qing doesn’t understand what’s going on. Fuxing and Hui Hua’s words are so similar to each other’s, so cruel and cold, all because they know exactly what it feels like to hurt and be hurt.

But who’s this he Hui Hua keeps mentioning? Who loved Fuxing—who loved Wei Wuxian so much that he fought for him, even after everything?

(A-Qing feels like she knows. It’s not a good feeling, because she knows that Fuxing is a master of embracing hatred and pain and pretending like it doesn’t hurt him at all. And she knows that Fuxing is terrified of being loved, because everyone who has ever loved him has ended in catastrophe.)

But this is enough, isn’t it? Hui Hua’s hurting, Fuxing’s hurting, and they’ve thrown words around that don’t mean anything, because neither of them will cave first.

So A-Qing steps forward as the only one here who’s managed to let the past make her stronger. She puts herself between Fuxing and Hui Hua, who both avert their gazes. She stands on her tiptoes and raises her sleeve, wiping away the blood that’s fallen from Fuxing’s eyes. It smudges against his pale skin, so she raises her other sleeve.

Fuxing catches her wrist. His touch is just like his eyes: cold but gentle.

“Don’t squirm,” A-Qing scolds, wiping away the smudges as best she can. “We’ve got a job to do here, don’t we? Let’s finish up, and then we can figure out where we need to go next.”

“Where we need to go next,” Fuxing repeats. He sighs, a quiet, short breath, and closes his eyes. “You’re right.”

Always moving forward, never looking back. It’s how it always is.

Turning to face Hui Hua, A-Qing lifts her chin and narrows her eyes. She doesn’t care if she has to fight half a goddess and then a demon lord after that. This night has been long enough.

“Fuxing might not have any right to tell you what to do, but I do,” she declares, knowing very well that Hui Hua can’t refute it. “You told me that you have promises to keep and promises to break. Everybody’s lost something here, and they’ll keep losing until this ends!”

A-Qing watches as Hui Hua’s expression folds back in on itself. She’s weary, she’s tired, she hates what this love has become, and she wants an ending.

She knows what she has to do, but it’s something she doesn’t want to do. It’s always like that.

Hui Hua’s red eyes burn like lanterns. “You find so much strength in tragedy,” she says. “How?”

A-Qing crosses her arms. It’s a question she’s been asked before, and it’s one she knows how to answer. “As long as you’re alive, you’ve got to keep living. Of all people, you lived and they didn’t. I refuse to let them become collateral damage!”

“And you find meaning, somehow.”

“I make meaning,” A-Qing answers. “It doesn’t matter if you find meaning or if it finds you. You can find anything and everything, but it won’t be anything until you make it into something of your own.”

For a long moment, Hui Hua simply stares. A-Qing doesn’t know what she’s looking for or even if she finds it, but the half-goddess finally averts her gaze and turns toward Ying Huohua.
“Do you think people can live on in others?”

A-Qing frowns. That’s not a question she was expecting. “Of course, but I think the best way to make something out of your life is to live in yourself.”

Hui Hua smiles something sad, which doesn’t make sense, why is she sad when this’ll all be over soon? Time will flow again, they’ll be free of this neverending nightmare, everything will be alright.

“Ah,” Hui Hua says, breathless, “that’s not an option I have.”

Not... an option?

Ice runs down A-Qing’s spine, down her her fingertips and her toes. “Hui Hua, you—what’s going to happen once you regain your true form?”

When Hui Hua doesn’t answer, A-Qing turns to Fuxing. His eyes look exactly like Hui Hua’s.

That’s not right. This can’t be. It’s not how things are supposed to work out!

“Once this realm shatters and time begins flowing again, things will work out, won’t they?” A-Qing isn’t begging. She doesn’t beg, but she has to know.

“Once this realm shatters,” Fuxing answers in a tone no different than how he usually mentors A-Qing, “once Ying Huohua becomes whole again, her soul will destroy itself.”

No, no, no—

“The most likely outcome is that the two halves of her soul, having been separated for so long, will tear each other to pieces. Even if they do manage to fuse, the resentful energy that’s been collecting within that warped golden core will eat her alive.”

“Then we’ll find another way!” A-Qing grabs Hui Hua’s sleeve, pulling her back. There’s no way she’d willingly go ahead with this, right? “Shouxing threw me out once! If we work together, we’ll find a way!”

Why isn’t Hui Hua looking at her? Why’s she looking at Fuxing? Didn’t they just finish yelling at each other? Why are they looking at each other like they understanding something she doesn’t?

Hui Hua lays a hand on A-Qing’s shoulder. A-Qing shrugs it away, jerking back from her cold, dead touch. “You’re going to die! Don’t you get it? If you die, how are you going to talk to Shouxing? Don’t you want to see her again?”

“A-Qing.”

When Fuxing calls her name like that, it means he needs help or he wants her to stop. It’s neither, it’s both, and she hates it.

“Ying Huohua,” says Fuxing, expression and voice both clear and empty, “you understand that once you disappear, Shouxing will follow soon after.”

What? But why?

Hui Hua bows her head. “I’m aware.”

“Is that what you truly want?”
“We died a thousand years ago.” Despite everything, there’s steel in her spine and in her words. She stands tall in the face of her own death, and even worse, she’s willing to go with Shouxing. “We’re ghosts of the past. It’s far past our time to go.”

But that’s—there has to be another way! People can’t just die like that! How can—how can—

Hui Hua looks down at her hands. “Every tragedy must come to an end one day. Once it ends, if the world is kind, a new story can take its place.” She looks up with stars in her eyes, a night sky filled with lanterns and wishes. “Perhaps things will be better next time.”

Why is it always next time? What if there is no next time? How can someone who’s been cursed by the world believe in it so much?

It doesn’t make sense!

As if she can hear A-Qing’s thoughts, Hui Hua smiles. “I believe that we’ll have better luck next time. After all, I trust that Fuxing will see things through to the end.”

Fuxing laughs. He laughs! And it’s genuine, too! “Somebody has to, don’t they?”

“It wasn’t such a bad choice to choose you,” Hui Hua says. “It’s reassuring to know that even the mightiest of gods have experienced the deepest depths of despair.”

There’s something going on here that A-Qing can’t follow. Maybe she isn’t old enough, or maybe it’s because she isn’t a god.

Is it rest Hui Hua’s looking for? It wasn’t reconciliation? Or are rest and reconciliation the same thing?

A second chance in rebirth. That’s...

With one last exchange of understanding nods, Hui Hua turns and makes her way toward Ying Huohua’s—her vacant body.

A-Qing wants to—she wants to—

She doesn’t know what she wants to do anymore. Does she have any right to try to force her opinion on someone who knows so readily want they want?

It’s an ending she hates, but at least it’s an ending. And that’s what Hui Hua wanted from the very beginning.

“A-Qing.”

Why, why, why does Hui Hua call her name exactly like Fuxing does?

A-Qing forces herself to look the half-goddess in the eye. If this is her funeral procession, it would be a horrible insult to ignore her.

“You’re so strong and kind,” Hui Hua says, with such meaning and weight that A-Qing feels something inside her shatter. “You don’t carry burdens; you build them into foundations for strength. You’re young, but you understand so much. It is my belief that the world would be much kinder if more people were like you.”

And what’s A-Qing supposed to say to that?
She doesn’t know. All she can do is stand tall, face the world, and say, “I’ll try my best.”

Hui Hua’s expression softens. “I know you will.”

It happens so fast.

Hui Hua reaches out to touch Ying Huohua, a brilliant gold light blooms forth, consuming everything, breaking apart the false barriers, breaking, breaking, breaking—

(Here.)
(I’m here.)
(Can you hear me?)
(It’s over.)

I’ll find an answer.

Somewhere, in that long, long life she lived, in that life I made her live, I made a mistake. Something happened along the way and broke everything.

It was my fault. Something happened and I didn’t see it. I just need time.

Yes, that’s right. I’ll find it eventually. As long as I keep searching, never stop looking, I can find it, and then I’ll know.

And then we’ll be happy.

(I’m here.)
(I’m here.)
(I don’t have much time left, but I have so much I want to say.)

I thought I knew her heart best. That was my mistake. I’m such a fool. I’ll always be a fool.
What went wrong? Was it me? Was it them? The god, the girl, the star-crossed lover?

In the end, can I still say I tried my best?

Or did I just make things worse?

(I never wanted you to live for me. I wanted you to live for yourself.)

(I can’t show you how to love yourself. I can love you, I can spend every waking moment and every breath telling you how much I adore you, but when the time comes, I need you to know that there is something in you worth saving.)

Ah, but I guess it’s too late to ask.

Now, there’s truly nothing left to save.

All those years—

All those lives—

Were they even worth anything?

Why did I take this path in the beginning?

(Can you hear me?)

I told myself, ah, what a beautiful night, because every second of it was hell.

Were those words you gave me even real?

I can’t remember anymore. Perhaps I’m the one living a dream.
(Please, can you hear me?)

If you’re out there, if you’re still listening—

(Can... can you hear me?)

I want you to know—

(I...)

I loved you then, I love you now, and I’ll always love you.

If we should meet again, let it be in a better life.

I’m sorry. Thank you.
“There’s a reason star-crossed lovers are star-crossed,” says Fuxing, his eyes glassy with an emotion A-Qing never wants to feel.

The god laughs, something breathless and tired and so utterly, heart-wrenchingly mournful.

There they stand, a god and a girl, atop a mountain with the sun shining brilliantly upon them. It’s a beautiful day, and A-Qing wants to cry.

She doesn’t. She’s done with crying. It doesn’t mean she can’t hurt, though.

Fuxing, in all his divine, golden glory, spreads his arms wide and faces the sun. He closes his eyes.

“It’s a beautiful story, isn’t it? A goddess who raised the flag of war against the entire world because she fell in love with a girl who raised lanterns and flowers into the sky, living peacefully, happily, and then spiralling chaotically.” When Fuxing turns to face A-Qing, that bitter smile is back on his lips. “It’s such a pretty story.”

The wind sweeps by them. It rings of laughter that nobody will ever hear again.

A-Qing feels sick.

There’s nothing to be gained from tragedies. It’s better for all stories to end as happily as they possibly can, because tomorrow isn’t always as close as it appears.

In the end, though, there’s nothing she can do about it. Fuxing’s the god here, not her. She hates how he acts so carefree about something that’s clearly ripped out his heart and run a knife through it, but that’s how he always is.

A-Qing won’t cry, and neither will Fuxing. Their tears have been left in the past.

The journey down the mountain is quiet. The two of them mount their swords and descend into the bustling town that is Yinhe, into life as it truly is.

A-Qing looks back over her shoulder one last time.
The sun shines brightly down upon her.

Despite it all, after a good rest, both Fuxing and A-Qing’s moods improve dramatically.

Say what you want, but isn’t it like that for everyone? It’s always better to face matters after a good night’s sleep and over food.

The hostess, Mie Yu, as Fuxing eagerly introduced, already has a meal prepared when they make their way downstairs, both rightfully exhausted and disoriented from spending who knows how long within an endless cycle of night.

Half the dishes Mie Yu brings out look like someone shaved an entire stick of cinnabar on each plate, and the other half looks normal and respectable and not something a heathen would eat.

“Ash blossom, desolate spring.”

A-Qing frowns. Fuxing’s hunched over a manuscript again, eating with one hand and reading with the other. It’s the same manuscript he was reading before this entire mess, and it looks like he’s pretty eager to finish it.

For him, reading isn’t just a passive task; he runs his fingers over each character, each line, memorizing each work page by page. The occasional word slips from his lips, and most of the time, he isn’t even aware of it.

Mie Yu walks by and smacks him on the head as if she’s done it a thousand times. Fuxing sputters and almost drops his chopsticks.

“Serves you right,” A-Qing says flatly. “Eat or read, but don’t do both at the same time! Besides, what’s so interesting about whatever you’re reading?”

Fuxing raises an eyebrow. “Ash blossom, desolate spring,” he repeats, with emphasis.

Ash blossom, desolate spring, ash blossom, desolate spring, ash blossom?

“What are you reading,” A-Qing demands, not asks, because she’s getting an answer no matter what.

“Oh, nothing much.” There’s that punchable sing-song tone again. “Just an ancient manuscript detailing ancient legends about ancient gods.”

And how in the world did he get his hands on that? There isn’t a divine novel study group around these parts, is there?

Fuxing watches with amusement as A-Qing’s eyebrows furrow. “I borrowed it off one of the shrines we stayed at. It wasn’t too long ago... back when we were in Yiling, I think.”

(The fact that he can casually say when we were in Yiling is a really, really good sign.

That was a pretty rough time. It wasn’t his fault, it wasn’t her fault, it was just something that had to be done.

At least the Burial Mounds look a lot prettier now.)
Fuxing taps his fingers on the manuscript, pointing at characters A-Qing doesn’t entirely recognize. “Would you believe my luck? Halfway through reading about all these fantastical fables, I find a certain tale of the Ash Blossom, Desolate Spring.”

“And?” A-Qing leans forward, almost standing, her palms set firmly on the table. “What’d it say? How’d it end?”

It’s a useless question. A-Qing saw how it ended herself. All she’s doing now is grabbing onto what broken pieces of their story she can find, trying to write happiness out of tragedy.

For a moment, there’s silence. Fuxing’s smile doesn’t falter, but something about it changes along the edges, like a blade worn dull.

He looks down at the page, then moves it toward A-Qing. He pulls his chair over from where he’s seated on the other side of the table, then makes himself comfortable beside her. A-Qing pulls in close as well, pushing some plates away to make some room.

“This right here,” the god says, his long, pale fingers tracing one paragraph in particular. “This is how it ends.”

Following Fuxing’s guidance, A-Qing lifts her hand, runs it over the ink that’s long since dried, over words written by someone who saw love burn to ashes.

Fuxing’s voice is melodious, a lull in time that converges inward on this one strange god who pours over legends of those who came before him, in search of something A-Qing doesn’t know if he’ll ever find.

What she does know is that Fuxing is a guide, a mentor, a teacher, someone who laughs when she fumbles with Jiangzai but is quick to correct her posture. She knows he’ll run through forms alongside her until she gets them right no matter how many times it takes.

She silently wonders if he’s trying to live the best of the memories he keeps running away from when he forgets that he’s the master and A-Qing’s the disciple, nudging her playfully and boasting about his superior talent, not to A-Qing, but to the few people that died calling him a friend.

But she indulges him. As much as she wants to tell him to stop running away from his past, it’s not fair of her to say that to him.

So when the sun sets below the horizon and all that’s left between them is the gentle flickering of a golden flame, A-Qing will stare up into the endless night. The stars flicker in, and they flicker out.

Fuxing will turn a page. He’ll look up, see A-Qing’s gaze directed toward that skyward abyss, something meaningless but still very present, and he’ll clear his throat.

He’ll talk like he was born with a golden tongue, weaving emotion into stories and poems that speaks more of who he really was before all this than any rumours ever will.

He reads, he speaks, and he doesn’t expect a response. He doesn’t need to look up to know that A-Qing’s listening, she’ll always listen, and she knows it makes him... not happy (too generous, too bright, too fake), but content.

It isn’t rare for her to fall asleep to the rise and fall of Fuxing’s voice these days. And for each story A-Qing doesn’t quite catch the ending of, Fuxing will smile and first ask, *what sort of ending would you give it?*
As if I have the power the change endings that have already been written, she used to say.

But then one day:

Oh.

Rewritten endings—

That’s exactly what Fuxing does, isn’t it?

Depending on where they are and what sort of mood they’re in, sometimes A-Qing will pull out paper and cinnabar, sometimes she’ll draw into dirt with a stick, sometimes she’ll trace invisible words with her fingers. Always, every time, without fail, she’ll write words she finds pretty with the same hands she uses to create talismans that burn and purge.

Now, as Fuxing runs his fingers beside each character, A-Qing listens. She looks and tries to find beauty in a story she already knows ends in tragedy.

“Once the first petal falls, the rest are sure to follow. 
What can tarnish gold is nothing but gold itself.
What can fell the gods is nothing but the gods themselves.
Love yourself, lest the world should fall at your feet
Because you tore it down for a heart you broke.”

Fuxing is silent. He breathes in deeply, then turns to A-Qing. It’s almost a relief when she sees his smile falter.

“That’s how the story ends.”

A-Qing doesn’t ask for how it begins or how it evolves; she doesn’t need it, and she doesn’t want it. Every love story, while so ridiculously different, is always stupidly and stubbornly the same.

Sacrifice is supposed to be a romantic thing. Oh, how you give for those you love, oh, how you bleed for those you’ve sworn to protect, oh, what a pretty thing, oh, what utter bullshit.

What’s so romantic about losing something? What’s so romantic about losing someone?

Love is a blessing, a curse, a burden, a fleeting memory. It’s everything and nothing all at once.

A-Qing used to think she knew how love worked, but now she knows that she doesn’t know anything at all.

She can’t help anyone with love—no, that’s not right. It’s romance she doesn’t understand. Love is—love is contentment with those you trust, talking late into the night around a dim flame about nonsense, buying little things for each other when something reminds you of the other. It’s understanding each other, trusting each other, being able to fall asleep in each other’s presence.

Is romance something more than that? Does love really drive people to wait a thousand years, to kill thousands, to want someone so badly that... that...

That what?

A-Qing doesn’t know. She isn’t sure she ever wants to find out.

(This is okay as it is.)
She silently traces the characters, dragging her fingers over each stroke, again and again and again until it’s engraved in her memory.

To Hui Hua, A-Qing wasn’t able to say anything. She didn’t understand, and she couldn’t find the words to reassure her that everything would be alright.

But Fuxing understood. He’s loved before.

With an ending like his, A-Qing knows it must’ve been a curse.

“Okay,” she finally says, lifting her hands from the table. “Alright. I’ve got it down, I think.”

Fuxing closes the book and tucks it into his robes. “You’ll remember it, then?”

“Only if you stop bothering me with that big mouth of yours!”

They banter, they tease each other, they move on. It'll take some time for the ache to fade, but that’s just how healing works.

A-Qing tucks Jiangzai back into her sash. Fuxing puts his weimao back on his head. There’s nothing much left to do, and the sun is already beginning to set over the valley. On days like these, it’s nice to turn in early.

“I’m heading up first,” A-Qing says, already halfway out the window of their room.

Fuxing hums an indistinct noise. “Sure. I’ll be up soon.”

With Jiangzai tied onto her back for convenience, A-Qing flips herself onto the roof. She carefully maneuvers her way up until she’s seated comfortably at the highest point. It isn’t as high as she normally likes it, but it’ll do.

The streets of Yinhe slowly begin to empty as the sun sets and a blanket of darkness sets over the valley. No festivities, no processions, no burning red and blazing gold.

Just peace and quiet. Everyday life, punctuated by the occasional visit from a god.

As the stars begin to creep out from the night sky, Fuxing finally leaps up and onto the roof. He makes his way up and settles down beside A-Qing. A long sigh escapes him. “Not tired yet?”

“No,” A-Qing answers. It’s only half a lie: of course she’s still tired, even after resting for a bit. She suspects she’ll be tired for at least a while. But tonight, she wants to sit here on the rooftops and just revel in streets without of wedding processions, winds that only carry whispers and not hymns, and skies free of lanterns and flowers.

Fuxing laughs. He takes his weimao off and rests it on his lap. His eyes reflect stars that A-Qing can’t see. “That makes two of us. We really got a lot more than we were expecting with this job.”

“I think we didn’t get enough.”

*I think we didn’t do enough*, is what A-Qing doesn’t say, because she knows Fuxing’s thinking the same thing.

It isn’t the first time something like this has happened, and there’s no way it’ll be the last time. That’s what makes it awful, and that’s why they need to keep travelling.

The next best thing after a happy ending is closure.
A-Qing isn’t sure how long they sit up there in silence. On nights like these, time doesn’t hold any meaning. The irony isn’t lost on her, but she can’t bring herself to care.

It begins slowly. Softly.

Fuxing’s voice has always been more honest than he has. He can laugh, he can tease, he can sink into shadows and pretend as if he doesn’t care. But when he reads, even more so when he sings, he finds himself.

His voice rises and falls, shakes and falters, climbs and ascends, echoes hauntingly in darkness and resounds nobly in light.

On nights like these, new legends are born. They tell stories of a golden god descended to the mortal realm, travelling the land on his own two feet, eternally searching for chaos. He gives power to the people, he makes them lucky, and he saves them.

But not everyone can be saved. And for those that fall before he can catch them, he sings into the night.

Ash blossoms fall amidst a desolate spring,
A stone-cold heart catches fallen stars,
The fools weeping crimson and laughing gold
Have nothing but bleeding fingers and broken souls!

Hark! The song of the golden gods, three strong, three fallen
Pierces through the endless abyss and goes unheard!
Ten thousand flowers for the hands clasped in prayer
That wilt and are born again!

It’s that same cursed song, but A-Qing can’t find it in herself to hate it. Not when Fuxing’s the one singing it, laughing bitterly at the misfortune the golden gods bring unto the world, lamenting the cries for help that disappear before they can be found, and wishing the best for two goddesses who lived too long but left too soon.

But once is enough. Repeating it won’t do. So when Fuxing’s voice trails off, A-Qing picks up with a new song.

Flowers circling above my head,
Dance without care or a single regret.
As a child, as a hero, as someone dead,
They keep dancing, and dancing, at everything’s end.

When one song ends, another begins. They’ve done this too many times not to know how to continue each other’s verses. Someone has to be there to send those who’ve been wandering for too long off to the next life.

The song of catastrophe morphs men into beasts;
A flower that rots and sings to the sky.
The song of true love echoes far,
And plants seeds that have already died.

And again—

Within the darkness, I traced your back
And remembered your outline so clearly.
I pray we never meet, for the only thing that won’t stop falling
Will be my tears.

And again, and again, and again. They sit on the rooftop, a girl and a god, singing for lost souls, for themselves, for each other, for anyone who’s listening.

It ends as it started: softly. Slowly.

Fuxing knows many songs, and A-Qing’s most of them. This one, though, she doesn’t recognize.

There are no lyrics, but Fuxing weaves meaning into each note regardless.

Tranquil: that’s what it is. Eyes closed, swaying gently, Fuxing draws from within him and lets it all echo into the night. He’s always felt so much, and this is his way of allowing himself to accept it.

A-Qing doesn’t hum along, even when the melody repeats. The song means something special to Fuxing. He looks far, far past what’s in front of him, toward something nobody else can see. The stars in his eyes shine brilliantly, and he sings.

Who is he singing for?

Something shuffles behind them. A-Qing hears it before Fuxing does, and naturally, her first reaction is to draw her sword.

Fuxing’s well known around these parts. Nobody in their right mind would interrupt one of their nightly rituals! It’s disrespectful beyond measure, and even A-Qing feels a surge of anger as Fuxing’s song cuts off abruptly.

“Impudent,” she recites, her mouth moving faster than her mind. “Don’t you know not to disturb a god—”

Oh.

Oh, no.

She’s already drawn her sword, and she’s not going to stand down. But this situation is very, very bad.

Hanguang-Jun’s white robes almost glow under the light of the moon.

Ethereal, ephemeral; the famed Light-Bearer, chaser of chaos and discord, is exactly as the rumours make him out to be. His eyes, clear gold pools, are focused on the god behind A-Qing.

Fuxing hasn’t moved. He stands there, his back turned to the disaster currently unfolding, utterly frozen, his hands slowly tightening around his robes, his shoulders beginning to tremble.

No, no, no. Not now. Not now, of all times!

Fuxing isn’t ready, he won’t be ready for some time, and he doesn’t deserve this now. Not after he just watched another story end in flames.

So A-Qing raises Jiangzai. The sword laughs bitterly. They both know she has no hope of keeping up with Hanguang-Jun if they should start a duel. It doesn’t matter.

“The revered Hanguang-Jun,” A-Qing spits. There’s wind in her hair and fire in her throat. “Does the Gusu Lan Sect not have any respect for the gods that ward away chaos from your lands?”
Hanguang-Jun’s gaze flickers momentarily to A-Qing. Her breath immediately catches.

His eyes have no right to look so much like Fuxing’s. That same molten gold, burning bright and then resting still, always mourning, always searching—no, no!

She won’t be intimidated. She won’t let Fuxing destroy himself again, and she won’t let anyone else destroy him.

“A god,” Hanguang-Jun repeats. His voice shakes imperceptibly; anyone else wouldn’t be able to tell. But A-Qing can.

She levels Jiangzai at Hanguang-Jun, who won’t look at her, why won’t he look, why does he want to drag Fuxing back into the past? “The divine and merciful Fuxing, god of wealth and prosperity, no less! Who are you to question him? If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave and repent—”

“Wei Ying.”

A-Qing loses her grip on her words. Fuxing flinches.

He knows.

He knows, how does he know? What went wrong?

Fuxing isn’t a coward. He’s fearless, but he’s also so kind, and that awful combination of noble traits eats away at him. Even so, he’s terrified of so much that A-Qing doesn’t understand. All she knows is that it hurts him, and he doesn’t deserve to go through that sort of pain.

She can’t do this, she has to, she doesn’t want to, she wants to, why, why, why does Hanguang-Jun call that name like he’s been waiting, searching, chasing—

(Waiting? For the Yiling Patriarch? To do what?

Searching? Why? What more is there to say?

Chasing? To what end? Which one of those brilliant figures is he chasing after? The boy, the martyr, or the god?

Is that what love sounds like?)

What can she say? What can she do? Should she do anything? Is this the right choice?

All A-Qing has is questions that nobody will ever answer. It doesn’t matter. Nobody needs to know.

“Don’t call that name like it means anything to you,” she says, putting herself between Hanguang-Jun and Fuxing. She can’t lie to someone like Hanguang-Jun; she can’t. But she refuses to see Fuxing hurt more than he already is. So she’ll do the hurting and take the hurt, because that’s all she can do. “Go away! You don’t have any right to be here!”

But what is one girl in the face of someone who’s been searching for one person for years?

(Has anyone in this area seen a sword-wielding, blind Taoist?)

The memory is like venom in her veins. It burns hot, then cold, but it hurts all the same. It screams, Don’t you remember what happened before? Will you let it happen again?

It’s not the same, yet it is. It’s so similar it cuts into A-Qing’s heart and carves out the pieces she’s
just barely managed to rebuild over the past year.

So when Hanguang-Jun steps forward, a beacon of light in the dark, all A-Qing can do is stand her ground and pray he doesn’t come closer, knowing very well that nobody out there is listening. “Don’t. Don’t! There’s nothing for you here. There’s... nothing at all.”

Fuxing takes a deep, rattling breath. It shakes and stutters, stumbles and falls. But he breathes, he’s alive.

“A-Qing,” the god says, turning with his head held high and his eyes glowing bright, “you don’t need to do this.”

A-Qing hates the expression on his face. It’s something molded from fear and pain, a mask he’s worn a thousand times that was cracked to begin with.

Fuxing pulls on a bitter smile. He breathes ice and shadow. He’s thrown himself into the depths in order to hide, and he’s willing to die there. “Tonight is just full of surprises. What curious matters have brought the famed Hanguang-Jun all the way to Yinhe?”

Something very small and very quiet breaks in Hanguang-Jun’s eyes. “Wei Ying,” he repeats, softly. The name is precious in his hands, something fragile that he desperately wants to hold onto. “You’re here.”

(If you hold on too tight, it’ll break. He knows. Why does he know?)

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Fuxing says, his tone light but vacant. Tension roars beneath his carefully controlled voice like he’ll break at any moment. “In case you so rudely ignored what my disciple told you, my name is Fuxing. That name, of course, isn’t for someone like you to use casually.”

That’s the thing about lying, Fuxing, you idiot. You can’t lie to someone when it’s so obvious the only person you want to fool is yourself.

“Now, I’m usually quite generous when it comes to prayers, but I’m sorry to say that I have no interest in you whatsoever.” A cruel glint colours Fuxing’s eyes crimson. A-Qing has seen it too many times not to realize the only one he’s pointing a blade at is himself. “You see, I have absolutely no interest in the sort of person who would fall for me.”

Something breaks a little more, but it doesn’t shatter. Hanguang-Jun truly is formidable. “You came back.” A pause, not a hesitation. Golden eyes take in this strange, unconventional god, and the utter yearning makes A-Qing want to look away. “You’re alive.”

“Oh of course I am,” Fuxing says sharply, the first threads of his patience snapping. “I never left.”

It’s so like him to answer everything in reverse. It’s so like him to give away everything he’s trying to hide.

As if realizing the weight of his words, Fuxing’s breath hitches. His eyes widen and he quickly looks away. He takes a step back, but his feet catch over the materialization of his own hesitation and denial, and he falls back, back, back—

A-Qing doesn’t need to take action if it’s taken for her. She watches as Hanguang-Jun follows after him without hesitation, reaching out a hand and wrapping it around Fuxing’s wrist.

Hanguang-Jun pulls Fuxing in close. Safe. Away from harm, away from this world.
Ah, thinks A-Qing, Fuxing, you idiot.

*How did you not see how much he loved you before you died?*

The touch is like fire. Fuxing jerks away violently, ripping his wrist away in a snap of white peonies, beautiful yet fleeting. “Don’t touch me!”

Hysteria bubbles within Fuxing’s voice, and A-Qing knows that he can’t do this. It’s not the right time or place. He needs to find himself before others try to find him. His happy ending will come one day—

But that day isn’t today.

When Hanguang-Jun takes a step forward, Fuxing takes two steps back. “I don’t know you,” he lies. “I don’t know who you are. You don’t know who I am. Stop talking to me.”

“Wei Ying,” Hanguang-Jun calls once more. With every word, the pain in his eyes that he can’t show on his face hurts more and more.

“Stop following me. I don’t know you.” The dam is breaking, he’s drowning and the only one holding him down is himself, he can’t breathe, and it’s all his own fault, but it isn’t. “Go away. Go away!”

This time, A-Qing’s the one that grabs onto Fuxing. She tugs hard on his sleeve as he begins to slip in both body and in mind. “Fuxing, Fuxing, it’s okay, everything’s okay!”

Something like this should be terrifying. Seeing a god—seeing anyone lose themselves to a time that no longer exists is scary. But A-Qing has seen Fuxing at his very worst and at his very best. He’s more than this.

He used to say, *that's not my name.* It is now. He’s made it his, and in doing so, he’s torn apart who he was before.

“Stop it!”

It’s a command. A-Qing listens, because she knows if she goes any further, all she’ll do is hurt Fuxing even more.

So she lets go and watches Wei Wuxian break before her eyes.

“Stop—don’t—I won’t go with you, I won’t, you can’t make me!” Red swallows his eyes, he clutches his head like it hurts, and it does, it hurts like nothing’s ever hurt before. “It’s too late, it’s too far gone, I don’t want it! Don’t—don’t touch me. Don’t touch me!”

This isn’t how A-Qing wants Fuxing’s voice to ring out. He wasn’t made for begging. He wasn’t made for this, but it’s who he’s become.

They’ve done this too many times. They both know it.

With a flick of her sleeve, A-Qing grabs a simple purging array. It’s reflex to throw it at the god, who doesn’t move, who never moves out of the way.

Something as simple as a purging array won’t hurt him. All it’ll do is dissipate the resentful energy clinging to his skin and knock him out for a bit.

The talisman isn’t like the rest of A-Qing’s arsenal. It blooms into life, a burst of qi that says, *it’s*
okay, everything’s okay, just close your eyes for a moment and it’ll all be alright.

Fuxing’s crimson eyes swirl once, twice, and fade into empty grey. The burdens that he carries within him ease, the strings that he’s weaved into every part of his being loosen, and he slips.

He needs the rest, anyway. As long as he’s unconscious, he won’t be able to tear himself to pieces, and neither will Hanguang-Jun. All any of them will be able to do is wait for the sun to rise. By then, they’ll all be able to go back to walking their own paths.

A-Qing is used to being the one who has to catch Fuxing when he falls. She finds that, surprisingly, it isn’t too bad letting someone else do it for once.

Hanguang-Jun catches Fuxing’s limp form in his arms like he’s been waiting to do it his entire life. The breath he releases sounds like something he’s been holding for years. And that’s just it, isn’t it? He breathes, he’s alive, the world is still and monotone, then suddenly it creaks, cracks, and bursts into every colour at once. Suddenly, the world is running away from him, and it leaves nothing but miracles and peonies in its wake.

You can’t live a life chasing after someone. That’s what A-Qing thinks. If that’s what you choose to do, you aren’t living an entire life, because half of what you’re living is for someone that isn’t there.

That’s why love needs to be shared. Someone lives half your life, you live half of theirs.

Is that how love works?

A-Qing doesn’t know. But she’d have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to realize just what Fuxing means to Hanguang-Jun by the way he lifts the man-turned-god, holding him so gently yet refusing to let go.

She wants to call Hanguang-Jun stupid for thinking that Fuxing needs protecting. Gods are the ones who do the protecting, after all.

But if recent events have taught A-Qing anything, it’s that all gods fall, and when they fall, nobody will be there to catch them. Which means, of course, she’ll be there to fill in the void.

It’s a job she’d be absolutely fine doing herself. Turns out she isn’t the only one with one foot on the path already, and that might not be an entirely bad thing.

With a sigh, A-Qing sheaths Jiangzai. Everything’s spinning out of control so quickly she can barely keep up. Then again, she’s the Wind-Swept Maiden for a reason. Things can move as fast as they want. It doesn’t matter. The wind will always be there first.

“Hanguang-Jun,” A-Qing says. “Let’s take this conversation somewhere else. It’s been a long day for all of us, I think, so the least we could do is sit down, right?”

For what seems like the first time, Hanguang-Jun looks at A-Qing and actually sees her. He makes a simple sound of agreement that reveals nothing and everything at the same time: “Mn.”

It’s sort of funny, watching such an esteemed cultivator step through the window and into the room, carrying an utterly dead to the world Fuxing in his arms. It’s only sort of funny because it’s also sad, and that’s something A-Qing doesn’t want any more of.

Hanguang-Jun sets Fuxing down on the bed. He falters for the slightest moment as his fingertips brush over the sleeping god’s robes, something between longing and acceptance flashes over his face, and he moves away.
A-Qing can’t be the only one sitting. She feels kind of awkward, loitering at the table when it’s obvious that Hanguang-Jun doesn’t even want to let go of Fuxing. So she stands, bringing both her chair and the vacant one with her, and sets them down beside the bed.

“You can see him just as well sitting as standing,” A-Qing says when Hanguang-Jun doesn’t move. “It’s not like we care about formality or anything. It’s a waste of time. So just sit down already!”

Hanguang-Jun frowns but sits regardless, and there, was that so hard?

With a short inhale, A-Qing bows her head a little. She hates apologies, she hates apologizing even more, but she’s got to pay her dues. “I said a lot of hurtful things. You didn’t deserve most of it. Sorry.”

Silence. Then: “Your name is Wei Chengfeng. The Wind-Swept Maiden.”

That’s not the response A-Qing expected, but it isn’t necessarily a bad thing. The fact that even Hanguang-Jun has heard of her is a pretty big deal, anyway. “I mean, Fuxing calls me A-Qing, and to be honest, that’s what I prefer.” She sits up straight and crosses her arms. “He said I was long overdue for a courtesy name, so he came up with one for me.”

“He gave you the name Wei?”

What’s that tone? What’s that in his voice? It’s so hard to tell with Hanguang-Jun. For this, though, it doesn’t take a genius to guess.

Don’t you dare say I took him from you, is what A-Qing doesn’t say. Don’t you dare say you’re the only one who sees good in him, because there’s nothing more tragic than love born out of loneliness, and we both know that the world has been cruel enough to all of us already.

She can’t be angry here. A-Qing feels like a stranger between Fuxing and the man who knows his heart best; Hanguang-Jun feels like a stranger between a god and his only disciple.

“He gave me my name,” A-Qing confirms. “I doubt someone from the Gusu Lan Sect would understand, but before I was a disciple, I was just another street rat. It’s hell out there, especially when everyone looks at you like you’re less than the dirt beneath their feet.” Hooking her pendant onto her finger, A-Qing plucks the bell from her sash. It releases a small chime, a quiet and clear sound. “Fuxing really gave me a lot, but to me, it’s not the name that matters.”

A name is just a name. What’s a name in the grand scheme of things, anyway? It isn’t Fuxing’s name she respects; it’s the kindness in his voice and the strength in his hands.

With a sigh, A-Qing wraps her fingers around the crystal bell. She drops her hands to her lap. “I guess it means a lot to Fuxing, though. I think he wanted to see the name Wei become something good.”

Hanguang-Jun’s next breath is longer than usual. Is he acting, or do his emotions really not show on his face? “It has never been something evil.”

“That’s you saying it to me! Try telling that to anyone else. You can try as hard as you can to convince people that there’s more to the story, but you can’t deny the fact that thousands of people died at his hands.” Her grip around the bell tightens. It’s fine. It’s never as fragile as it seems. “Do you get it? You can’t make people see something they don’t want to see. They’d rather carve out their own eyes. So when I call Fuxing Fuxing, it isn’t because I think Wei Wuxian was a bad person. It’s because there’s nothing to be gained from calling him by a name that everyone, including himself, hates!”
Fuxing’s even breaths stutter. His head lolls to the side, his brows furrow, and an indistinct noise, something weak and pained, escapes his lips.

A-Qing shuts her mouth immediately.

Hanguang-Jun’s piercing gold eyes study the god’s form, how even in sleep, the tension in his limbs never seems to go away entirely.

Slowly, gently, with visible hesitation, Hanguang-Jun reaches out and brushes the stray strands of Fuxing’s hair from his face. He tucks them behind Fuxing’s ear, and his touch lingers, wavers, and begins to pull away.

Fuxing’s breath hitched again, and he turns toward Hanguang-Jun, seeking a warmth he undoubtedly remembers only from the dreams of the past. Even in sleep, he can’t lie to himself.

Hanguang-Jun is perfectly still as Fuxing’s pale, calloused hands reach for a comfort he’ll never allow himself to accept in his waking hours.

(There’s a reason star-crossed lovers are star-crossed.)

But the impossible is meant to be brought to its knees. Even stars can meet.

Something so, so utterly soft and quiet comes over Hanguang-Jun’s features. When Fuxing reaches for him, he reaches back. Here, in this small room of a small town in a big world, the impossible begins to happen.

With a deep sigh, A-Qing presses her palms to her eyes.

Is it right to feel... guilty, in a weird way? Because she’s here, Hanguang-Jun has living, breathing proof that the last thing Fuxing wants to do is return to the past. Because she’s here, Hanguang-Jun knows that no matter what anyone feels, Fuxing will keep running until the day he finds himself.

Fine. Whatever. It doesn’t matter what A-Qing feels right now. Hanguang-Jun now knows Fuxing without and within: the god who chases chaos nobly and refuses to look back, and the god who clings desperately onto chaos as a reason for being, whispering lies to himself about his cursed touch and poisonous words. One is a god who shapes miracles from nothing, and the other is a god who brings calamity upon himself from nothing.

It’s good enough for now. There’s no telling when Fuxing will finally be able to face the legacy he’s left behind. But someday is always better than never.

When Fuxing wakes, he’ll run. It’ll hurt both himself and Hanguang-Jun. It’s better to just let everyone go their separate ways before the sun rises.

“Listen,” says A-Qing, keeping her voice soft. She doesn’t say, look at me, because she knows that Hanguang-Jun only has eyes for one person. “I don’t think I need to say this, but... Fuxing doesn’t like his past.”

Hanguang-Jun closes his eyes. Keeps them shut. Opens them with a swirling in that endless gold.

He’s listening. That’s good. A-Qing’s beginning to realize that, with Hanguang-Jun, his actions speak much louder than his words. It’s one or the other. Both are reserved for someone else.

So A-Qing talks. She talks enough for two, three, however many people she feels necessary. And she has a lot to say.
“He says it was all his fault, but he’s stupid like that. He’ll take all the blame if it means people are happier that way. He’s been like that for as long as I’ve known him, and I’m sure that’s how he was before.”

(This is the boy who grew up loved and had that love ripped away from him. Why? Because of himself, because of fate, because of a world spinning wildly out of his control.)

“I don’t think he’s a bad person. But the past hurts him, and it hasn’t helped him. Not yet. So, for now, it’s probably better to let him find himself first.”

(This is a god who needs to save himself before he can save others.)

“Does it really matter, in the end? He says he’s paying the world back for everything he’s done, so no matter what name people call him, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s fixing things.”

It’s a question A-Qing can answer because she isn’t bound to the past. It’s a question Fuxing can lie to because he rejects the past. It’s a question Hanguang-Jun can answer because he understands the consequences of leaving words unsaid.

Lifting her eyes up and gesturing faintly to Fuxing is harder than A-Qing expects. Everything’s harder when emotions are involved.

“You knew him once. As things are right now, he doesn’t want to know you. Well, half of him doesn’t want to know you. The other half…” A-Qing trails off into silence. Hanguang-Jun knows what he’s doing, because silence really does speak louder than words sometimes. “I think you already know.”

Hanguang-Jun lowers his head. His hand tightens around Fuxing’s ever so slightly.

A-Qing clenches her own hands together. Why are the words so bitter all of a sudden? “But all of him wants to move on with his life, and the worst thing anyone can do is drag him back into the past. It might seem selfish, but there’s no way around it. It’s always been all or nothing with him, hasn’t it?”

Life’s too short to be taken too seriously, but that doesn’t mean you should work to make it even shorter. That’s just—no.

A sigh slips from A-Qing’s lips. The bonds between people are the strongest and most tangled things she’s ever seen. Love, regret, denial, and all those sharp strings just waiting for someone to reach in and cut themselves open.

But—

“But I suppose the fact that you’ve grown apart means you were united at one point in time,” says A-Qing, gesturing weakly at Fuxing. “And hear me out, okay? Because I’ve seen it happen more than once. You can’t want to say these sorts of things. You’ll wait and wait until you lose him, and by that point, the words you wanted to say won’t mean anything to anyone.”

Something unnamed in Hanguang-Jun’s eyes changes. He looks at her a little differently, a bit clearer, maybe. A bit more honest, for sure.

So A-Qing looks down at her shoes. Honesty goes both ways, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. “Maybe you should’ve checked if love was there from the beginning. But we all make mistakes, I guess. Some are just bigger than others.”
Some literally kill you. She doesn’t say. They both know it.

This one-sided conversation has really gone on for too long. Is A-Qing even saying anything meaningful? Do her words even matter to someone like Hanguang-Jun, who has to know how much it hurts already?

It’s okay. At the very least, Hanguang-Jun will know that he has an ally standing by Fuxing. Even if they can’t both chase Fuxing at the same time, one of them will always be there to make sure he doesn’t destroy himself. And that’s meaningful.

It feels weird, considering A-Qing barely knows Hanguang-Jun. At the same time, though, she knows him startlingly well for someone she’s just met. “I don’t think you’re a bad person, either. I think you two both deserved to be loved, and you just don’t know how to do it yet.” With half a laugh and half a huff, A-Qing levels an exasperated gaze at both the esteemed Light-Bearer and the Golden God of Prosperity. “I guess you’re both kind of stupid like that, huh?”

Hanguang-Jun’s brows furrow. It wears strangely on him. “We are not stupid,” he says succinctly, as if trying to explain it clearly to A-Qing.

At that, A-Qing almost wants to laugh. She disguises it as a sporadic cough because even she has dignity.

Really? He’s just going to try and say they’re not stupid? Being quiet is one thing; being emotionally stunted is another. Similarly, being proud is one thing, while being completely and utterly ignorant is definitely a whole other thing.

Whatever. It’s far too late for this sort of harrowing business. For a stuck-up Gusu Lan cultivator, Hanguang-Jun isn’t so bad. He looks at Fuxing like he wants to hold him and never let go, but he knows that doing so will just scare Fuxing away. So he understands that freedom is the first step to healing, and from there, maybe a kinder story can be written.

A-Qing leans back in her chair, tilting it back onto its hind legs. “Love’s a stupid thing, but people have to chase after it for a reason. I don’t really get it, so I don’t get a say in it. However!” Her voice rises, and with it, so does Fuxing’s breath. She pauses for a moment, watching as the god’s chest rises and falls with a sort of peace he hasn’t had in a long time.

“Even so,” A-Qing continues, softer, “despite it all, I want to see a happy ending. Between you and Fuxing, I’d bet one of you can get things rolling, right?”

She grins a wide grin at Hanguang-Jun, who, surprisingly, holds her gaze without any trouble. All he does is nod his head a little. “Mm.”

“Then everything will be just fine.” A-Qing moves to grab a pillow and a couple of blankets from her own bed. Once she has a decent haul, she turns toward Hanguang-Jun. “As Wei Chengfeng, I’m going to have to ask you go your own way before sunrise, but as A-Qing, I’m going to let you take your time until then. In the meantime, I’ll be upstairs.”

By upstairs, she obviously means the roof, which doesn’t slip by Hanguang-Jun. “No need,” he says. “You have been through many trials. Rest.”

A-Qing shakes her head. “This isn’t just for you, dummy. It’s a nice night out, and a change of scenery would be nice.” She shrugs helplessly when Hanguang-Jun tries to stare her down, which doesn’t work too well, because that’s what she does, too. “I guess Fuxing’s going to miss out on one thing to get in on another. It’s not so bad.”
For a moment, there’s silence. Is he going to be annoying and insist, is A-Qing going to have to keep rambling, or—

“Thank you.” Hanguang-Jun bows his head, which feels very wrong. His voice trembles. “I... will be gone before morning.”

A-Qing smiles. “Got it.” Immediately, a little something pops into her mind. “And just so you know, Fuxing doesn’t like that. ‘Thank you’, I mean. Just some advice for when you meet again.”

Hanguang-Jun nods. He might not say much, but the words that are given to him will never be lost. With all that said and done, A-Qing steps out the window, dragging the sheets through the frame. She’s only halfway out when she decides that, well, Fuxing’s always been good at running away. But he gave A-Qing the name Chengfeng, and he bestowed the title Wind-Swept Maiden upon her.

So this wind is going to slowly but surely blow the sails in a different direction.

“One last thing.” She hesitates, but pushes onward as she always has. “Do you... mind if you get letters every now and then?”

Hanguang-Jun’s eyes widen almost imperceptibly. This is embarrassing, A-Qing wants to end herself immediately, but for the sake of everyone here, she’ll do it. “Fuxing’s teaching me how to write, but I don’t really have anything to write to! And if I write to you, I could keep tabs on Fuxing for you, and maybe that’d be, I don’t know, peace of mind or something. Does the Gusu Lan Sect even take mail? I’d probably have to use a talisman... some sort of tracking talisman? But what about the protective array? I can’t just blow up the entire mountain, even that’s a bit much for me—”

“Wei Chengfeng.”

When Hanguang-Jun calls her courtesy name like that, it feels like it has a bit more meaning. The Light-Bearer fixes A-Qing with an unwavering gaze. He isn’t looking down on her or demanding her attention. All he’s doing is looking, and yet it feels so heavy.

“Address your letters to the name Lan Wangji,” says Hanguang-Jun. “I will answer.”

There a problem with his name: A-Qing wants to end herself immediately, but for the sake of everyone here, she’ll do it. “Fuxing’s teaching me how to write, but I don’t really have anything to write to! And if I write to you, I could keep tabs on Fuxing for you, and maybe that’d be, I don’t know, peace of mind or something. Does the Gusu Lan Sect even take mail? I’d probably have to use a talisman... some sort of tracking talisman? But what about the protective array? I can’t just blow up the entire mountain, even that’s a bit much for me—”

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“Address your letters to the name Lan Wangji,” says Hanguang-Jun. “I will answer.”

There a problem with his name: A-Qing doesn’t know how to write it.

Trying her very best not to flush up to the cheeks, A-Qing scurries back in and flicks a talisman and a stick of cinnabar free from her sleeves. “Um,” she begins. “The lan part’s easy, and I think I know the wang part, but ji...”

Hanguang-Jun takes the blank talisman and cinnabar from A-Qing. In doing so, he lets go of Fuxing’s hands.

By now, though, the god sleeps soundly. The tension in his body has faded somewhat, giving way to natural exhaustion.

“Watch,” says Hanguang-Jun. His flowing handwriting is perfect, almost too perfect, and a complete contrast to Fuxing’s manic scrawl.

When Hanguang-Jun hands the paper back, A-Qing almost feels bad when she slips it back into her sleeve. Oh, she can’t wait to get letters back from him. She can only hope he’ll be able to read the
travesties she sends him.

With the name matter settled, A-Qing climbs out the window. “You’ve been very kind,” she tells Hanguang-Jun for good measure. “You didn’t need to be, but you were anyway. You’re too good, and that’s what makes you a great fit for Fuxing.”

A-Qing grins when Hanguang-Jun nods firmly again. One of them has to be true to their emotions, and thank god it’s the more sensible of the two.

“Rest well,” Hanguang-Jun says. The gold in his eyes is almost divine. “May the winds of fortune bless your journey.”

“The winds of fortune will be blessing you,” A-Qing answers. “You ran into me, after all.”

As she makes her way onto the roof, she settles the pillows and sheets down as comfortably as she can. Even if it’s bumpy and uneven, she’s tired enough to feel the lull of sleep pull at her the moment she settles down.

Somewhere beneath her, Hanguang-Jun is sitting by Wei Wuxian, cherishing every moment. When the sun rises, he’ll be gone without saying goodbye, and A-Qing won’t even be angry for once.

He can leave goodbyes for when he writes back. But first, she needs to write to him first.

Underneath a sky free from lanterns and flowers that will one day be born again, A-Qing thinks of what her first words should be.

Chapter End Notes

30k....... 85 pages........ why do i do this to myself....... 

you may have noticed the spacing has changed. the reason is pretty simple: 31k is long and i didn't want to make people scroll forever. editing this made my eyes glaze over. it's for the best!!

i cannot tell you how weird the creative process was for this chapter. i think i drew inspiration from every obscure memory i had and just. mashed it all together and here we are. i wanted to write a mini mystery like you the ones scattered through mdzs, but i also wanted to write a series of interludes that sort of work like checkpoints, which each one involving more characters from canon and revolving around self-contained plots.

also, i decided to give a-qing a courtesy name bc a) she's 16-17, so she's of age to have one and b) having strangers call her a-qing is sort of weird?? so i gave her the name 乘风 (chéng fēng), which to my knowledge means "to ride the wind" or "to take an opportunity". in general, i really like her character, and i also really love the platonic relationships in the series just as much as the romantic ones. i just want wwx to know he's loved and lwj to have friends!!

i have a few more interludes planned, but i have no idea if they're going to be as long as this one because jesus christ, i have literally never written anything as long as this chapter.

as usual, thanks for reading! feel free to yell at me on twitter!
It’s cold.

But it’s been that way for a long time now, so it doesn’t matter too much. It’s just a fact, a way of life, something that comes with living. It’s just as meaningless as saying it hurts.

Maybe it means something when others say it. When Mo Xuanyu says it, the world just...doesn’t seem to care all too much.

That’s okay. Love is a luxury, anyway. Frankly, it’s a luxury he can’t afford and would rather stay far, far away from, because love bites, cuts, and leaves scars like none other, and those scars ache for a long time.

Mo Xuanyu rolls over. It’s one of those nights, where no matter how long he tosses and turns, he just can’t seem to get comfortable. The ground is too cold, the air is too cold, his breath is too cold. His hands tremble as he lifts them to his cheeks.

They’re cold too. It’s not very surprising. There’s not much to be offered in this house. Or this village. Or this world in general. It’s all very cold.

Well, it’s not so bad. Living is just a battle of attrition. It’s a test of endurance, and there’s not much to be gained from winning. Losing just...doesn’t seem so bad. Nowadays, it might just be easier to fall asleep and drift off.

Is it selfish?

It can’t be. To be selfish, you’d have to be doing someone wrong to do yourself right. Who would he doing wrong by leaving? Nobody would care all too much, would they?

Mo Xuanyu takes a breath. He’s alive, and it doesn’t even feel like he’s living.
It’s strange, being here. There are a lot of things he’s scared of, but at the same time, he can’t be scared of them anymore. It can’t get too much worse. No matter what others do to him, no matter what he does to others, no matter what does to himself, he can’t be afraid anymore.

Besides, it’s cowardly to be afraid. What’s there to be afraid of?

It’s cold tonight, isn’t it?

Ah.

It’s cold.

“Are you dumb or deaf? Answer me!”

“P-please, honoured vassal, if we could take this conversation somewhere else—”

“Somewhere else? You think I have time for somewhere else? Is everyone in this household as much of a coward as you are? Stand up straight! Look me in the eye! Stop acting like I’m going to eat you!”

“Please put down your sword! If you could just—if you could just—”

“If I could just what? Speak up, you idiot!”

It’s, um, very noisy out today.

Mornings usually start with a meal. Sometimes it comes, sometimes it doesn’t. It depends on how the servants in the main house are feeling. Even if they’re in a good mood, they don’t show it around Mo Xuanyu. He tends to sour any situation he’s put in. It’s understandable. Personally, he’d rather they go about their day happy, because when they’re not happy, they tend to take it out on him.
This morning, though, seems a bit livelier than usual.

“At least answer this: is this the Mo household?”

“Yes! Yes, revered vassal, it is, but please, if you could speak with the masters before intruding, it would be very much appreciated!”

Mo Xuanyu frowns. A vassal? To whom? And to say *revered* with so much fear...

It’s odd, to say the least. Mo Village isn’t exactly a notable place. Merchants and cultivators come and go, but nobody would visit otherwise.

Oh. Unless it’s the Lanling Jin Sect.

His breath stutters, and something tightens in his chest. It hurts, it won’t go away, it’ll never go away. But he can ignore it as best as he can.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Mo Xuanyu says to himself, as if it helps at all. It doesn’t. It does. It’s all the same. “There’s nothing to fear, nothing at all.”

Leaning against the space where the door meets the wall, Mo Xuanyu listens. The voices fade in and out, with A-Tong’s frantic begging frequently interrupted by what sounds like a girl’s voice. It isn’t familiar, but the pride in it could certainly belong to a disciple from the Lanling Jin Sect.

If they’ve come for him, there’s nothing he can do. If they haven’t, it...it doesn’t matter, but he needs to know anyway. At the very least, he can control what he knows. He doesn’t have much left, but this is something he can hold close to himself.

A loud thump shakes the door. Mo Xuanyu flinches back.

A groan, followed by a whimper, and then that same young, proud voice, filled with so much anger and outrage Mo Xuanyu slowly backs away: “You’ve done *what*?”
The walls shake again as something hits them. Is someone trying to knock the house down? They can’t—none of the servants in the main house could even do such a thing!

It must really be a cultivator, then. A...a cultivator...

Mo Xuanyu breathes, he feels air fill his lungs, and he wishes he could sleep through this.

“So you’ll act like a obedient dog around those above you, but you’ll spit on anyone below you!”

“You must understand, honoured vassal! He’s insane! He’s a disgrace! You mustn’t—you mustn’t—”

“I mustn’t? You think you have any right to tell me what to do?” The unmistakable sound of something being set ablaze suddenly fills the air, and Mo Xuanyu flinches. “Get out of my sight! You’re useless! Go tell your masters that we can do anything we like, and none of your pathetic babbling will do anything to change that!”

There’s a very familiar sound. Metal on metal, the sound of a sword being unsheathed. A-Tong screams, and his rambling slowly fades away into the distance.

For a moment, there’s only silence. Mo Xuanyu hesitates, but moves closer to the door.

The supposed vassal takes a breath so audible even he can hear it. It’s partly out of frustration, partly out of anger, and it makes him nervous. Are they here for him? If they really are, then what in the world do they want?

(At least they want him.)

Three quick but firm knocks sound off from the other side of the door. Mo Xuanyu jolts up, knocking over a stack of loose manuscripts. The papers scatter, and he fumbles to collect them.

“Hello?” It’s the vassal’s voice again, nowhere near as angry as before. It’s almost kind, in a strange way. Regardless, that’s good. That’s very good. “Is anyone in there? Or, rather, are you okay in there?”
It’s...been a while since anyone’s asked him that.

He isn’t even sure if he remembers how to answer. He isn’t sure what he should say.

Is he okay? Well, he’s alive, for one. That’s something.

(But are you living?)

He has food, water, shelter. He has everything he needs. He should be fine.

(But is it enough?)

He expected too much from life, so he has no right to be disappointed. Maybe he deserved everything that happened, maybe he didn’t, but it doesn’t change the fact that it happened.

(But don’t you want more?)

Justice is a word that only works when you’ve been wronged. And to enact justice on others means to do as much hurt to them as they’ve done to you.

Justice is...it’s...

(I only wanted to prove that I was worth something.

I trusted you. You gave me so much, you looked at me, you told me I was useful, that I was more than what they all said.

What did you have to gain from being so cruel?
Why did you give me everything and then rip it away from me?)

Mo Xuanyu takes a breath.

“I…” His own voice sounds so foreign. He feels nauseous, and he doesn’t know why. The words he longs to say won’t come. “I’m not…”

The words fall off his tongue and disappear. No matter how far he reaches with his feeble hands, he won’t be able to reach them.

For a moment, there’s silence. Then: “Can I open the door?”

When Mo Xuanyu can’t speak, she fills in the void. She doesn’t speak over him; she waits until he has nothing more to say, and then she steps into the silence without hesitation.

Light footsteps scuffle across the ground, and Mo Xuanyu swears he can feel her presence just on the other side of the door.

“Let’s get you someplace better,” she says, and Mo Xuanyu’s heart catches in his throat. “I don’t know the whole story, but I know that you don’t deserve to be treated this way. But I don’t want to force you to do something you don’t want to do. I’ll open this door only if you want me to.”

Her voice is so confident. It’s so expressive. Mo Xuanyu can hear a thousand colours and emotions in every word. It sounds incredible. It sounds like living.

Who is she?

Why does she sound like she’s giving him a chance?

(You are you, and you are something, simply by the fact you’re here.

Yet you live as if you’re nothing, a harrowing, bleak existence, by the will of those who wish harm upon you, and a world who has cast you aside.
Then only one question remains:

At the end of the world as you know it, will you cast yourself away?

Or is there more beyond the wounds you carry?)

Mo Xuanyu is alive. But he wants to live. The life he was given before wasn’t living at all, because in the end, it was a lie. It’s okay. It was his mistake. He should’ve known better. Life isn’t something others give to you; it’s something you take hold of yourself.

“You can open it,” says Mo Xuanyu. His hands shake and his voice wavers, but the words are there. And that’s good enough.

There’s a quiet sigh on the other side of the door.

“Okay,” the vassal says, relief in her voice. She’s so honest with her feelings. Isn’t she scared of what others will say? Isn’t she scared of how others might try to manipulate her? “It might be rude of me to say this, but frankly, your family’s rotten to the core!” The sound of metal rending through metal rings out, and something heavy falls to the ground. “They all deserves to burn for doing this to you.”

He can’t—there’s nothing he can say to that.

He knows very well that what he shouldn’t be here. At the same time, he can’t blame anyone for putting him here. It’s not their fault. All they know is that Mo Xuanyu is insane, out of his mind, a failure of the highest calibre. To them, he’s not human. It’s not their fault.

The blame rests with Mo Xuanyu. He was a fool for blindly trusting the first person to reach out to him. Kindness is just as potent a weapon as it is a gift. And Mo Xuanyu let himself be cut over and over and over again, all for the sake of someone who tossed him aside and left him to die.

He knows it’s wrong. He doesn’t want to be here. But the only person he can blame is himself.
The door slowly creaks open. The morning light spills into the room, bathing the walls in a gentle hue Mo Xuanyu has never appreciated until now.

And before him, dressed in green and gold robes fit for a goddess, a young girl stands tall and proud. She brushes a strand of hair from her face without much care, and the golden flowers in her hair clack against each other. Everything about her, from how she wears her heavy robes with fluid grace to how she holds her head nobly high, speaks of something divine.

For a moment, all Mo Xuanyu can do is stare. Then he catches sight of the jade pendant and the crystal bell hanging from her sash, and oh, for the love of all that is good in this world (which...isn’t saying much), is this—is this the revered Yufeng-Zhe?

Yufeng-Zhe frowns as she studies Mo Xuanyu’s slack-jawed expression. “I guess you recognize me,” she mutters, which is very much fair to say.

Who hasn’t heard of Yufeng-Zhe? The Wind-Swept Maiden, the Windrider, the first disciple of the Golden God of Prosperity, she who brings the wind, she who dances with flowers, she who ushers in reconciliation and change; she who is strong, bears strength, gives strength, and never stops moving forward.

Even here, in Mo Village, stories of Yufeng-Zhe’s feats are wide and varied. Even so, nobody can get the story quite right. Some call her a young genius born with luck on her side, and others call her a divine beast in the form of a human.

With Yufeng-Zhe standing right in front of him, Mo Xuanyu thinks he understands.

She’s just a girl with an exceptionally strong will.

As Yufeng-Zhe sheathes her sword and steps closer, Mo Xuanyu has to remind himself not to flinch away. Someone as noble as her wouldn’t...wouldn’t do anything to him.

Her cloudy eyes pierce through Mo Xuanyu. There’s something strange on her face, a clashing of anger and another emotion he can’t quite decipher.

That’s not for him, is it?
Mo Xuanyu tries to shrink down as best he can. Angering the servants is one thing. Angering the vassal of a golden god would truly be his final hurrah. His life is—his life must be worth more than finding freedom by leaving the world behind. He wants there to be more, because he wants to be more, and...and...

“Your name,” says Yufeng-Zhe, startling Mo Xuanyu out of his reverie. The anger has mostly faded from her expression, leaving something gentler in its place. “It’s Mo Xuanyu, isn’t it?

His heart sinks.

Yufeng-Zhe knows, and she believes it. Why wouldn’t she? It’s just...it’s just so exhausting, trying to deny what everyone already believes. It’s better just to work with it.

So Mo Xuanyu keeps his eyes on the ground. He nods, a sharp jerk of the head.

Yufeng-Zhe huffs to herself. “I guess that snake can say something useful once in a while.”

That snake?

“Um,” Mo Xuanyu blurts out, immediately cursing his awful, awful mouth, “if you know who I am, and if you know what—I’ve done, why...what is it you want with me?”

Yufeng-Zhe’s cloudy eyes are more honest than anything Mo Xuanyu has ever seen. Despite her short stature, her presence is so incredibly heavy. The crystal bell hanging by her waist chimes with an ethereal song, pleasant and peaceful. “What I want with you,” she repeats slowly, as if testing the words.

Mo Xuanyu wrings his hands together. There’s no reason for a cultivator as noble as Yufeng-Zhe to seek out someone as lowly as himself.

“I don’t want anything from you.” Yufeng-Zhe crosses her arms and frowns. The way she frowns is so different from the sneers and the glares everyone else throws his way. The displeasure on her features is directed inward, at herself, and Mo Xuanyu can’t even begin to understand why. “I heard that Jin Guangyao is a piece of shit. I also heard that he did you wrong. We’re not about to let a
coward like him get away with everything he’s done, and we’re sure as hell not going to let everyone he’s hurt suffer for the rest of their lives.”

That’s—

She—

How—

How does she know?

“You—” The words won’t come. He doesn’t know how to say them. “But you—you shouldn’t—”

“I shouldn’t know.” Yufeng-Zhe’s displeasure darkens and darkens until she’s levelling a gaze as sharp as a knife at someone unseen. “Of course I shouldn’t know! That pompous bastard really did a good job of killing everyone who saw into his gaping hole of a heart.”

He did. He really did. Mo Xuanyu hates it.

It was so nice before everything. Being able to call one of the most renowned cultivators of the generation your brother was nice, but the fact that Mo Xuanyu finally had someone he could call family without shying away was something precious and irreplaceable.

To have someone who saw worth in you, who trusted you with secrets no one else was privy to, until those secrets became sharp and deadly and smelled of old blood; to have family, even for as short and fleeting a time as those broken, jaded pieces rested in Mo Xuanyu’s hands, was something special.

(I had a heart and you didn’t.

You turned the entire world against me.

I hate you for it, I hate myself for it, but why—why—why—
Why do I still want you to acknowledge me as something greater than the fate you forced upon me?

“I’m not sure how much you know, but I can tell you know plenty.” Yufeng-Zhe’s expression softens as much as it can. She sighs, then gently places a hand on Mo Xuanyu’s arm. To his own surprise, he doesn’t flinch away. “I know it hurts, and it isn’t fair.”

Her grip tightens around his arm. It’s warm. It’s firm. It doesn’t hurt. It simply says, *don’t go away just yet.*

And Mo Xuanyu can’t. Is it because of this unyielding girl, or is this what he wants?

What does he really want?

Has he ever bothered to ask himself?

Six years. It’s been six years since he’s been named the disgrace of the Lanling Jin Sect, chased out of that small, golden world he so foolishly called his home. It’s been six years since his half-brother smiled at him and plunged a dagger into his gut.

Since then, this big, empty house has been his life and his prison. Ah, but it’s not fair to call it a prison. Perhaps someone else threw him in here and locked the door, but the key’s been in his hands the entire time.

His hands smell of ink that never dries. He writes and he writes and he writes and he doesn’t know why.

There’s nowhere for him to go. At least, here, he belongs somewhere. He has a purpose to be hated, and even though it’s painful, it means that he’s alive for a reason.

(Somewhere in those six years, I suddenly realized that I don’t have a place I want to go.

Even so—
It wasn’t that I wanted to go somewhere, but rather that I just wanted to end up going somewhere.

If I can get there, then everything should be alright.

If I can get there...

If I can just get there...

If I don’t have too much hope, if I can just accept emptiness, if I can just stop thinking...

Then this is the goal.

So here I am.

And so there was no more. No more reason to forge ahead. Not a single reason left at all.)

“We’re moving against Jin Guangyao,” Yufeng-Zhe declares. Her glassy eyes burn with an unwavering determination worthy of her namesake. “He’s gotten away with more than any of us can accept. He’s lying to the world, and there’s no way we’re letting his filthy mouth lead to the deaths of even more people!”

There’s no fear at all in her words, no hesitation. Just unbridled anger against what she believes is unjust.

Mo Xuanyu knows it’s unjust. People have died. People have been hurt. Lives have been taken and ruined forever.

So he breathes. In, out, and over again. Like usual. Like always.

“You want me to...fight against Jin Guangyao?”
The thought of facing him again—the thought of losing even more—it’s—

“As I said, I don’t want you to do anything. It’s your decision.” Yufeng-Zhe crosses her arms. All she’s doing is standing in from of him, speaking words that make all the sense in the world, yet it feels like she’s doing so much more. When she stands, she stands her ground, and when she speaks, she demands that choices be made.

While Mo Xuanyu stands at this sad, pathetic goal he’s created for himself, Yufeng-Zhe never stops moving forward. The wind at her feet runs wild and free, ripping apart the illusions he’s written for himself.

The stories couldn’t be more accurate. Unparalleled strength, an unbreakable will, unmatched determination, anything and everything; that’s what this girl-turned-vassal has. She makes it sound so easy. She makes it look so easy. She’s a fighter, a warrior, but before that, she’s human. That’s what makes it so incredible.

Yufeng-Zhe stares into Mo Xuanyu’s eyes. Her expression reveals some sort of emotion, but it’s so foreign that he can’t hope to identify it. “Whether or not you want to fight is up to you. For me, I just want to talk, get your story, see if we can put some pieces together.”

Two firm steps even closer, and a finger pointed at his chest. He can almost feel Yufeng-Zhe’s steady breaths, a whirling tempest contained in a mortal form, and it makes him dizzy.

“But you’re different!” There it is: the raging winds that sweep away everything. Yufeng-Zhe holds on tight, and in doing so, brings Mo Xuanyu along with her. “You have a choice to make. And the question isn’t if you should fight against Jin Guangyao or not! Instead, ask yourself what you really want! Will you leave this place behind or stay here for the rest of your life until something takes it away from you?”

Ah, but...

He doesn’t know how to answer that question.

If he knew, he’d be gone already. Or perhaps he’d turn away and continue to sleep.
Fire burns in Yufeng-Zhe’s eyes. They’re cloudy but so unbearably clear, and Mo Xuanyu doesn’t know what to think.

As much as he wants to turn away, he can’t. Doing so would be repeating what he’s been doing for years. He hasn’t been running away, but all he’s been doing is finding reasons not to move. Backward, forward, it doesn’t matter.

Right now, as he is, all Mo Xuanyu is, all he has to show for himself is a goal with no meaning and the broken pieces of something that once was in his hands.

Through the open door, a breeze billows through. It hums, sings gently, picks up the pages Mo Xuanyu has spent years writing and sends them into disarray.

Black on white falls around them, and Mo Xuanyu can’t bring himself to pay attention to it. The answer Yufeng-Zhe demanded from him rests on his tongue, and he doesn’t even know if he’ll ever be able to live it.

“I want to leave,” he says, feeling something move within him. His throat feels tight and something inside him wants to escape. This barren, cold house is nothing but a sea of trees, and Mo Xuanyu has spent so long tangled in this overwhelming something, the possibility of what could be. All this time, he’s been slowly choked by something entirely and utterly silent. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Is it right, to say those words?

Yufeng-Zhe breaks into a wide grin. She releases her grip on Mo Xuanyu’s arm and steps back, her arms spread wide. “Then that’s it, right? That’s the answer. That’s your choice.”

Well, it doesn’t matter all too much.

He wants to go somewhere. If that’s not possible, he simply wants to go away from here. Everything else can come afterward.
Like the whirlwind she is, Yufeng-Zhe begins to walk around, picking up the papers that’ve been scattered like fallen leaves. “Let’s go, then.” She frowns when she reads over Mo Xuanyu’s writings. “Huh. So you’re researching cultivation? I guess there really isn’t much you can do here.”

“Um, they’re not all that interesting.” Mo Xuanyu mutters, rushing to help. “Most of it’s based off of what I read back when I—” The words fumble over themselves, but he pushes onward. In the face of the storm, he doesn’t want to be left behind, not when the storm is what will lead him to somewhere new. “It’s based off what I read when I was with the Lanling Jin Sect.”

As Yufeng-Zhe continues to scan over the pages, her eyes widen, bit by bit. “Whose works did you read while you were there?”

Mo Xuanyu hesitates. A vassal of the Golden God of Prosperity couldn’t possibly understand, but he won’t lie to her. “I...I mainly read the Yiling Patriarch’s writings.”

Yufeng-Zhe is silent. Her eyes are wide with shock, an emotion he hasn’t seen on her young features yet, but one that’s just as vivid as the rest. She looks up at Mo Xuanyu with that unfaltering gaze, and it takes an incredible amount of will not to look away. “The Yiling Patriarch’s—weren’t they destroyed?”

“Um, the Lanling Jin Sect recovered most of his belongings. His writings, his tools, his sword, most of what he brought with him to the Burial Mounds.”

The following silence is laden with unspoken words.

Yufeng-Zhe takes a breath. The papers in her hands crinkle under her grip, and she puts them down on the table. “His dizi. Chenqing. Is it with the Lanling Jin Sect, too?”

“Chenqing?”

Mo Xuanyu has always found the Yiling Patriarch to be strange. Not in the way that everyone says—not insane, cruel, and cold, but rather whimsical.

It’s undoubtedly an uncommon opinion. A man who, without even drawing a weapon, killed thousands of people and turned the entire cultivation world against him, only to meet his end at his own hands... it’s almost unthinkable to even use the word whimsical to describe a so-called monster.
But Mo Xuanyu doesn’t think it’s quite right.

A man like the Yiling Patriarch, who had nothing to gain and everything to lose, would have no reason to lie.

His writings on demonic cultivation were ingenious, of course, but they weren’t the ramblings of a madman. Whenever the days were hard, or whenever Mo Xuanyu found it difficult to breathe, he’d find a little joy in reading over flame-licked pages decorated with drawings of rabbits and reminders to buy more potatoes.

Sometime in the past, a boy who named his sword Suibian existed. Perhaps he died, or perhaps he simply grew up. The man who named his dizi Chenqing couldn’t have been the same person.

Somewhere along the way, he began to care. Or—no. Perhaps he always cared. Somewhere along the way, everything he cared about shattered in his hands.

“I think the Yunmeng Jiang Sect took Chenqing,” Mo Xuanyu says. He wrings his hands again, squeezing the skin between his fingers. “Although nobody’s ever asked Sandu Shengshou. He doesn’t take well to demonic cultivators, and even the slightest mention of the Yiling Patriarch infuriates him.”

“Oh?”

That’s not a good tone. That’s a very bad tone.

Mo Xuanyu’s eyes creep up to gaze at Yufeng-Zhe, and he immediately feels like he’s unearthed something that should’ve stayed dead and decaying.

Yufeng-Zhe laughs. It’s something far too deep and archaic for a girl of her size to be able to physically produce, echoing deep and resounding far. Mo Xuanyu feels a few years shave off his lifespan.
“That repressed idiot had even more he was hiding, did he?” Something terrifying glints in her eyes, and Mo Xuanyu fights desperately against his sense of self-preservation telling him to flee. “That’s brave of him. Be true to yourself, I said. Rely on others, I said. I guess he really is stupid!”

With a smile that promises bloodshed in the near future, Yufeng-Zhe brings her hands together. A horrible series of small cracks accompanies the stretch of her palms.

“Mo Xuanyu, I appreciate your help,” Yufeng-Zhe sings more than says, a dark smile pulling at the corners of her lips. “Turns out I didn’t hit that dumbass hard enough last time. That’s alright.” Her lips curl into something dangerous, and oh no, absolutely not, that’s not a smile anymore, that’s a predator baring her teeth, ready to rip out the throats of anyone who looks her way. “I’ll just have to knock his entire head off this time. If I lop it all off, he’ll die with the knowledge that he’s the most emotionally crippled idiot to ever have the misfortune of being born.”

This conversation has taken a very strange turn very quickly, leaving Mo Xuanyu shaking and terrified for his life.

Yufeng-Zhe knows Sandu Shengshou? Not only that, but she knows him well enough to speak so casually of him? Why is she making death threats? Why does she talk like she’s already made those threats to Sandu Shengshou? Why, oh why does she talk like she’s already acted on those threats?

With a frustrated sigh, Yufeng-Zhe massages her temples. Her brows are furrowed when she finally returns to look at Mo Xuanyu. “That’s one more on the list of things to do when we visit Lotus Pier again. Do you want to come?”

The question is so abrupt that Mo Xuanyu’s words trip over silence. “I—you want—”

“I don’t want anything,” Yufeng-Zhe repeats for the third time. Despite Mo Xuanyu’s incompetence, she grins, leveling the brilliance of her kaleidoscopic emotions at him. It’s blinding, it’s confusing, it’s amazing, and it’s everything at once. “I’m asking what you want. If you have nowhere else to go, why don’t you come with us?”

But that’s...

Why?
Yufeng-Zhe doesn’t know him at all. She says she’s heard what happened, what really happened, but why would someone as noble and as powerful as her even consider reaching out to Mo Xuanyu?

Every opportunity that’s been presented to him has been crushed to nothing. He’s squandered every chance. If there’s one thing in this life he’s proven, it’s that as he is now, all that he’ll ever amount to is nothing.

As if hearing every single one of Mo Xuanyu’s thoughts, Yufeng-Zhe’s eyes soften ever so slightly. The long strands of her hair billow gently with the wind, and the morning light paints her green robes in a gentle hue of gold. “Are you scared?”

It’s another question Mo Xuanyu doesn’t know how to answer. He parts his lips to speak, to say anything at all, and finds the grip of silence pressing against his throat, squeezing tighter and tighter.

For a moment, Yufeng-Zhe peers into his eyes. Mo Xuanyu isn’t sure if she finds what she’s looking for, but she holds out her hands toward him, almost as if she’s receiving something precious.

Oh.

She’s—she’s waiting, isn’t she?

Mo Xuanyu raises his shaking hands. It’s not so cold anymore, but his hands still tremble.

He hesitates, but lays his palms against Yufeng-Zhe’s. Her hands are warm. They’re calloused, yet they’re more gentle than any touch Mo Xuanyu has ever been given.

The vassal smiles. She doesn’t know Mo Xuanyu, not at all, but even so, she looks at him like he’s her equal, and he doesn’t know how to feel, what to think, because the last person to reach out to him with a smile didn’t have a fraction of the warmth that Yufeng-Zhe carries so easily in her eyes, in her smile, in her hands.

(Is this...what kindness really looks like?)

Mo Xuanyu really is a fool.
Yufeng-Zhe runs her thumbs over Mo Xuanyu’s hands. “It’s okay to be scared. What’ll happen if you leave? Is it safer here? Is what you really want out there?” Every one of her words speaks of stories Mo Xuanyu doesn’t understand. “They’re all perfectly good questions. What’s the guarantee you’ll find your place? It’s scary, right?”

There’s nothing Mo Xuanyu can say. He doesn’t need to say anything in front of this strange, miraculous girl, who shines like she has stars in her eyes.

“Fear and loneliness are vital human emotions, I think. Having the courage to reach your hands out to new worlds because of loneliness and hurt, we grow our little worlds bit by bit.” Yufeng-Zhe raises her hands, and in doing so, cups Mo Xuanyu’s and brings it up to his eyes, as if to say, see? “They say the world isn’t kind. I’m not going to go and say it isn’t, but if the world isn’t kind, then why don’t you go out there and find a world that is kind?”

Mo Xuanyu...feels something unfold inside him.

It’s hard to describe. It isn’t the birth of something new, and it isn’t the death of something old. It’s a strange something that’s been there for a long time yet is still so new to him. He’s been protecting it all this time, and he didn’t even know.

It’s warm. He doesn’t know what it is, but it’s so, so warm.

This is a chance, isn’t it? It’s a chance that he needs to take. If he doesn’t, he’ll be trapped here forever. And even if he should find a way to leave later on, every step of whatever journey he takes next will be laden with the reminder that you ran away, you ran away, you had all the kindness in the world in your hands and you threw it away.

(Is it a mistake to trust so readily?)

It’s always been like this. At the end of everything, when nothing’s left, someone will reach out to him.

He reaches back. It’s always his fault. He trusts too easily. When that trust is broken, it’s his fault. He’s the fool.
And yet—

And yet—

Cloudy eyes, a short stature, a legacy of strength, hands that reach out to anyone and everyone because kindness isn’t just a weapon, it’s a gift—

Ah.

He’ll always be a fool."

For himself. That’s who he needs to move on from and for. The Mo Xuanyu of the past, dressed in robes that didn’t fit and a peony that wasn’t his, and the Mo Xuanyu of the future, who he hasn’t met and will never meet.

He can’t—he can’t let them be the same person. If they are, then it’ll be as if he never lived at all.

So he breathes and looks Yufeng-Zhe in the eye. The words elude him, always just a little out of his reach. Instead, he tries on a smile, something small, something nervous, but...it’s there. And it’s good enough.

Yufeng-Zhe beams. Mo Xuanyu hasn’t said a word, but she can read him so clearly. Why? How? “What do you say? You’ll be safe with us. We’re pretty hospitable, being the ragtag group of nobodies and everybodies we are!”

She releases Mo Xuanyu’s hands, and for a moment, he finds himself seeking something he can’t see.

“We’ve got a god on board, so you don’t have to worry about money, and we also have a cook too, so you don’t have to worry about food.” Yufeng-Zhe sighs, a noise that’s only superficially exasperated.

She can’t quite disguise the gentle humour or fondness that creeps into her voice and onto her lips.
“And we’ve all seen the best and worst of humanity. Some of us have been the worst, but they’re trying to be their best. I’ve been with Fuxing for four years now, and a lot has changed. And just so you know, I may be short, but I’m already twenty, alright? That’s, what, only four years younger than you!”

Mo Xuanyu swears he sees the sword by Yufeng-Zhe’s side shiver. When he looks down, it’s perfectly still.

The ebony sheen whispers something he doesn’t understand.

Following his gaze, Yufeng-Zhe looks down at her sword. She looks up again, then down, and finally up once more. With an odd lilt to her voice, she asks, “Can you hear him?”

Hear who?

“I...I don’t think so,” is the answer Mo Xuanyu decides on. He tries not to fidget under Yufeng-Zhe’s scrutiny.

“Huh,” says Yufeng-Zhe. She leaves her gaze on Mo Xuanyu for a little longer, then smiles. That’s the thing about her: one moment, she’ll roar like a storm, and the next, she’ll ebb like the tide. “Well, whatever.” Yufeng-Zhe nudges him gently. “So? What do you say? If you don’t have a place to go, we can find you one.”

It’s incredible, unbelievable, almost, how quickly Mo Xuanyu’s small, quiet world has been cracked open.

“I’ll go with you.”

Ah, that’s—

That’s his voice.
His own words echo endlessly through his mind, resounding loud and clear for the first time in six years. Mo Xuanyu feels like crying and he doesn’t know why.

Yufeng-Zhe simply nods her head. The brilliance of her smile is almost blinding in the way it reaches every part of her person; the corners of her eyes crinkle, her shoulders rise, and her hands move to secure the future she’s set into motion. “Great! Then it’s nice to meet you, Mo Xuanyu!”

Mo Xuanyu feels faint when Yufeng-Zhe bows to him. In a flailing mess of limbs, he splutters helplessly. Why—why is she bowing? Why is a vassal bowing to someone like him? “Y-you don’t need to bow, Yufeng-Zhe, not to me, it’s—”

“If you want to call me by any name, I prefer A-Qing,” says Yufeng-Zhe, moving to gather the books and brushes scattered around the room. She says it so casually that it’s almost horrifying, because there is no way in hell, heaven, or whatever great beyond awaits Mo Xuanyu once his feeble heart succumbs to Yufeng-Zhe’s blatant disregard for formality that he’s calling the first disciple of the Golden God of Prosperity A-Qing.

No, absolutely not, it just doesn’t work like that! Not at all, not even a little bit.

It’s apparent Yufeng-Zhe can see Mo Xuanyu’s face explode into red, because she huffs as she hands him a pouch. He fumbles with it. “Guess not. Then you can call me Wei Chengfeng. That’s okay, right?”

No, it isn’t, it really isn’t!

“I don’t think I can do that,” Mo Xuanyu says lightly, feeling his soul slowly tug away from his body. “I don’t...I shouldn’t...”

“Then Yufeng-Zhe it is.” The vassal shrugs, dropping a few books into the pouch, and oh, it’s a qiankun pouch. That’s nice. “It doesn’t make a huge different to me, anyway. A-Qing is Wei Chengfeng, and Wei Chengfeng is Yufeng-Zhe.” A few brushes disappear into the void within the bag, followed by more books, a couple of loose pages, and some half-finished and very half-baked talismans that make Yufeng-Zhe’s expression change into one of curiosity, hey, wait a second.

Mo Xuanyu stands there helplessly as Yufeng-Zhe traces over one of his talismans with her fingers.
“It’s square,” says the vassal.

“It is,” Mo Xuanyu mumbles.

“I’ve never seen something like this before.” Yufeng-Zhe’s brows furrow and her fingers move in peculiar ways, almost as if she’s writing something in her mind. “Not characters, but symbols instead. What’s the circle for?”

Everyone called his research the ramblings of a madman, and recently, he’s beginning to agree. But Yufeng-Zhe’s eyes sparkle with genuine curiosity, and it makes Mo Xuanyu feel warm inside, like he’s stuffed within cotton.

Here goes nothing.

Mo Xuanyu composes himself to the best of his ability. “Um,” he says, his hands clenching into tight fists, “the circle represents the flow of life and the cyclical pattern of nature. Life, death, and rebirth. It’s—it’s a conduit for energy.”

“A conduit for energy,” Yufeng-Zhe repeats. Her eyes widen. “Not for your own energy, but for the energy of nature?”

She...understood?

She understood!

While Mo Xuanyu is preoccupied mulling over the fact that someone is acknowledging his work for the first time and not attacking him or tearing his research to shreds, Yufeng-Zhe mutters under her breath, one hand holding the talisman, the other tracing furiously in the air.

“Oh, wow!”

Yufeng-Zhe stops. She turns the full force of her gaze to Mo Xuanyu. Mo Xuanyu immediately freezes.
“You’re incredible,” the vassal suddenly says. “If you actually manage to manipulate the five elements—or, even crazier, if you actually figure out a way to harness the flow of nature, then you’d be doing the unprecedented! You’d revolutionize cultivation! Would it even be called cultivation anymore? That’s crazy!”

The admiration in Yufeng-Zhe’s eyes makes him want to dig a hole and just lie in there. It makes him feel weird and tingly and he doesn’t know why, but someone listened, and they understood so quickly, and they believe he’ll actually be able to go somewhere with it.

“Let’s finish packing your belongings,” Yufeng-Zhe says, tossing another pouch at Mo Xuanyu. “Clothes, personal items, research, whatever you want to bring, feel free to pack it.”

Impatience crossed with excitement seeps into Yufeng-Zhe’s voice. She moves about one room while Mo Xuanyu folds his robes as quickly as possible, taken in by the vassal’s contagious emotions.

It’s almost unreal to think back on the night before, when it was so cold and he was so prepared to simply sink into nothing.

But the morning sun has risen, and with it, a storm has swept into the village, wearing green robes and gold flowers, and Mo Xuanyu has been entirely and utterly torn apart.

He meets Yufeng-Zhe outside once he’s done. The vassal peers up at him. “All set to go?”

Mo Xuanyu nods. “I’m done.”

“Okay,” Yufeng-Zhe simply says, grabbing Mo Xuanyu’s sleeve and tugging him forward, forward, forward. He stumbles for the first few steps, then finds his footing. “Time to meet the others! Fuxing’s going to love you, with how you both love alternative methods of cultivation and everything.”

Okay, that’s good, except Fuxing’s going to what?

Fuxing, one of the revered Sanxing, the Golden God of Prosperity, the merciful deity descended
from the heavens, the saviour of mortals, a miracle incarnate, is going to—is going to—

But that doesn’t—it just doesn’t—why would a god be interested in Mo Xuanyu’s baseless theories? Well, they aren’t exactly baseless, since the Yiling Patriarch proved it was possible to harness stagnant resentful energy, so it should be possible to employ similar methods to the five elements, which are so abundant but much more difficult to understand, and wait, that isn’t the point!

Mo Xuanyu feels dizzy, and this time, he knows why. “You’re taking me to meet the revered Fuxing? Now?”

“Well, yeah,” Yufeng-Zhe answers, a single eyebrow raised. “And maybe a few others. It’ll be okay. They’re a great bunch of people!” An ominous twitch makes its way onto her face. “And by that, I mean they’re smart and powerful. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t know love if it stabbed them in the gut and kept stabbing until they died, came back to life, and died again.”

Mo Xuanyu glances nervously at the sword by her side and how her fingers keep twitching toward the hilt. “That’s, um, nice.”

Yufeng-Zhe smiles darkly, and Mo Xuanyu immediately feels like she’s about to walk up to the nearest tree and punch it to splinters with her bare hands. “Oh, it’s nice. It’s so nice. I love love. I love dealing with man-children. It’s the best. It’s the greatest.”

For a vassal of a god of prosperity, Yufeng-Zhe can certainly look very demonic sometimes.

“You said you travel around a lot,” Mo Xuanyu blurts out, partly out of curiosity, mostly to change the topic. “I-I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but where are you trying to go?”

Yufeng-Zhe looks back at him with a frown. “Where? I mean, we don’t really have a set destination. We just roam.”

That’s...interesting.

For a god to stay for so long in the mortal realm is already strange, but for a god, his vassals, and his allies to simply wander around in search of chaos is a little peculiar and very human.
Mo Xuanyu isn’t sure what to do with that information.

“It’s a good thing we travel, otherwise we would’ve never gotten wind of Jin Guangyao’s scheming.” Yufeng-Zhe sneers, and her grip tightens on Mo Xuanyu’s sleeve. “He’s a real piece of work, killing his own sworn brother and chopping him into pieces.” Though Yufeng-Zhe’s words are cold, she looks at Mo Xuanyu with respect and—and something akin to pride? What? Why? “You did good to make it here.”

Right.

At least...at least he’s here.

He’s here, and that’s okay.

There’s so much he hasn’t seen, and he gets to see it now. It’s okay, because he’s here, he’s breathing, and life has just begun.

(That cold, empty house can stay as it is.

Nobody will ever live in it again.

Needless to say,

He doesn’t look back.)

As they make their way out of the Mo manor and through town, a familiar wave of nausea slowly begins to sweep over Mo Xuanyu. It’s a deep, festering thing that digs its claws in slowly. Every passing second hurts more and more, his breath is lost on a life he left behind, and he can’t feel his fingers.

Yufeng-Zhe glances up at him. Her expression hardens resolutely, and she moves to hold his hand. “We’re almost there,” she says, her steps falling a little faster. When the townspeople begin to throw glances their way, she fires back a burning glare that sends them fleeing. “I can’t wait until we leave. This village is poison.”
“It isn’t their fault,” Mo Xuan tries to argue. His hand tightens around Yufeng-Zhe’s, his eyes trail the ground beneath him as if it’ll show him the way forward, and he feels as if he’s drowning. “They don’t know any better. It’s—it’s just how things turned out.”

Yufeng-Zhe takes a deep breath. Holds it. Releases it slowly.

For once, she stays silent. Yet she keeps walking forward, treading a path for Mo Xuanyu to follow.

There’s nothing you can say to something you know is the undeniable truth.

There’s a hum in his head that won’t go away; through his chest, to his fingers, it’s a heavy rain that drowns out everything. It’s a gentle lapping in his ears that roars like a torrent and escapes out to the sea that is his thoughts, returns, leaves, and repeats. Around him, the townsfolk whisper vitriolic nothings, their lips moving and eyes narrowing in complete silence.

The sound of Yufeng-Zhe’s footsteps thud against the road. Each step is a string pulled tight and released, breaking apart the cacophony in his head, battling against the rain.

*Clack.*

*Clack.*

*Clack.*

Everything that is isn’t, his head hurts, something’s pressing against his chest, and he’s free.

Mo Village isn’t particularly large. It hasn’t grown much in the past few years. It’s stagnant, a little pocket of the world repeating the same days over and over again. Nothing changes, nothing is new, and yet Mo Xuanyu has never felt more out of place.

The memories he has of these worn, dusty streets are distant. Running from shop to shop, laughing without any understanding of how heavy the burden of expectation was, only to leave with whispers
following behind him and return with the scorn of his entire world awaiting him.

It’s no surprise that the memories of what once was are so much brighter than the images reflected in his eyes now.

He can’t look anyone in the eye. He doesn’t get to. Yufeng-Zhe wards them all off with her head held high and the crystal bell at her waist chiming clear, resonating notes.

It’s so—

(“Are you okay?”)

It’s so easy—

(“Keep it up. We’re almost there.”)

It’s so easy to get lost out here.

(“Seriously, where did he—hey! Hey! Fuxing!”)

It really is hard to walk a new path when the ruins of what you’ve destroyed are always behind you.

(“Oh, A-Qing! Welcome back.”)

Welcome back. That’s such a warm phrase. It means you belong somewhere, and you’ll always have someplace to return to, because there will be someone there to welcome you home.

(“Where’d you run off to? If I can’t find you, how do you expect Daozhang to?”)

(“You always find me. Who’s this?”)
There’s something in the air. It’s dense, not heavy, as if he’s moving through water. It’s hard to hear, it’s hard to move, it’s hard to breathe, but here he is, stumbling after those who cut through the haze and seek out what lies beyond the storm.

He’s—

(“The servants didn’t put up much of a fight. I didn’t tell them much, and frankly, I don’t care.”)

(“If they come after us, they can speak to me. That should be an interesting conversation.”)

(“Ha! They’d be too busy cutting off their own tongues.”)

(“Is...he alright?”)

(“Oh. He’s had a rough day. Uh, he’s had a rough couple of years, from what I heard. The sooner we leave this place, the better.”)

(“A-Qing. You should go look for Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen.”)

(“Huh? Now? Well...okay. Don’t go too far!”)

(“I never do.”)

(“Uh-huh. Sure. Anyway, see you soon, Mo Xuanyu! Fuxing isn’t as scary as he looks, I promise. If he does anything stupid, tell me, and I’ll take care of him. I’m off, then.”)

(“Don’t take too long.”)
Yufeng-Zhe’s light steps echo in his mind. Each one fades, and fades, and fades, until the smell of rain gives way to something new.

Mo Xuanyu lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. It shakes, trembles, and stutters in an attempt to escape his body. He feels empty, like the storm that swept through so furiously and so quickly took everything with it.

He feels—

He’s—

“Mo Xuanyu?”

He’s here.

He’s here.

(Then why don’t you act like it, you idiot?)

The world snaps back into place, everything flings itself right in an instant, colours burst to life like he’s opened his eyes for the very first time, sound roars in his ears in a cacophony of nonsense, and—

The stars whirl and pass in front of his very eyes. They shine, they dance, and they move on, all while a hand raises to gently cup Mo Xuanyu’s cheek.

Ah.

It’s warm, this is what he wants, what he’s searching for.

“Are you alright?”
There’s a man with long ebony hair and a weimao with a golden veil before him. He smells of flowers, a perfect and beautiful embodiment of everything worth living for. Black and white robes fall down his shoulders, guiding silver peonies down his arms and his sleeves.

He’s beautiful, otherworldly, unlike anyone Mo Xuanyu has ever seen, and there’s nothing Mo Xuanyu can do except marvel at star-dotted eyes that carry so much weight yet so much kindness.

The hand lingers for a little longer, then moves to tuck a strand of Mo Xuanyu’s stupid, unruly hair behind his ear.

The god smiles. It’s a radiant, gorgeous thing, and oh, the stories really were right, the revered Fuxing really is beautiful beyond measure, he’s perfect in every way, and Mo Xuanyu can feel his traitorous face flushing red all the way too his ears, oh no, time to lie down and return to the earth, he’s made a fool of himself already and he hasn’t even spoken—

A clap of laughter cuts his thoughts in half. He freezes, his eyes blown wide, as Fuxing pulls his hand back. “There we are. Good morning, Mo Xuanyu. I hope A-Qing didn’t make things too difficult for you.”

Wind billows by, dragging loose leaves through the trees, and oh, they’re already on the outskirts of the village, how did Mo Xuanyu blindly follow Yufeng-Zhe through all of Mo Village with half a mind to spare?

“Mo Xuanyu?”

He’s so stupid, what is he doing, why is he still trying to run away from problems he’s already escaped?

With his eyes averted to the ground, Mo Xuanyu bows, knowing very well how disheveled and awful he must look. It’s shameful, but at least he’s used to it by now. “I—your divine lordship, I beg your forgiveness. This undeserving servant has—has taken advantage of your noble quest.”

“Gods exist to be taken advantage of,” says Fuxing, still smiling, as if it makes anything better. Why is he smiling? What’s there to smile about? “We serve the world. It’s my responsibility to ensure that you all live as wildly and as freely as possible.”
Mo Xuanyu hasn’t been doing that all. He must be such a failure, wasting all the opportunities to live the life Fuxing says that all people should be living.

Yufeng-Zhe isn’t back yet, but Mo Xuanyu hopes she returns quickly. The kindness in Fuxing’s eyes and hands is undeniable, the physical manifestation of a miracle, but Mo Xuanyu feels very small and very wrong in the presence of someone who’s so unbelievably right.

But she isn’t back, so Mo Xuanyu stands as far away from Fuxing as possible in order to be within his presence but not necessarily within his reach. He tries to shrink down as best he can, which isn’t saying too much, since the god’s presence is already so overwhelming.

For a moment, Fuxing simply stares at Mo Xuanyu. All he’s doing is looking, but it makes Mo Xuanyu feel so heavy. He’s done something wrong, he must have, if there’s one person in this world who can squander the generosity of even the kindest of gods, it’s him—

The wind is blowing. It carries Fuxing’s voice to places Mo Xuanyu will never see.

“Come here,” says the starry-eyed god, gesturing to himself.

Maybe he sees Mo Xuanyu hesitate, or maybe he doesn’t like it when people beneath him ignore his call. Either way, the smile slides off his face and something akin to petulance takes its place, which is a thought Fuxing doesn’t need to know.

“I don’t bite,” the god huffs, hands on his hips, lips jutted out into a pout. Mo Xuanyu has to remind himself to look away. “Your hair’s all over the place. A face as beautiful as yours shouldn’t be hidden, don’t you think?”

For a moment, Mo Xuanyu just stands there.

A god—this god—the revered Golden God of Prosperity—the generous, the merciful, the divine Fuxing—he just—he just—

Beautiful?
Mo Xuanyu blushes, his ears burn, and a heat rises to his chest. He can tell because it feels like he’s just set himself on fire, which he would very much like to do. Alternatively, he could just drop dead here and now. At least the worms would appreciate him then.

The god—honorable Fuxing! Fuxing!—simply smiles, and oh, he really is pretty, isn’t he? “What’s wrong? Anyone would say you’re an attractive young man.” The god pauses, as if contemplating something. Then he steps toward Mo Xuanyu. “Your hair is remarkably similar to mine. Do you mind if I…?”

Fuxing reaches out, and Mo Xuanyu feels his face ignite. He flinches back, ashamed of his own cowardice.

Fuxing pauses. “Ah, I don’t mean to make you do something you don’t want to.”

“Not at all, of course not,” Mo Xuanyu blurts out, immediately wishing for the earth to open up and swallow him whole. He takes a deep breath and tries to brush off the dirt on his sleeves. “I mean, um, okay. It’s okay. I’m...okay with it.”

Fuxing doesn’t seem to mind the fact that Mo Xuanyu is a living, breathing, walking disaster. Instead, he steps close and runs his hand through the knotted, awful mess Mo Xuanyu has the misfortune of calling hair. With one practiced motion, Fuxing tugs the ribbon from Mo Xuanyu’s ponytail, and his hair spills out at once, tumbling haphazardly down his neck and shoulders.

The god sighs, and Mo Xuanyu feels ice run down his spine. He’s displeased Fuxing, he’s going to die, he’s going to finally leave this world—

“It must’ve been hard.”

What...what’s with that tone of voice?

There’s nothing in Fuxing’s eyes but stars. They swirl on endlessly, living and dying in an instant, dancing in ways no mortal could ever hope to understand. And through it all, he looks so kind, so quiet, so understanding.

He knows what it feels like.
He...knows what it feels like?

To be abandoned, to be martyred, to be saved.

Which one is it? What is it that fills Fuxing’s brilliant eyes with an unspoken agreement, a gentle nod, and a melancholy that’s softer than it is sad?

Fuxing’s fingers tug at the knots in Mo Xuanyu’s hair, but it doesn’t hurt. The gentle pulling grounds him and gives him something to focus on. It’s...extraordinary and stifling all at once, to have a god run his fingers through your hair, over your scalp. It’s such an intimate thing, but Fuxing moves as if he has all the love in the world to give and not enough people to accept it.

“I’ve heard some of your story. You don’t deserve everything that’s happened to you.” A firm determination draws a haze of grey into Fuxing’s eyes, but the warmth never fades. “You’ve done well to make it this far, Mo Xuanyu.”

Two hands cup his face, tilting his chin up to peer into endless pools of gold. They burn with—with that same something that makes Yufeng-Zhe’s storm roar, dragging in all whom it passes, leaving them shaking and startled but not scared.

“To receive a fate like yours is a testament to how unfair luck can be. But to make something more out of what you’ve been given is also a testament to your strength.” Lyrical: that’s what the god’s voice is. He’s singing a hymn of victory, and Mo Xuanyu is already lost in it. His thumbs trace the sensitive skin below Mo Xuanyu’s eyes. “Destiny is what it is. Whether or not it becomes something more depends on strength of will, and more importantly, strength of heart.”

Fuxing grins. It’s a bright, cheerful thing, almost childish, yet it’s heavy with the weight of the world. His hands draw back, only for one to point gently at Mo Xuanyu’s chest.

Maybe Fuxing can feel how Mo Xuanyu’s heart is beating out of his chest. His ears thud with the distant sound of each beat. His fingers feel hot, and he wrenches them together. “I...you honour me. But I’m not worry of your praise.”

I’m not strong, he doesn’t say. It doesn’t matter. Fuxing hears it anyway.
Pulling Mo Xuanyu’s hair up into a ponytail, Fuxing pulls a crimson ribbon from his hair—from his own hair—and ties it once, twice, as many times as he deems necessary. “It’s easy to see strength in others. Seeing strength in yourself is why we’re alive.” Fuxing steps back, a hand raised to his chin. “I think you’d look wonderful in longer robes. If you’d like, A-Qing can go shopping with you later.”

Why is it so easy for Fuxing to say such heavy words as if they’re nothing at all? Mo Xuanyu can’t understand. His own words won’t come; they don’t come. Sometimes they aren’t there at all.

But it’s...it’s undeniably nice, having someone to fill the silence.

He reaches up to his hair. His fingers brush the ribbon the god bestowed upon him, and his entire face flushes red like he’s one of Yufeng-Zhe’s blessed lanterns.

Of course the revered Golden God of Prosperity would be beautiful, but there’s something about the warmth behind those stars and the gentle touch of those hands that makes Mo Xuanyu’s tiny heart shred itself into pieces, and oh no, no, no, it’s time to take all those thoughts and shove them somewhere very deep and very quiet.

“Fuxing! I found them!”

Yufeng-Zhe’s voice is accompanied by a violent gust of wind that scatters flower petals from the trees in a veil of white. The vassal wears a wide grin, marching forward with purpose. Two Taoists follow a few steps behind her, swords by their sides, smiling faintly.

“That was quick,” Fuxing says. As the group approaches, he dips his head. “Sect Leader Song, Xiao Xingchen Daozhang, it’s a pleasure to meet you again.”

Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen. Two Taoists who appear to know each other very well.

Oh, hang oh, no way, there’s no way, it can’t be right, can it?

Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen?
Didn’t they go missing years ago? There were rumours that they died, or that someone killed them, but apparently the stories were all wrong, because here they are, standing tall, having founded their own cultivation sect.

Why does Fuxing know them? Why do they know Fuxing? How has Mo Xuanyu stumbled into such a complicated narrative by pure chance?

He shuffles awkwardly behind Fuxing. The god either doesn’t notice or pretends not to notice. Either way, Mo Xuanyu appreciates it greatly. It feels like he’s intruding on something he shouldn’t be.

Song Zichen—Sect Leader Song—bows, low and deep. Xiao Xingchen follows suit.

“It’s been too long,” says Sect Leader Song. There’s half a smile in his words, hinting toward some story Mo Xuanyu doesn’t know. “I had hoped to meet on more casual terms, but it seems the world insists on working you to death.”

Fuxing huffs indignantly as both Taoists rise. “I work hard, but the world works harder. Besides, dying once was enough.”

Both Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen sigh in unison, which is very worrying. Maybe it’s better if Mo Xuanyu stays as ignorant as possible, because he really doesn’t like what this conversation is implying.

“We’re sorry for dragging you into this mess,” Yufeng-Zhe apologizes sheepishly. She levels a glare at Fuxing, then kicks him in the leg. The god yelps as Yufeng-Zhe grabs a hold of one of his braids and drags him down into a bow. “You really didn’t have to come all the way from Yinhe for something like this!”

Yinhe? If Mo Xuanyu remembers correctly, that’s a city even further south than Yunmeng. To come all the way to Gusu to do anything is a bit...drastic.

Xiao Xingchen shakes his head. “We owe Fuxing more than we could ever repay. Something like this is the least we could do.”

“You’ll be antagonizing Jin Guangyao,” Yufeng-Zhe warns. “He can’t do anything to us, but his words still have an enormous amount of influence over the rest of the cultivation world.”
Oh.

So Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen are here to expose his lies to the world.

That’s—

It’s—

Mo Xuanyu breathes.

That’s fine. It’s fine. He’s the only one here who’s trapped in the past. The four before him are the ones carving out the future.

So he stands a bit taller, peeks out a little more behind Fuxing and Yufeng-Zhe. He’s here too. He said it himself: he wants to be here. He’s tired of letting time slip away from him.

“If we move carefully, Jin Guangyao won’t have the opportunity to do anything,” Sect Leader Song says. He rests one hand on his sword. It’s the exact same motion Yufeng-Zhe so frequently defaults to, which raises some interesting questions.

Fuxing hums in agreement. “Between Huaisang and Jin Guangyao, I’d bet on the former.” A flicker of irritation flashes by his eyes. “The games they play aren’t something I look kindly upon, but I believe A-Qing’s doing her best to, ah, make things right.”

Something dark crawls onto Yufeng-Zhe’s features. It’s the basic human instinct of self-preservation that shoots a shiver down Mo Xuanyu’s spine and urges him to run far, far away. “I’ll lecture him until he cries,” she hisses, eyes narrowed. “And then I’ll kick his ass with his own saber, and then he’ll really cry!”

By Huaisang, they couldn’t possibly mean Nie Huaisang, right?

Right?
Before anyone can throw in their opinions, Yufeng-Zhe jolts up. Realization crossed with panic lights up her face, and she scrambles to pull a piece of paper out of her sleeve.

“Give me a second,” she says quickly, pouring over the paper with determined fervour. “You can introduce yourself, Mo Xuanyu. Just, uh, let me...”

She trails off and doesn’t finish. With the silence comes a surge of anxiety that rages violently in his gut as three pairs of eyes move to look his way.

Fuxing simply nods, as if he’s perfectly used to this. “Well, that’s not a bad idea. You’ll be travelling with us for a while at least, so we might as well get acquainted.”

“Acquainted,” Mo Xuanyu repeats, blurtling out words like he has no control over his idiotic mouth. His hands squeeze together, his fingernails digging deep into his palms, but he forces the words out. “I mean—yes, of course. My name is Mo Xuanyu. I’ll...I’ll be imposing on you.”

He makes sure to bow long and deep. Good first impressions are wasted on him because he’ll always find a way to ruin them, but the very least he could do is try and be a good person.

Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen bow back, which is entirely unexpected but not unappreciated. People have been bowing to him all day and it’s making all the thoughts in his head crash against each other and shatter into little pieces.

Fuxing rests a hand on Mo Xuanyu’s back. He doesn’t push him forward. He simply supports him, tells him that it’s alright to stand tall, and it makes Mo Xuanyu flush. “Mo Xuanyu has a history with Jin Guangyao,” the god says, no particular inflection in his voice. “He’ll be coming with us for as long as he likes.”

Mo Xuanyu bows again. “I’ll do my best,” he promises, feeling very small among people who are all larger than life. “I...I won’t be much use in combat, but I can...”

What can he do? There must be something he can do. He’s a mess, a burning wreckage of a person, but there must be something even he can admit he’s alright at.
“I can create talismans of all sorts,” is what he decides on.

And then, of course, he immediately wants to leap into the nearby pond and stay there forever, why, why, why did he say that, what use are stupid talismans to two notable Taoists, a vassal, and a literal god?

(Ink on his hands, on his face, in his blood. He may not have much to his name, but the smell of ink and the feeling of a brush in his hands eases his heart.

*I would like to be happy before useful,* he doesn’t say. It’s too selfish. He’ll never say it.)

“Talismans?”

What’s in his voice? What’s that which lilts his voice, raises it, proves that the past really was just a facsimile?

When Mo Xuanyu looks up, expecting disdain, he’s met with—with unadulterated curiosity instead?

Fuxing leans in closer, stars swirling in his eyes like a current out of control. He beams, pride seeping into his grin with no clear rhyme or reason. “I never thought I’d meet another cultivator who appreciates the art of creating talismans! They’re wonderful, aren’t they? What sort do you study? What do you prefer to use them for?”

He—but that isn’t—it’s not—

“Creating talismans is a difficult art to master,” Xiao Xingchen says, nodding a little. “Most cultivators will only learn how to draw basic exorcism talismans.”

Sect Leader Song nods along, as if musing over something. “A sword can only do so much. Talismans are especially important to cultivators who lack the means to forge a sword of their own.”

It’s not anything special. Not even a little. All Mo Xuanyu can do is read and write and draw. His hands bleed, shake, and hesitate. He’s not—why is Fuxing grabbing his hands, what is going on—
“You studied with the Lanling Jin Sect for a while,” says the god, his words eager and quick. “Their library isn’t as impressive as the Gusu Lan Sect’s, but surely you picked up on some inside knowledge. What do you think about their arrays? Too much gold and splendor, right?”

The Lanling Jin Sect, arrays, gold, splendor, oh, he can answer this question. “Y-yes, I think they’re too costly. They...don’t have the best understanding of how to draw qi from sources outside of golden cores.”

Of course, money isn’t an issue for the Lanling Jin Sect. But it’s the main barrier between other cultivators and higher grounds, which of course means it’s a point of interest, and hang on, this is veering violently off topic, and this time, it isn’t Mo Xuanyu’s fault!

“Yufeng-Zhe,” he begs helplessly, trying his very best not to make it seem like he’s trying to run away when, in fact, he very much would like to scream into his hands for the rest of his measly existence. He shuffles his feet and tries not to writhe too much, but it proves to be exceedingly difficult when there’s a god looking at you like you put the stars in his eyes. “Yufeng-Zhe, you...you said there was a chef in your ranks! Is that, um, you?”

It’s an awful and obvious method of taking the attention of off of himself, but it works. Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen exchange a look, emphasis required and fully justified.

Yufeng-Zhe peers up from the paper, leveling the most unimpressed expression Mo Xuanyu’s ever seen at Fuxing. “I can’t cook. Fuxing once put a hole through a wok.”

That’s terrifying, but it’s a skill in and of itself. Destruction and creation walk the same road, hand-in-hand, two ends of the same circle, and wow, Mo Xuanyu is really putting in one-hundred-and-one percent trying to convince himself that’s normal divine behaviour.

Slowly, nervously, Mo Xuanyu looks up at Fuxing.

“By accident,” the god tries to amend, releasing his grip on Mo Xuanyu’s hands, only to loop an arm around Mo Xuanyu shoulders, which means it’s time to wake up from this fever dream, because he’s completely and utterly lost as to what’s going on anymore. “Nobody can appreciate my taste in food, unfortunately.”

“Your taste in food is repulsive,” Yufeng-Zhe sneers.
“I’ll second that,” says Xiao Xingchen, raising his hand.

“Third,” Sect Leader Song finishes. His lips are drawn into a tight line. “My apologies, but your cooking brings literal tears to my eyes.”

“In a good way?”

“Not quite.”

With a wail of despair, Fuxing leans his weight onto Mo Xuanyu. It’s not enough to make him stumble, but it is most certainly enough to send all the blood in his tiny body rushing to his face. “How dare you! I’ll have you know I cultivated my tongue in the finest kitchens of Yunmeng!”

Yufeng-Zhe remains unimpressed. The paper—no, letter, going by how she keeps looking down and scanning line by line—crumples under her tightening grip, then folds back as she takes a deep breath. Through gritted teeth and with impressive control, she says, “Give me a moment.”

In a snap of green robes, Yufeng-Zhe walks some paces away, leaning against a tree sitting beside the pond. She studies the letter with renewed determination, effectively abandoning Mo Xuanyu again.

He kind of wants to cry. But he won’t, because that would be mortifying.

“Anyway,” Fuxing begins once more, swinging the full force of his radiant smile around, “talismans!” He gestures at the two amused Taoists. “I’m sure Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen would be interested in your research, too.”

“Accessible methods of cultivation will help break the monopoly the four sects have held for the past eight years,” Xiao Xingchen explains, his words kind and his voice measured. It’s like he can tell that Mo Xuanyu is a hair away from combusting right there and then. Needless to say, it’s a gesture that is immensely appreciated.

Mo Xuanyu shuffles his feet. He wrings his hands in an attempt to wrestle the life out of his thumbs. He takes a breath, and then another one.
It can’t hurt to spill a little of his research, right? At worst, they’ll be a little disappointed. After all, he’s far beneath them, so they can’t be expecting much to begin with.

So he looks up. “I think,” he starts, coughing to clear his throat. “I think it’s more efficient and, um, more effective to draw on the natural energy from the surrounding environment instead of, um, golden cores.”

Silence. Nobody moves, nobody speaks. They all just stare at Mo Xuanyu.

Well then. The weather’s great today. Perfect for him to just descend to hell immediately.

Then, in a flash of movement too fast for Mo Xuanyu to follow, Fuxing spins him around and splits into a brilliant smile, all wonder and amazement, like he’s just caught the stars in his hands. He looks so beautiful, lips curved up in a declaration of his love for the world and all that exists within it.

Mo Xuanyu’s gut is at war with itself, dropping like a stone one moment, then flip-flopping like a dying fish the next. He blames Fuxing, he blames Yufeng-Zhe, and, as always, he blames himself.

“External cultivation! Why, I didn’t know there was someone out there who still researched such a thing!” That same pride sweeps back onto Fuxing’s face. “I’m so glad someone sees that energy is energy all the same.”

It’s all Mo Xuanyu can do to stay upright. “I didn’t—I’m only working off previously existing works.”

A blink, followed by a tilt of the head. It makes Mo Xuanyu’s heart clench. “Really? Whose works?”

Peering in Yufeng-Zhe’s direction has no effect. She’s still pouring over the letter, a little slowly, actually, now that Mo Xuanyu thinks about it. But she looks like she’s focusing her entire being on parsing through whatever characters are on that page, and it’d be disrespectful to ask for help again.

Looking at his feet, Mo Xuanyu steps back a little. “I wanted to study works that weren’t commonly known,” he says.
“Respectable,” says Fuxing, nodding.

“And I had...I had access to some works that only a select few knew existed.”

“Respectable,” repeats Fuxing, slower this time.

“And by works only a select few knew existed, I mean Sect Leader Yao and maybe a few others.”

“Huh,” says Fuxing. It sounds very strange coming from a god’s mouth, but today has been a very strange day. “So...”

Good thing Mo Xuanyu can’t possibly sink any lower, because it’s time to dig this hole straight to hell. “I read the Yiling Patriarch’s works,” he says. If he’s going to bleed, he might as well bleed out all at once. “Despite what everyone says, he knew far more about harnessing energy than anyone else, and his writings were supported by documented experiments, which makes them more reliable than the vast majority of popular works. That is, um, when his handwriting was legible, and he wasn’t, uh...” Mo Xuanyu winces. “Consumed by the paranoia and insanity that comes with manipulating resentful energy.”

The final works of the Yiling Patriarch weren’t as much writings as they were despair-driven ramblings. It was awful to see such a brilliant person descend slowly into madness over the course of three years, sinking deeper and deeper until something surely broke him. Yet there were moments of heart-wrenching lucidity, a final attempt to fix matters and make them right, that scattered as quickly as they came.

As expected, everyone turns blankly, sans Yufeng-Zhe. She does, however, peek up and glance around.

Mo Xuanyu prepares for—for something. To be hit, to be yelled at, any of those normal reactions, he’s already braced himself.

Despite everything, Fuxing rubs his temple and sighs. It’s a long, frustrated thing, directed toward himself, not Mo Xuanyu, which is very confusing. “Fair enough,” he mutters. “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s injecting my opinion into everything I write.”
“Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu, mostly out of reflex.

The use of first person is an interesting choice. It’s...an interesting choice...

Hm. Okay. Fuxing, Sect Leader Song, and Xiao Xingchen are all looking at him like they’re waiting for something to happen.

Oh.

Well then.

Okay, okay, okay, that's nice, that's great, that's absolutely wonderful, because it makes no sense but it sort of does and today has been a very, very long day.

Mo Xuanyu gapes.

Oh, no, no, there’s no way that’s possible, the Yiling Patriarch is done and dead, torn to shreds by his own undead army, never to return to the world, but then again, esteemed cultivators can be born as gods, can’t they?

The sound that escapes from Mo Xuanyu’s lips is far from human. In fact, he feels like a corpse himself. Maybe he already is one. Frankly, it wouldn’t make much of a difference.

Sect Leader Song frowns. “I understand that you aren’t as protective of your identity anymore, but subtlety is a very useful trait.”

“It’s fine,” says Fuxing—Fuxing? Is that even his name? “A-Qing found out in, what, half a year?” With a nudge, Fuxing-not-Fuxing grins at Mo Xuanyu. It almost knocks his soul right out of his body. “Besides, we’re research partners, aren’t we?”

Research partners?

*Research partners?*
When was this decided? Mo Xuanyu didn’t sign any contract. He didn’t agree to this. Not that he would mind being researching partners with either the Golden God of Prosperity or the Yiling Patriarch, because both would be incredible opportunities to gather experience and oh god everything is falling to pieces, Mo Xuanyu can feel the tension in his limbs evaporating from the sheer heat of his cheeks.


The Yiling Fuxingiarch beams. “Partners!”

Yufeng-Zhe isn’t helping. She isn’t helping. Why isn’t she helping? Why are Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen smiling? He’s dying. He’s dying here, and they’re all having a good time.

“I’m going to cry,” whispers Mo Xuanyu.

Fuxing-Yiling lets out a clap of laughter. “Well, it’s certainly better than running away screaming.”

He doesn’t need to know that Mo Xuanyu has considered doing so more than once over the course of this conversation.

A finger raised to his lips and a coy wink is enough to give Mo Xuanyu some serious emotional whiplash. “Now, I know this might be very overwhelming, but I go by Fuxing these days.”

“Uh-huh,” Mo Xuanyu agrees faintly.

“I’ll be happy to explain on the way,” Fuxing says.

“Uh-huh,” Mo Xuanyu repeats.

“You look a bit red,” Fuxing suddenly points out, worry blinking into his eyes. “Are you alright?”
“Uh-huh,” Mo Xuanyu blurs out by force of sheer panic, backpedalling as hard and as fast as he can. Like the fool he is, he trips over his own feet.

Fuxing reaches out and catches him by the arm. “Whoa there,” the god chirps, all too cheerful for the sheer pandemonium that’s parading down Mo Xuanyu’s tiny brain, “don’t hurt yourself.”

With one gentle tug, Fuxing pulls Mo Xuanyu close. He blinks, narrows his eyes, then raises a hand to Mo Xuanyu’s chin again and oh god there’s almost no space between them, is this allowed, go away, stupid blush, begone, demons—

Tilting Mo Xuanyu’s chin from side to side, Fuxing hums a single note of affirmation to himself.

“Uh,” Mo Xuanyu drolls like an idiot, feeling heat crawl rapidly up his neck. The wheels on this wagon have long since run off into the sunset.

“These are old bruises,” Fuxing says, a frown resting on his perfectly cut features.

Mo Xuanyu ducks his head down. They don’t hurt, but they’re proof how how weak he is. “I...yes.” In an attempt to salvage what little dignity he has left, Mo Xuanyu clenches his fists and tries on a smile. “Please don’t be worried. I—I’m very good at handling injuries.”

The frown on Fuxing’s face deepens. Even Sect Leader Song wears a severe expression, while Xiao Xingchen shakes his head. Mo Xuanyu tries to curl in on himself even further.

This has suddenly taken a turn he really doesn’t like. Between displeasing the Golden God of Prosperity or the Yiling Patriarch, he’d rather leap to his doom and just get things over with.

“Oh, no.”

Yufeng-Zhe’s voice cuts through the silence. She looks up from her letter, wide-eyed, glancing between Fuxing and the town gates behind them. If Mo Xuanyu isn’t crazy (which...is a long shot), she almost seems panicked.

“Quick question,” Yufeng-Zhe says. “How far are the Cloud Recesses from Mo Village?”
Finally, a question Mo Xuanyu can answer. “Not very,” he supplies. “Um, Gusu Lan Sect cultivators could probably make it in a day, I think.”

“Oh no,” repeats Yufeng-Zhe, with emphasis.

That isn’t a good sign. Fuxing frowns, which is actually sort of great, because it means his attention isn’t directed exclusively toward Mo Xuanyu anymore.

“Is there something wrong?” asks Xiao Xingchen.

Yufeng-Zhe folds the letter and slips it back into her sleeve. With shifty eyes, she says, “Uh. No.”

Needless to say, it isn’t very convincing.

Fuxing clearly isn’t buying it. With a raised brow, he crosses his arms. “Of course. Sure. What is it?”

Yufeng-Zhe shuffles her feet. Her fingers tap on the hilt of her sword. “So, you know how we’re on a pilgrimage of sorts?”

Mo Xuanyu didn’t know that. That’s interesting. He’s heard stories of how the glorious Fuxing travels across the land, rooting out evil and chaos, but he’s never heard of any pilgrimage. Maybe it’s a ritual of some kind?

“I do know that,” says Fuxing.

“We’ve been to Yunmeng and Lanling. Right?”

“I also remember that.”

“And we’re heading to Qinghe.”
“Shockingly, I also know that.”

“Well, okay, smartass,” Yufeng-Zhe snaps. Then she looks away, her lips pressed into a thin, determined line. “Kinda weird how you haven’t said anything about visiting Gusu.”

It’s strange, it’s undeniably weird, but Mo Xuanyu swears he sees Fuxing pale. “That’s not true,” the god lies.

Yufeng-Zhe snorts. She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t need to, because Fuxing pales even more even without provocation. Something strange creeps onto his face, right there between denial and panic.

“Hang on.” Startling realization slaps Fuxing rigid. “What’s that have to do with anything?”

Tap, tap, tap. “Well,” says Yufeng-Zhe, “I mean. Hanguang-Jun said he’d be dropping by and I forgot to tell him that we were preoccupied. So.” She looks up at the sky, as if expecting someone to just drop out of the clouds. “Guess we should expect another guest. I told him our plan, but I wasn’t going to get him involved. He’d be a big help, though.”

Sect Leader Song brightens. “Ah, so we’ll finally have a chance to meet the revered Hanguang-Jun.”

“And,” says Xiao Xingchen, giving Fuxing an amused look, “we’ll have the opportunity to introduce him to Fuxing again.”

They both chuckle, having a good laugh at whatever’s going on right now. Everything’s happening so quickly, and there’s no way Mo Xuanyu’s ever catching up.

Also, everyone here apparently knows Hanguang-Jun. That’s not too surprising, given that the four before him are all legendary names in the cultivation world, but the fact that they talk about Hanguang-Jun like he’s just another friend is confounding. And why does Yufeng-Zhe have a supposed letter from him? Are they...actually, genuinely friends?

That’s—that’s an image. It’s an image, alright. What is going on?
Fuxing looks like he’s about to pass out, which is very worrying, so Mo Xuanyu does what a good person should do and presses a hand to his back in an attempt to steady him, which is a decision he instantly regrets, because wow wow wow, Fuxing is a very healthy person.

“Great!” Mo Xuanyu blurts out, desperately trying to drive the flush from his cheeks. “Um, if we’re waiting for, ah, Hanguang-Jun, then I’d like to ask, who exactly is the chef among your companions, Yufeng-Zhe?”

Yufeng-Zhe blinks. She stops tapping on her sword. “Oh, that?” For some reason, she gives Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen a nervous glance. “Uh, he’s an interesting character.”

“Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“I mean really interesting,” Yufeng-Zhe explains.

“Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu, more hesitant this time.

With a huff, Yufeng-Zhe swings her sword off her hip and holds it out in front of her. “He kind of has two names,” she says, still giving the two Taoists strange looks.

Mo Xuanyu stares at the sword. Now that he has the chance to get a proper look, it really doesn’t seem like a sword he’d expect a vassal of a prosperous god to carry. It’s a fairly ornate thing, its hilt adorned with a red gem and folding out like black wings. The weapon seems a bit ominous, and Mo Xuanyu doesn’t really know why.

The characters on the sheath read Jiangzai.

That’s...interesting. To bring down disaster doesn’t seem too in line with Yufeng-Zhe’s righteous ways.

Even stranger, Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen’s expressions instantly darken. They eye the sword like it’s the literal embodiment of its name.
Yufeng-Zhe heaves a sigh. She grasps the hilt of the sword. “No point hiding the inevitable, I guess.”

Immediately after she speaks, Fuxing steps forward cautiously. “A-Qing, I don’t think—”

“That’s a good idea,” he doesn’t get to finish, because Yufeng-Zhe unsheathes Jiangzai with a resonating ring of metal on metal. The blade slips free, and Yufeng-Zhe studies it for a minute. She narrows her eyes. “Wake up, dumbass! Time to work.”

She’s talking to her sword. Mo Xuanyu wants to ask if she’s alright, but that would be incredibly insulting. Instead, he stands there and watches as something shimmers once, twice, three times, then snaps into form behind Yufeng-Zhe.

It’s...a teenager. An angry teenager. Specifically, an angry teenager who looks like he’s been rudely awoken from a pleasant nap. He yawns, and wow, those are some sharp canines.

He’s familiar, shockingly so, but it can’t be. He’s dead.

Despite his grumpy grogginess, he’s dressed in fairly ornate robes, with long sleeves cut like wings and swirling red patterns on black robes and oh god, he’s a sword spirit, isn’t he?

“What,” the sword spirit—Jiangzai—snaps. He throws one leg over the other and crosses his arms, floating petulantly in place. “Did Fuxing poison your food with—huh.”

Jiangzai cuts off when he sees Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen, who in turn stare at him, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. They immediately draw their swords, which is followed by Yufeng-Zhe stepping in as if to shield Jiangzai, which leads Fuxing to step beside his disciple, which obviously makes Mo Xuanyu take a good number of steps back.

“Step back, A-Qing,” Sect Leader Song commands, leveling his blade at Jiangzai. His voice is cold and flat. “I don’t know how you’re alive, or how you returned, but—”

“That was me,” Fuxing says, as if that explains anything at all.
Xiao Xingchen shoots him an incredulous look. “You brought him back? But why?”

Yufeng-Zhe looks like she’s having the headache of her life. “It’s a long story, but I swear it makes sense.”

“It really doesn’t,” Jiangzai snorts.

“Shut the fuck up,” Yufeng-Zhe snarls.

Jiangzai clamps his mouth shut and looks away, viciously displeased, but silent nonetheless.

As if remembering that Mo Xuanyu does, in fact, exist (unfortunately), Yufeng-Zhe gestures at Jiangzai dismissively. “Just so you know, his formal name is supposed to be Jiangzai, but he still goes by Xue Yang.”

That’s a familiar name. In fact, that’s a worryingly familiar name, because Mo Xuanyu remembers crossing paths with a certain Xue Yang back at Koi Tower, and okay, this is bad, this is very bad.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Mo Xuanyu half-shouts, the volume of his voice surprising himself.

Jiangzai—Xue Yang? Xue Yang rolls his eyes. “Yeah, haven’t heard that one before.”

Yufeng-Zhe turns and grabs hold of Xue Yang’s ear. She tugs hard, sending the sword spirit stumbling forward. “For the last goddamn time, can you stop being such an asshole, asshole?”

Xue Yang’s eyes flash dangerously, and a shiver runs down Mo Xuanyu’s spine. “Maybe if you stopped being such a fucking idiot, I would!”

Fuxing shakes his head as he watches this disaster unfold before him. He smiles fondly, which makes no sense at all. “Children are so lively.”

From what Mo Xuanyu can see, Xue Yang’s pulling on Yufeng-Zhe’s hair while Yufeng-Zhe has her hands locked around Xue Yang’s cheeks. They’re both yelling and screeching impressively
barbaric profanities at each other as they kick and stumble.

Even Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen appear to be at a loss for words, which is an enormous relief. Finally, someone understands.

“Is...is everything alright, Young Master?”

An unfamiliar voice just barely cuts through the yowling. When Mo Xuanyu turns, expecting a villager, he’s instead greeted by gaunt, dead eyes, grey skin, and thick, matted hair, wait a second, this is a corpse, but it’s talking and shuffling nervously, so it’s a fierce corpse, and it called Fuxing ‘Young Master’, so that means—

“It’s the Ghost General,” Mo Xuanyu rasps, abandoning the shreds of his dignity in favour of preserving his life. He stumbles behind Fuxing, reeling from all these people stumbling into his life, and please, please, someone explain what in the world is going on.

Fuxing peers back at Mo Xuanyu with a grin. Then he turns to the Ghost General. “It seems like you still have quite a reputation.”

“It’s always been like that, Young Master,” the Ghost General says miserably. He wrings his hands together, and in the darkest corners of Mo Xuanyu’s mind, something tells him it’s actually kind of endearing.

Yufeng-Zhe stumbles over, her hair a complete mess. She smiles at the Ghost General, giving him a smack on the arm. “It’s been a while, Wen Ning! How’ve you been? How’s Wen Qing-Jie?”

The Ghost General smiles back shyly. “Um, I’ve been alright. And—”

“I’ve been fine, too,” says the now fully corporeal ghost beside the Ghost General, dressed in flame-licked robes that can only belong to one decimated sect. She crosses her arms and studies the situation with a faint irritation or pride that never seems to leave her expression. “Why are we travelling as such a large group? Don’t you understand what subtlety is?”

“No,” Fuxing chirps cheerfully. “Besides, isn’t it fun? We’re all here now!”
Oh, they’re all here, alright. Everyone’s here, and Mo Xuanyu hasn’t got a single clue as to what’s happening. Everyone knows each other, and then there’s him, a failure of a person in every respect.

While he attempts to confine his meltdown to a mental one, the ghost—what was her name? Wen Qing? Right, Wen Qing, the renowned medical cultivator known for her pioneering ways, no big deal, no big deal at all—engages in a heated conversation with Fuxing. They chat comfortably despite wearing drastically different expressions.

Meanwhile, Yufeng-Zhe has made her way over to Sect Leader Song and Xiao Xingchen, gesturing wildly as she undoubtedly explains what’s going on with her sword spirit in hushed tones.

That leaves, of course, Xue Yang, the Ghost General, and Mo Xuanyu. They somehow end up standing awkwardly beside each other, some fidgeting more than others.

His heart is pounding out of his chest, but Mo Xuanyu takes a deep breath and tries to smile. He bows, praying that he’ll at least be able to greet someone here normally. “Um, hello. I’m Mo Xuanyu. I’ll...be travelling with you from now on.”

The Ghost General bows back. For some reason, he seems just as nervous as Mo Xuanyu. “I’m Wen Ning. It’s very nice to meet you.”

As they both rise, they exchange a look. It’s a look of camaraderie, unity in social incompetence, and Mo Xuanyu has never felt more relieved. He almost feels like crying.

Xue Yang watches their interaction with faint interest. There’s something odd about the way he looks at Mo Xuanyu, and that isn’t a good thing.

Then he smiles, his canines jutting out to his lip, and Mo Xuanyu feels something in his stomach drop. “Well, well, well. It’s certainly been a while, Mo Xuanyu.”

It really has been a while. The last time they met, their robes were gold and their futures were bright. It’s strange, to remember the days in which they’d sit at the same table, strewn over works lost to the world, denying the fates they’d been given.

In the end, things didn’t work out for either of them.
Slinging an arm casually over Mo Xuanyu’s shoulders, Xue Yang chuckles. It sounds different; a little lighter, less crazed, more...genuine. “Looks like you’ve been doing some research on your own,” he says lightly. “That’s nice, very nice. Between a god that never shuts up and a whining baby—”

“I heard that, asshole!”

“At least one of us is normal,” Xue Yang continues, ignoring Yufeng-Zhe’s cry. He makes a very rude gesture in her direction, which is returned with twice the rage.

Mo Xuanyu looks up at Wen Ning. “But Wen Ning seems very nice,” he says.

If corpses could blush, Wen Ning would probably be red to his ears. Instead, he makes a strangled noise and brings his hands to his chest.

Xue Yang sighs. “I mean, he’s a literal corpse, but compared to the psychos over there, he’s perfectly normal. Too bad he doesn’t travel with us.”

That’s very worrying for two reasons: first, the fact that Xue Yang has excluded himself from said psychos, which, if Mo Xuanyu remembers the rumours correctly, isn’t entirely accurate, and second, the fact that the Ghost General is just galavanting across the land, doing god knows what.

But Wen Ning doesn’t seem like the type to cause destruction. Um, excluding what he did eight years ago. That...that was kind of bad.

“You’ll be stuck with us,” Xue Yang says. “If you think it’s bad now, just wait until Fuxing tries to feed you his death sludge. And A-Qing never stops yapping, either, so brace yourself.”

Despite the disdain in his voice, there’s something about the curl of his lips that speaks what he won’t say. So Mo Xuanyu simply nods.

From there, the conversation actually picks up a little. Xue Yang is a lot less, um, unhinged than before, which is nice. Wen Ning proves to be very kind and very passionate about archery, which Mo Xuanyu knows little about, but it’s fun to talk anyway. Stranger still, Xue Yang goes off on a
tangent about cooking, which turns into an impromptu lecture of sorts. His knowledge of knives is worrying, and a name occasionally stutters on his tongue fearfully—Mie Yu or something of the sort—but it’s nice to see Xue Yang genuinely interested in something that isn’t. You know. Murderous.

Being in the company of people who treat you as an equal is nice. A little foreign, but undeniably nice.

Among them all, Wen Ning that hears it first.

In the middle of a sentence, he looks around nervously, glancing to the sky. “Um,” he says, “I think—I think we should be expecting someone soon.”

Mo Xuanyu looks up as well. “Oh. It’s Hanguang-Jun, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s Hanguang-Jun, alright,” Xue Yang confirms, his lips pulled into a devious smile. “Just sit back and watch the show. It’s going to be great.”

Before Mo Xuanyu can ask why it’s going to be great, a wave of white in the corner of his eye catches his attention.

It’s only right that he who seeks chaos should seek them out.

Every single cultivators knows Hanguang-Jun. He’s the pinnacle of etiquette, a cultivator with skills beyond compare; the Gusu Lan Sect’s perfect disciple, as beautiful as the reflection of the moon on still waters, as noble as the light he bears on his shoulders, righteous and infallible.

It’s good that Mo Xuanyu’s already confused to death and back, otherwise he’d be stuttering and stumbling over this new arrival.

Mo Xuanyu’s already bowing when Hanguang-Jun descends from his sword. Wen Ning’s the only one who bows alongside him. Everyone else seems to be very comfortable with this new, cold presence, and it only makes Mo Xuanyu even more grateful to have someone who understands him.

Yufeng-Zhe beams as Hanguang-Jun sheaths his sword. “It’s nice to finally see you again,
Hanguang-Jun!” She laughs sheepishly. “Sorry for the confusion. I completely forgot to write back.”

The revered Hanguang-Jun’s response is a single sound: “Mn.”

“You kind of came at a weird time,” Yufeng-Zhe continues, gesturing to the crowd of people before them. “We’re actually all planning to head to Qinghe together. You know. For reasons.”

“The reasons you disclosed in your letters,” Hanguang-Jun says.

“That’s right.” Yufeng-Zhe’s brows knit. “You didn’t tell Zewu-Jun, did you?”

“I did not.”

“Oh, good.” Yufeng-Zhe sighs a breath of relief. The fact that she needs to be relieved is slightly alarming. “It’s better if we figure things out first. Then we can tell him.” A short pause is all that’s needed for her to spin around and put a smile back on her face. “Anyway, I’m sure everyone’s happy to meet you!”

Just like that, Yufeng-Zhe begins leading Hanguang-Jun around, introducing everyone eagerly. Hanguang-Jun wears the same expression no matter who he’s talking to, and Mo Xuanyu can’t bring himself to look into those gold eyes, so it’s difficult to tell what exactly Hanguang-Jun thinks of...all this.

Curiously, Fuxing slips away as soon as Yufeng-Zhe mediates a conversation with Wen Qing. The god more or less flees to Wen Ning in what appears to be an attempt to hide behind someone shorter than him. It’s not very effective, and Wen Qing gives him a withering glare before turning back to Hanguang-Jun.

“Um, Young Master,” Wen Ning begins.

“Do not,” Fuxing whisper-shouts, eyes blown wide. He peers desperately at Mo Xuanyu and Xue Yang, which isn’t a good idea at all, because they won’t be able to answer his questions. “What am I supposed to do? That’s Lan Wangji!” Gesturing helplessly at Hanguang-Jun, the god makes a noise between a whine and groan. “I was so awful to him. If I could go back and punch myself, I would do it in a heartbeat.”
Is this about his disputes with Hanguang-Jun back when he was the Yiling Patriarch? That would make sense, to a degree. But there’s something about the way Fuxing looks at Hanguang-Jun that’s more complicated than it appears, that speaks of hidden depths.

(Mo Xuanyu knows that look. He’s seen it in the mirror too many times. Regret is easy to spot. It’s an obvious look on anyone.

But then—

Could it be—

Is that—is that ye...
That isn’t to say he knows anything about love. Love is dangerous; it’s a tool and a weapon, but before that, it’s an emotion, something born of fate and destiny and something far beyond mortal understanding. It hurts as much as it comforts, and when it hurts, it’s the most unbearable pain. But Mo Xuanyu isn’t about to make any decisions for others.

“Um,” he starts. Fuxing peeks at him, and Mo Xuanyu wrings his hands. “If...if you want to talk to Hanguang-Jun, I’m sure he’d listen. He seems like someone who’s very good at listening.”

Xue Yang grins, baring his teeth. “Well, well. Even the new kid gets it.” When Fuxing glares at him, he shrugs. “You do this every time. Oh, help me, I don’t know how to talk to him, boo hoo. You keep digging for a solution, but it’s so easy! Just go over there and say, Hello, Hanguang-Jun, could I please sit on your di—”

“Do not finish that sentence.”

“Your loss.” With a yawn, Xue Yang stretches, his robes falling down to reveal arms covered in bandages. He doesn’t seem bothered by them, though, so maybe they’re just, um, an aesthetic choice? “I’m bored. I’ll be in a tree somewhere. Don’t wake me up again.”

In the blink of an eye, Xue Yang’s form vanishes, leaving empty space where he stood.

Mo Xuanyu stares for a moment. “Um,” he tries. He trails off when Fuxing sighs again.

“Young Master, you should just get it off your chest,” Wen Ning suggests, though the steel in his voice implies it isn’t much of a suggestion at all. “You both deserve better than this.”

Fuxing is silent.

It doesn’t seem like Wen Ning’s going to say any more, so to drive the point home, Mo Xuanyu takes a deep breath, braces himself, and says, “If you keep putting it off and saying you’ll try again next time, you’ll never get to that next time. And if you part ways here, there’s no guarantee you’ll ever see each other again.”

An awful, awful expression twists Fuxing’s features into something painful, and Mo Xuanyu knows he’s hit where it hurts.
He immediately feels terrible. He’s pushed too hard. He has no right to tell anyone to do anything, and he especially has no right to tell a god how to handle his very complicated relationships that overlap with a life he isn’t living anymore.

“Only if you want to,” Mo Xuanyu adds pathetically. “I don’t—I don’t mean to imply anything.”

“No, I understand.” Fuxing raises his head, smooths out his robes, and levels his clear, star-filled gaze at Mo Xuanyu. “I suppose trying and failing is better than never having tried at all.”

Wen Ning nods along eagerly. Mo Xuanyu wrings his hands.

With one final sigh, the god brushes his hair out of his face and runs his hands down the braids by his face. He clears his throat, adjusts his weimao, oh, he’s checking his appearance, isn’t he?

It’s oddly endearing, and Mo Xuanyu finds himself biting back a smile. “Your sash is a little crooked,” he says.

Fuxing looks down. “Oh! Thank you.” He fiddles with it a little, and the resonating notes of the crystal bell ring far. Then, with such unbridled confidence and certainty that Mo Xuanyu feels that the sky would rend if the god told it to, Fuxing declares, “Things will be different this time.”

It’s unclear who he’s talking to. Himself, Hanguang-Jun, the world—it doesn’t matter. What matters is that Fuxing closes his eyes, opens them, and walks toward Hanguang-Jun with his head held high.

As if thinking the same thoughts, everyone immediately begins to slowly move away. They all carry the same weight of knowledge in their eyes, and for once, Mo Xuanyu feels like he knows what’s going on.

“I suppose we should go see what Yufeng-Zhe’s up to,” says Mo Xuanyu.

Wen Ning nods. “We should prepare for the journey to come.”
In the span of a single morning, Mo Xuanyu’s entire world has been flipped, shaken, and shattered. In this one morning, he’s lived more than he has for the past six years.

It’s okay. It’s alright. He has a long road ahead of him, and maybe, just maybe, he can help those he’s walking with. This journey isn’t about revealing Jin Guangyao’s crimes to the world; it’s about fixing things that have been broken. Sometimes, that means fixing yourself.

There’s no guessing what tomorrow has in store, but Mo Xuanyu’s alright with that. What’s important is that he’s overcome yesterday, and today, he’s alive.

And this time, he’ll be living.

Once, when Lan Wangji was young, he saw a bolt of lightning in broad daylight.

A fleeting flash of light tumbled like whirling silver across the deep blue sky of the Cloud Recesses. In that short, ephemeral moment, his breath was stolen, taken away by something that captured it utterly and entirely, even though that radiance was soon followed by heavy and violent rain.

(In that final parting, met with an exhausted smile and eyes weary of the world and everything in it, there was nothing Lan Wangji could say.

His hair, as he turned his back, caught the sunlight for an instant.

Then, ultimately, that light would bring on a storm.)

Wei Wuxian used to be so lonely.

His pride was just as radiant as his smile; golden and precious, not just another facet of his character, but everything he was, given freely, generously, without a single care for what he was losing. He gave himself to everyone.

He bled for all those he loved. He tore his heart to pieces until his smile cracked and shattered into
something biting and bitter, until his pride mingled with madness, despair, and finally, at the end of all things—acceptance.

This world is not kind to those who have too much kindness to give.

The road he walked was a lonely one. He fell alone, and he faced his end alone. Even when he returned, dressed in divine garments, carrying stars in his eyes and miracles between his fingers, he continued to bear the weight of the world alone.

And yet, despite it all, Wei Wuxian is at peace.

He does not stand alone in his pride. Beside him are disciples, vassals, friends. They have been wronged, they have done wrong, and yet they understand one another. Wei Wuxian sees beauty in them. Wei Wuxian sees something worth saving in them, and he has finally seen something worth saving within himself.

When Wei Wuxian smiles, it is different. It is not the same smile he wore so often when they were young and naive. And it is not the same smile he wielded against the world. It is something new, born of the duty and freedom this new life has offered him.

In this life, Wei Wuxian has left spaces for others to fill. He has given meaning to others, just as they have given meaning to him. He lives for the world because he sees so much beauty in it.

Wei Wuxian used to be so lonely. Now, he is no longer lonely. He is in love the world. The world finally loves him in return.

Wei Wuxian is here. He is alive. He is happy.

There is not much more Lan Wangji can wish for.

(If the world will allow it—)

(If you will allow it—)
(Wei Ying, I—)

(Will you let me walk by your side?)

“Lan Zhan! It’s been a while since we last talked, hasn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes

at this point. i have given up on predicting how long the chapters are going to be. this one isn't even an interlude and it almost hit 18k.

[ mxy has finally joined the party! he has no idea what in the fresh hell is going on but he's happy to be here! ]

almost everyone pokes their head in this chapter, which was kind of hilarious to write. mxy's just there but so are all these very important people, yes, he is very stressed and very confused. of note is xue yang, who's making good use of his second chance. his story will come a little later, but he's the designated cook of the disaster team that is wwx, a-qing, mxy, and xue yang.

in case you missed it, this chapter takes place three years after chapter 4. things will be more nonlinear from now on, so the blanks will be filled!! also i lied.........i'm not done with angst just yet, the Blast from the Past (between chap 1-2) and That Time in Yiling (between chap 3-4) are still there so i still have a pretty decent arsenal of angst. but!!! things will be okay in the end!!!

it's weird to imagine but a-qing would be 20 in this chapter, so she's a young adult, but she's still pretty short. she's like an angry gremlin that has the ability to kill you. she's great. also, i called her the wind-swept maiden, but in order to fit in with all the other characters who have chinese titles, i gave her the title 驭风者 (Yù fēng zhě) which more or less translates to "windrider". sort of how i sometimes call lwj "light-bearer" for dramatic effect.

in general, writing mxy is so much fun bc he comes in late compared to the others, so his thought process is essentially ??????????? ??????????? and i think that's great.

as usual, thanks for reading! i'm on twitter if you want to talk to me!
Chapter Summary

respite
/resˈpɪt/ noun
1. a short period of rest or relief from something difficult or unpleasant.

verb
1. grant a delay or extension of time to; reprieve from death or execution.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s quite easy to be a god. At least, that’s what Wei Wuxian concludes.

He has a duty to the world, yes, but it’s so simple.

Help them. Save them. Pay back your debt.

Why would kindness ever be a mission? Don’t people wake up and realize, *I’m alive and I would like to be alive tomorrow*, all while the sun rises and sets with each passing day?

It’s strange. But Wei Wuxian keeps his promises.

He walks, he runs, he spreads his arms out and laughs under the warmth of the sun. He greets humans with a smile and listens to their stories and their struggles. He mends wounds, he grants fortune, and he moves on, all without saying goodbye.

*Goodbye* is a phrase reserved for those who’ll greet you with *welcome back* when you return. There’s no guarantee that anyone will remember him. It’s better that way. Let the people of this world see hope in his miracles and find the strength to face tomorrow by themselves.

Around him, seasons pass. He feels as stifling humidity turns to cold winds. It’s new. It isn’t.

“My name is Fuxing,” he tells every human he meets, bringing a finger to his smiling lips. “Hush, now. There’s no need to cry. I’m here.”

Again, and again, and again. Over and over.

No matter how long he walks, there is always someone who cries out to be saved, for others to be saved, to be freed. Wei Wuxian walks onward.

They stare at him in awe, in fear. Something ugly inside him twists, snaps, and is born anew. He doesn’t want their reverence. He doesn’t ever want it again.

*Don’t look at me with those eyes*, he wants to say. *How dare you do this to me*, he wants to scream. *Why was it only me*, he wants to ask.
He wants, he wants, he wants. For the first time since being born, Wei Wuxian wants to reject something that he’s been given.

Is it selfish?

It doesn’t matter. He keeps walking.

They tell him he has stars in his eyes. He knows. They tell him he looks like a demon. He knows.

They ask him to find the seed of chaos and destroy it. He does. They call him justice even when he returns with blood on his hands. He smiles. He calls himself a god and finds himself wavering.

*I didn’t want this,* something inside him cries. *Don’t give me this life and force me to pay for sins I died for!*

When he washes his hands clean in rivers that will never be as warm as he remembers them to be, another reflection stares back. That someone reaches out, skin pale as death, eyes red as blood, speaking words Wei Wuxian can’t say. He wraps his fingers around Wei Wuxian’s throat, squeezing tighter and tighter, and he laughs. It’s an awful, despairing thing, and it *hurts*, why does it hurt so much—

*What do you want from me?*

*Haven’t I killed enough?*

*What difference does it make?*

*Why is it only me?*

*Why, why, why—*

Wei Wuxian never hears the end of it. His strings tear the reflection apart until only stars stare back, swirling endlessly into the silent future.

There are many questions he doesn’t know how to answer. The unknown doesn’t scare him, but the man in the reflection does.

(Because the man in the reflection is someone he knows, and that makes it all the more terrifying.)

Despite it all, weaving miracles feels good. It fills him with a sense of warmth that lingers in his stomach and chest, sitting like a precious stone. He feels full even when he is empty, and it’s a precious feeling.

In smaller towns and villages, where determination and perseverance play larger roles than prayers ever will, the townsfolk laugh as they pull him into restaurants and push drinks his way.

“*You’ve done us a favour,*” they say. “*We won’t forget it. There’s not much we can offer to a god, but if you ever find yourself in hard times, we’ll be there.*”

“*With good food!*”

“*And good drinks!*”

They laugh, teasing Wei Wuxian with light in their eyes and a skip in their steps, comfortable even in the presence of his divine aura. They treat him as one of their own, and it is on nights like those where he remembers exactly why he’s alive.
Look at the world and all that exists within it. Isn’t it amazing?

The world is a vast place with so many people feeling so many emotions, and Wei Wuxian finds himself eager to see more, to discover more, to turn the tides of fortune for those who have lost their way in that endless, stormy sea.

In the back of his mind, something asks, *how can you move forward, even after it all?*

He doesn’t understand. He answers anyway.

“I don’t need a reason to keep walking,” he says to himself. To someone else. “As long as the path exists, I’ll take it.”

Journeying alone is jarring, but surprisingly, it doesn’t bother him as much as it should. He feels right walking alone, moving across a life so many others are living. When his robes tear, he mends them by himself. When he stops to eat, he rests by the fire by himself. When the weariness of travel tempts him with sleep, he drifts off by himself.

*This is how it should be,* he tells himself. In rain, in heat, in darkness, he walks on alone.

But the silence is almost unbearable.

(Without the souls to guide him, the pain in his heart grows, festers, digs its claws into something that hurts, it *hurts*, no, *stop it*—

In the darkest of nights, when the weight of a life he can’t remember wraps its cold fingers around his throat and laughs, mocking him for all he is, cursing him for all he isn’t, he raises his voice and sings to the heavens, desperately searching for air he can’t find. He sings, even as he chokes on breaths that won’t come and claws at an ache that won’t fade. He cries, scared out of his mind, terrified for himself, for those he loves, for the world around him.

I’ll be better, please don’t go, come back, I was wrong, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.)

Well, it’s alright. Who doesn’t have bad nights?

It’s not that Wei Wuxian’s running away from what’s chasing him. What could possibly be chasing him? Let it come find him if it wants. He has cut down more monsters than he can count, and whatever evil whispers in his ears and haunts his dreams is just one more. When the time comes, he will cut it down, purge it from this world forever, and that’ll be the end of it.

He does, however, learn to ignore the voices. They are distracting. It’s not his fault.

Wei Wuxian moves through life, and life moves through him. He has bad nights, yes, and he hears whispers in the dark, but there is much more to life than the remnants of something that no longer exists.

One day, he decides that he has had enough of these flame-licked robes. They keep tearing, and it really is a hassle to keep repairing them. He could see if any merchant or tailor would be willing to take them, but he can’t quite bring himself to part with them.

Instead, he spends three days and three nights stitching golden thread into robes that smell of old blood. He purges, purges, and purges away the shadows that cling to the garments, tracing peonies in their place.

Gods need to look presentable, and Wei Wuxian certainly doesn’t want to give anyone the wrong
idea. With the remaining strings, he weaves a long veil of gold and pins it to a weimao.

The vendor he purchases the weimao from, a middle-aged woman with a glint in her eye, grins as she watches him methodically fix the veil. “You trying to look like those fancy cultivators?”

“Like a god, actually,” he mutters. He hisses as he stabs himself with another pin. For a god who weaves the strings of fate so easily, his hands are certainly awful with a needle and thread.

The woman’s brows raise, but her smile is as sharp as can be. “Well then. Does this god mind telling this undeserving servant why he’s travelling north?”

Wei Wuxian blinks. Why? There’s no why. There just is. “I seek out chaos and I grant humans the power to destroy it. Sometimes I do it myself. I’m just——” He gestures dismissively at himself. There’s no use explaining his lack of reason, so instead, he says, “I’m just following the river, really.”

The woman sighs. “Well, you’re bound to find work up there.”

“Work?”

“You haven’t heard?” Surprise lights up her eyes, and she blinks back. It’s a reaction Wei Wuxian has seen hundreds of times by now. He barely knows anything about the world, and it’s a little shameful. Oh well. It can’t be helped.

Wei Wuxian simply shrugs. He sets the weimao down on his head, tugs on the veil for good measure, and sighs in relief when it stays. “I suppose you could say I’m a bit new to these parts.”

“No kidding,” says the woman. “I thought everyone knew about how Lotus Pier burnt to the ground a few years back.”

Something inside Wei Wuxian stutters, but only for a moment. It hurts, but only for a moment. “Lotus... Pier?”

“Yeah,” the woman says. “Lotus Pier, the little haven of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.” She hesitates. “Not that it’s so pretty right now. Give it a few years, and maybe it’ll be somewhere close to what it was like before. But the folks there are still putting up the bare bones.”

“I know, but hang on,” Wei Wuxian interrupts. His mind is half-reeling in half-confusion, half-understanding, and his head pounds. “You said there was trouble. Aren’t they just building? How much trouble could there be?”

A solemn expression makes its way onto the woman’s face. She throws a glance at the vendor beside her, who shakes his head. Even the not-so-subtle eavesdroppers sigh, which is a testament to just how things are going in Lotus Pier. “Retaking something is easy,” the woman says. “Rebuilding is a different story entirely, especially when the blood of everyone you’ve ever known is still stained onto the dirt under your feet.”

“I know, but hang on,” Wei Wuxian interrupts. His mind is half-reeling in half-confusion, half-understanding, and his head pounds. “You said there was trouble. Aren’t they just building? How much trouble could there be?”

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Wei Wuxian’s breath hitches. His heart aches, but it’s something fleeting, something that’s already passed. He’s fine. It’s fine.

“Thank the gods for Sect Leader Jiang,” the woman says, pride in her eyes. “Nobody knew what that young, haughty Jiang Wanyin would do, but we’d be much worse off without him.”

Oh. Yes, that’s the same Jiang Wanyin who led the charge against the Yiling Patriarch at the Burial
Mounds.

(It’s the same name that cuts Wei Wuxian’s breaths short and throws him to the ground, asking, *Have you had enough? Aren’t you satisfied yet? How much more do you need to take before you realize what you’ve done?*

It’s fine. It’s just another one of the whispers. If there’s something Wei Wuxian has learned over the past year of wandering, it’s how to bury the dead.)

“He seems like a noble person,” Wei Wuxian says, something sharp and bitter on his tongue. It cuts at his lips and drips down his throat like poison. He feels empty; he feels full. He swallows down the poison and smiles. “Do you think this Jiang Wanyin would be particularly upset if a god strolled into his city?”

The woman laughs. “Only if you lounge around.” In one smooth movement, she rolls up her sleeve, revealing a surprisingly well-toned arm that really is quite impressive for a civilian.

Wei Wuxian’s brows shoot up. The woman clearly catches it, because she laughs again.

“We earn our keep in Yunmeng,” she declares, her chin lifted up high. “If you want to eat, work. The folks in Lotus Pier aren’t waiting for someone to magically put their homes back together. They’re building the city up with their own hands, plank by plank, tile by tile.”

Of course. It’s just like the people of Yunmeng to push on through the ruins, adamantly digging through the wreckage to piece together what they love. Perhaps it stems from how their very home tests their resilience, with flooding rivers, the oppressive heat of summer, and a bloodstained legacy; perhaps they’re just stronger than Wei Wuxian can ever understand.

Wei Wuxian spreads his hands. Golden strings materialize between his fingertips, and he plays with them casually, all while wearing a smile. “Well,” he says. “I suppose I’ll just have to prove that I can work as hard as the rest of them, won’t I?”

“Who knows?” The woman gives a dramatic shrug, glancing at the dancing strings. “That Jiang Wanyin has always been a fickle one, though I hardly believe he’d reject the favour of a god like yourself.”

*If only you knew*, something inside Wei Wuxian says. He doesn’t acknowledge it. There’s no place for it.

Instead, he brings his hands together, reaching out to drag the stars down and shape them into his whim and will. The first few notes of a lullaby no one sings to him anymore resonate through the still air; his words may carry what lingers from the past, but his voice calls to the great beyond, and even further beyond.

*Listen*, he hums. *If there truly is any meaning to this warped, strange world, give me the strength to change it.*

Within his calloused hands, a single golden orchid blooms. Its petals curl outward, as if breathing for the very first time. It’s alive, it’s here, yet its radiance is of something divine.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian’s breath is stolen away by this tiny, meaningless flower. It shivers even in the warmth of his palms, and it means everything. It means nothing.

He’s never—he’s never been able to create life.
Within his small, careless hands, something has been born.

Wei Wuxian is—

It doesn’t matter.

So he snatches the flower up by the stem. “Kind maiden,” he says, holding the orchid out toward the woman, “your advice is much appreciated. Would you do this god one more favour and accept this gift?”

The woman grins. She accepts the flower, brushing her fingertips over the golden petals. “If that’s what your divine lordship commands, I couldn’t possible refuse.”

Life is given. Life is taken. Wei Wuxian is alive.

“How far north is Lotus Pier?”

“Not far,” the woman answers. After a moment of contemplation, she tucks the flower in her hair. The faint glow colours her hair with a gold sheen. It waves with the wind as the woman points to the gate down the path. “Follow the road out of town for a day or so, and you should reach a pier. Take a boat, and you’ll be at Lotus Pier in a bit.”

That’s good.

(Home is never far away.)

The crowd surrounding them has grown noticeably since the start of their conversation. Wei Wuxian brings the brightest smile to his lips as he turns and makes his way north. Those around him part with ease, staring at him like he put the stars in the sky instead of dragging them down from the heavens.

Just once, he looks back, and the woman waves.

“You’d better make Lotus Pier into the finest city anyone’s ever going to see!” she shouts. “And get that young Jiang Wanyin to take a break for once. Come down here again with him, and we’ll show you how we normal folks celebrate!”

It’s like breaking through ice and falling into the cold waters that churn beneath. The woman’s proud voice spreads the idea of a god and a sect leader travelling to this town for a day trip into the minds of the entire crowd, and soon enough, they’re all calling after Wei Wuxian, urging him to return soon.

Humans. Aren’t they interesting? Aren’t they just so utterly full of life? Isn’t it fascinating, how a single emotion can spread like wildfire among them?

Something in him aches. He feels at peace, and that scares him.

His steps fall faster, and soon enough, yet another town is behind him. The sky has long since darkened, pulling the veil of night over the shoulders of another weary day. Above him, the stars clamber out and begin to sing a silent hymn, ushering all those who travel by the light of the moon to rest quickly, to sleep well, for all that is done in the lonely depths of night can be left for tomorrow.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t care for tomorrow. He has always travelled for today. Those that call to him have waited for long enough.

This time, though, things are different. This time, he has a destination.
Somewhere in that unknown future, Lotus Pier awaits him.

(Will I be welcome back?)

*Ha.*

Never mind. Don’t bother answering that question.)

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It turns out that, in the middle of the night, there are no boats at the pier.

Wei Wuxian has never been fond of planning things out. He is, however, very fond of doing whatever comes to him in the heat of the moment, which is an excellent skill, and not an excuse for his poor self-control and lack of self-preservation.

The river flows gently before him. It sways and ripples, dancing to the beat of the earth and the thrum of the world. Underneath the moonlight, the water beckons gently, setting out a path of luminous silver that shifts with each heartbeat.

It’s not that Wei Wuxian minds getting wet. In fact, he welcomes the thought of diving into a river for the sake of simply being one with the current. He’s comfortable in water; he knows it, he doesn’t own it, but by no means is he a bad swimmer.

The problem lies in the fact that Wei Wuxian only has one set of robes, and said robes are currently being worn on his person.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t have the patience to wait until morning comes or until someone arrives with a boat.

For a moment, he glares at the water, as if he has the ability to coerce it into shaping a path beneath his feet and—hmm. That isn’t such an awful idea, now is it?

Wei Wuxian is a god. A god of prosperity, not a god of rivers or water or anything of the sort, but he has the very unique talent of bending fate to his will. That, and he thinks it would incredibly special to be able to walk on water. Then nobody would mistake him for someone he isn’t.

Well, it can’t hurt to try.

“Excuse me,” says Wei Wuxian, bowing his head to the slow-moving current before him. “It looks like we’ll be travelling together for a little while.”

The water is silent. Strangely so, actually; it’s like the current has frozen in place before him. It waits, and waits, until Wei Wuxian blinks and someone arrives.

He looks into the water and sees the stranger. It seems their images are always intertwined.

Wei Wuxian sighs. Kneeling down to to meet the water, he raises a brow and tilts his head downward. “You again,” he says to the stranger. “Following me again, are you?”

The stranger is silent.

“Well, don’t try anything foolish,” Wei Wuxian warns, lowering one foot to the surface of the water.
His touch sends golden ripples cascading through the wide river, echoing deep into the night with the notes of his song. “One false move and the people of Lotus Pier will think a well-dressed water ghoul has decided to take a trip to their lovely town.”

Once, twice, three times. The stranger blinks slowly, methodically, his gaze speaking of sorrow Wei Wuxian doesn’t want to understand. Then, like the lights of the town behind them, he flickers, wavers, and disappears.

Ha. Who’s the one running away now?

Once, twice, three times. Wei Wuxian places one foot in front of the other, watching the ripples of his steps light the path before him. The souls by his side may have moved on, having found brighter places to be than with a god who knows nothing of their pain, but there will always be something to guide the way.

Once, twice, three times. His walks forward, beckoning for the sun to rise.

(You don’t need to greet me with welcome back.
I know I’m not welcome.
I broke one promise. I won’t break the other.
Even if I die, even though I’ve died, even after death—
I will try
to protect
what is closest to me
even if
I have long since
lost them.)

“Um,” says the hostess, trying very hard not to wring her hands.

“I know,” says Wei Wuxian.

“You’re,” the hostess starts. She gestures helplessly, and her features twist half in despair, half in confusion. “You seem to be. Um. Dripping, sir.”

Wei Wuxian sighs. “I’m aware,” he says, monotonous in the very definition of the word. He feels like he just drowned, died, came back, and immediately tripped in the nearest river to die all over again. Dying once was plenty; he isn’t eager to rush toward it again. “If you don’t mind, could I please get a room?”

The hostess almost trips over herself showing Wei Wuxian to his room. She fidgets like she’s afraid that Wei Wuxian will pull out a sword and run her through, which would be a bit insulting in any
other situation. Unfortunately, he did just have a very dramatic and very loud run-in with the local water ghoul population, in which he most likely attracted and destroyed every water-residing monster in the entire region.

In hindsight, he could have been a little bit more subtle. Eight golden swords and tens of thousands of golden strings make for quite a spectacle, even for a lively pier town. Unfortunately, he recalled a little too late that water ghouls love to summon torrents of water and spit them at the faces of their prey in attempts to blind them, which is wonderful, a real riot, especially when Wei Wuxian has a one pair of robes and an empty stomach.

Needless to say, he isn’t in a great mood. When he tries to smile at the hostess, she acts like he’s just unhinged his jaw and eaten someone alive. When he abandons the smile, she looks as if her soul has just departed from her body. It doesn’t take her long to escort herself out of the room, though it’s more accurate to say that she flees as quickly as possible.

That’s quite rude. Wei Wuxian is a perfectly charming man with many redeeming qualities. For example, he’s a god, and he can materialize gold from nothing. Status and wealth: the two most treasured qualities of any human.

He laughs to an empty room, pulling his weimao off his head.

Who is he kidding? He’s never cared about status or wealth, and he doesn’t expect to ever begin caring.

It takes him a while to pull his outer robes off. Once he finishes wrestling with his clothes, he hangs them up near the window with his veil. Then he stands there in dripping white robes, feeling that his luck has been remarkably dismal recently, which is a grave injustice, given the fact that he’s supposedly a god of prosperity and all.

Wei Wuxian sighs. “A fitting welcome back, I suppose.”

There’s not much to do. He ties his hair into a loose ponytail and slings it over one shoulder, wringing out the wet mass out on the balcony. Surely he isn’t the first guest they’ve had who looks like he waged war with the entire river and lost. In fact, he sure he can’t be, given that Lotus Pier is a major hub in the cultivation world, and only the heavens know what those cultivators get up to.

Below him, the streets bustle with the rush of a world waking up to a new morning. The musk of night has been overtaken by the smell of shopkeepers readying food to fill the bellies of their patrons. Perhaps it’s due to the ongoing construction, but these people always seem to be in motion, seeking out the next task, and then the next, and when their hands are finally empty and sweat dots their brows, they turn to their neighbours and ask how they can help.

This energy had been silenced once, Wei Wuxian recalls. Under skies painted red with a sun that refused to set, this place fell as the people who made their homes here fell, leaving only the crackle of flames to fill the void.

It’s strange. Isn’t it strange? All those who rush through these streets can be called the children of Lotus Pier, even if that childhood has been swallowed by the relentless appetite of time. Their home was ripped away from them once; they refuse to let it happen again. So they work diligently, persistently, to ensure they never lose it again.

As the townsfolk pass by beneath him, they look up, pale, and speed away. It’s a reaction Wei Wuxian is intimately familiar with, which is exactly why he takes his weimao everywhere he goes. Really, though; even if he looks like an infamous villain, don’t these people realize there’s no way
someone so vile is ever coming back?

(He wouldn’t want to come back. He doesn’t want to come back. He didn’t want to come back.

And yet—)

“Young Master!”

An unfamiliar voice catches Wei Wuxian’s attention. He peers down to the streets and finds himself blinking at an old woman with an odd glint in her eye.

“You look like you’ve had a rough day,” she says, her lips raising into a grin. There’s a lilt in her crackling voice, like water cascading over rocks, and it makes something in Wei Wuxian ache. Raising one of her many baskets of loquats, she levels her grey gaze at him. “How about you give my loquats a try?”

(Why not cool down with a loquat, Young Master?)

(For you, they’re free! Bring those friends of yours next time!)

(You’ll always be welcome here.)

The stranger stands beside him, arms folded over the railing, something so melancholic and yearning and sad on his pale face that, for a moment, Wei Wuxian believes he is actually there. He turns, eyes an empty red, and parts his lips.

I lost my place here a long time ago.

Wei Wuxian blinks, and the stranger is gone. Perhaps he was never there to begin with.

Ah, it hurts. That ache is back, and it pounds against his ribcage, demanding release. His chest feels tight and he feels nauseous. There’s a heat on his skin, not from within, but rather from without, as if the warmth of summer has made a home with him. In the end, though, it’s only pain.

With a smile, something brilliant and younger than he’ll ever be again, he waves to the elderly woman. “That’s very kind of you,” he says pleasantly. “Then, if you’ll excuse me.”

A wave of the hand and eight softly hummed notes is all it takes for golden strings to weave themselves into existence, wrapping around a few loquats and tossing them upward. Wei Wuxian catches them in his arms, then snaps his fingers. A few gold coins deposit themselves where the loquats once rested, and with another wave, the strings shatter into flecks of ethereal dust, stolen away by the wind.

Hmm. That wasn’t too audacious, was it? After all, Wei Wuxian is a god. As long as he does his duty, he’s entitled to whatever he wants.

The passersby gape. For some reason, their reactions seem even more exaggerated than usual. Then again, if Wei Wuxian really does share the same face as a certain someone, it makes sense that the people here in Lotus Pier would stare at him like he’s just brought on the end of the world.

The elderly woman’s grin widens, creeping upward at the corners. “Why, thank you very much,” she says with little inflection, shuffling the coins across her palm. She glances upward, a single brow raised. “It’s not everyday we host a god. May this undeserving servant ask why your divine lordship is here?”
“I heard there was some rebuilding going on,” Wei Wuxian answers. It’s the truth, he isn’t lying, yet the words leave an acrid taste on his tongue. He gestures to the half-finished buildings around them, all those shops and houses that smell too new, that have lost something that can’t be replaced. “The Lotus Pier of the past was one to marvel at. This may sound selfish, but I would like to see it return to the way it was before.”

A look takes over the elderly woman’s face. Some others adopt that same subtle twisting of features, though most can’t look Wei Wuxian in the eye.

It means something, but Wei Wuxian isn’t sure he understands. It’s fine. It doesn’t concern him.

“Are you here to watch humans reclaim something that’s been taken away from them?”

The woman’s face isn’t blank; she wears a faint smile, but her eyes are dull, carefully filtering the light that shines from within. For some reason, her words weigh heavily on Wei Wuxian, and he reaches up to his chest toward a scar that has already faded.

He doesn’t need a reason to be here, but within him, something cries out, terrified of the darkness and everything that it brings; there’s a beast that makes a home inside his heart, a beast that will bite and tear everything to pieces in order to protect the people it loves, that will struggle and grasp at nothing in order to keep them alive. No matter the misfortune it brings. No matter what happens because of it.

(There is a flash of black and red beside him. A bitter laugh tears itself free from the stranger, almost as if it’s been wrenched from his gut with a dagger.

_Kill the beast before it leads to your ruin._

_How will you protect those you love?_

_Let them learn to protect themselves._

_You won’t let them die alone._

_No, I won’t_. Red eyes cursed with the touch of destiny stare sadly at him, reflecting nothing but flames. _But if you make your world in others, don’t cry when the world turns on you._

_Flicker, flicker, and then there is nothing._)

It isn’t like Wei Wuxian to use silence as an answer, because it isn’t one.

“I’ve had enough of watching people lose what they love,” is what he decides to say. He smiles, rests his chin on his hand, and prays that those who watch take it for elegance rather than exhaustion. “Besides, I have time. Too much time, some could say. With that time, I would like to help build something up.”

What a ridiculous situation Wei Wuxian has put himself into. Here he is, a god dressed in thin robes and soaked to the core, declaring that he’ll do what he likes, how he likes.

Arrogance is unbecoming of someone who’s already died, but what can he do?

The woman flips the coins between her fingers. “Oh hoh,” she half-laughs, half-speaks. A complicated something carries in her voice, and Wei Wuxian doesn’t know how to unravel it. “It’s very generous of you to offer your assistance. Why don’t you tell Sect Leader Jiang what you’re planning to do?”
“As soon as I look presentable, I’ll speak with him,” says Wei Wuxian. He knows everyone’s watching and waiting for some sort of reaction. What do they want from him? How is a god supposed to grant wishes when humans won’t even admit what it is they desire?

It’s alright. It isn’t the first time people have looked at him with grim expectation, and it won’t be the last. What does it matter? All he needs to do is grab hold of the image they’ve painted of him and shatter it to pieces.

Crush it until it’s gone and never recovers. Wei Wuxian isn’t someone who lets others define him. He’s Fuxing, the god of prosperity, and he’s here. Whether or not he has the right to be is—

It is what it is.

He turns his back on the eyes that watch him.

Watch me all you want, he doesn’t say. His hands clench, nails biting into his palms. It hurts. It doesn’t hurt enough. I am who I am.

Walking beside Wei Wuxian, his steps dragging heavily with the chains of the past, the stranger cries silently.

I’m here.

Perhaps, once, he had a home,

(I’m here.)

and as things are right now, this place is a home,

“I’m here.”

but it’s not his.

Wei Wuxian isn’t a liar.

What is there to lie about? He doesn’t have any secrets worth telling. Even if he did, they’ve all been washed away by death and rebirth and the convoluted cycle of life that closes its eyes and picks out souls at random to ascend into gods or damn into demons.

So he dresses himself in his ornate (and dry) robes, triple-checks that his weimao is intact, looks at himself in the mirror, winces when the stranger stares back and their images overlap a little too perfectly, hastily throws the hair that drapes over his shoulders into braids, hums the first notes of a lullaby as the cosmos turns, turns, and collapses into his hands in the form of golden peonies, weaves them into his hair as elegantly as he can manage, and peers at the mirror again.

A god of luck stares back. When he moves, gold follows in his wake, and when he sings, the peonies on his robes bloom.

Wei Wuxian smiles. He’s not usually so picky about his appearance, but here, in Lotus Pier, he has something to prove.
Again: Wei Wuxian isn’t a liar. When he makes his way out of the building and turns in the exact opposite direction as the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s manor, he isn’t breaking a promise. He has every intent of meeting the young Sect Leader Jiang. Just... not now.

How can he? Everywhere he looks, either construction or repairs are going on in one form or another. The people here are trying their best to rebuild with their own hands, and it’s admirable.

But it’s long, hard work, and only fools find joy in extended suffering. So Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath, holds it, and releases it. He brings his hands together, as if in prayer, and gives them a solid crack.

“How can he? Everywhere he looks, either construction or repairs are going on in one form or another. The people here are trying their best to rebuild with their own hands, and it’s admirable.

But it’s long, hard work, and only fools find joy in extended suffering. So Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath, holds it, and releases it. He brings his hands together, as if in prayer, and gives them a solid crack.

“How can he?” he says to a group of people hefting building materials down the road. “It seems you could use a little bit of help with that.”

Things quickly escalate from there.

Wei Wuxian has no experience with building or repairing an actual house, so he decides that it’s probably best if he lets the experienced hands do the work. He does, however, buy a sizeable stack of blank talismans.

Cinnabar has normal results, blood has unusual results, so if Wei Wuxian uses his gold strings instead, it should produce some very interesting spells.

The builders are a bit wary when he hands them the finished talismans, but in the end, the shiny gold lustre and their desire for more efficient ways to complete their task win out.

It turns out that if you pull out an untested flight talisman from the deepest recesses of your mind and use divine power instead of blood, it’s more or less the equivalent of a short-term blessing. A very powerful, very flashy short-term blessing.

There’s an impressive crowd watching the spectacle unfold before them. It’s understandable, though Wei Wuxian would rather have no onlookers at all. After all, four winged builders, all settling into the fact that they now have wings (temporarily, it’s temporary, probably, hopefully) by performing various tasks at drastically different levels of skill is most likely a very interesting show.

“Are you alright up there,” Wei Wuxian calls to the builder who’s currently flying laps around the house.

“I’m great,” the builder shouts back. His face splits into an enormous grin as he flaps his speckled owl wings. “I’m great! I’m better than ever!”

The shortest builder grumbles under his breath. His tiny quail wings ruffle in indignation as he rummages through his tools. Meanwhile, the magpie-winged builder works away diligently on the roof, nodding every so often at the heron-winged builder, who transfers supplies up while dodging the owl-winged builder.

Conclusion: divine power takes spells and multiplies them tenfold. Or, rather, it takes spells and turns them into blessings, which is, admittedly, a little worrying, because blessings tend to last for a very, very long time.

Wei Wuxian eventually decides that it should be fine. His assumption turns into a conclusion when all the builders’ wings vanish out of existence with an abrupt and comedic pop, leaving one to stumble onto the roof, one to stare distantly, one to breathe a sigh of relief, and one to fall out of the
The good thing about being a god of luck is that Wei Wuxian is very adept at weaving things quickly. The golden net that flies between his fingers just barely catches the builder, who sways up and down on the buoying veil, looking superbly stunned.

Wei Wuxian hurries over and offers the builder a hand. He takes it. Wei Wuxian pulls him to his feet and waves the net away.

For a moment, there’s silence. A wave of shame washes over his head, and Wei Wuxian feels like burying his head in the ground.

“Well,” Wei Wuxian says, feeling that he has more or less exhausted his usefulness here, “I suppose I’ll see you around, then.”

And with that, he takes off, speeding away from the house.

The further he walks, the more gazes follow him. They’re a little different now, not as heavy, focused more on the stars in his eyes and the flowers in his hair than the legacy he wears.

Good. That’s a good development. All Wei Wuxian needs to do is keep it up, and that’s not so difficult, is it?

It shouldn’t be. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s coming up with spells for the most mundane of tasks. And, well, he says mundane, but that’s a cultivator’s point of view. Strength, endurance, health —cultivators have got it all, yet they’re always hungry for more.

As he walks, he makes more and more talismans. What would be most useful? What would have the lowest risk of bodily harm? He demands answers from himself, tearing strings from the paper when he isn’t satisfied, stitching them back in with new forms, sharper edges, finer lines.

Whenever he sees people struggling, he offers his assistance. Said assistance comes in different forms depending on the task, which is more enjoyable that he could’ve ever anticipated.

“I tore my best robes,” one man says, holding up a robe that’s closer to being rags than anything else.

“I can help,” Wei Wuxian says, cheerfully slapping a mending talisman onto the rags.

As expected, the robes stitch back together like nothing ever happened. The man beams, admiring the golden details that weren’t there before, and immediately walks into the path of an oncoming wagon travelling far too quickly to be even remotely safe.

Wei Wuxian is about to jump in and rescue the poor fellow. Instead, he watches as the man performs the most impressive backflip he’s ever seen and executes a perfect, bold landing with a flourish of his newly repaired robes.

The man’s jaw drops. Wei Wuxian has a feeling he might’ve accidentally made those robes into a spiritual tool running off divine energy, but that was pretty impressive. And on the bright side, if any wagon ever tries to do him in ever again, he’ll show it a good time.

“If you could help us move all these baskets into our shop, it would be much appreciated,” a young man says. He waves helplessly to an imposing collection of baskets filled with fruit. “It’s a bit of a trip, so I don’t want to ask anything too menial of you.”

Wei Wuxian thinks for a moment, then slaps down a transportation talisman by the baskets. “Will
It’s a few streets down, and navigating through the lively chaos isn’t a promising prospect. So Wei Wuxian puts another teleportation talisman on the door, snaps his fingers, and realizes a moment too late that he might’ve just teleported everything all at once.

The young man is terrified for a short moment, then awed the next. He looks between the floor, which is now covered in baskets of fruit, the door, which is currently radiating a gentle golden hue, and Wei Wuxian, who’s trying his best to figure out what exactly he’s done this time around.

He solves the mystery after the young man offers him a basket of the best fruit they have. Wei Wuxian takes it happily because food is always a gift to be appreciated. When he bites into a peach, it tastes like—and this is no joke, he’s being entirely serious—it literally tastes like heaven.

He inhales the rest of the fruit like a starving man and he continues on his tirade to help the people of Lotus Pier in any way possible. Needless to say, he’s far more skilled at some tasks than others.

When Wei Wuxian is directed to a local teahouse by a friend of its proprietress, he feels more satisfied than he’s ever been.

So far, so good. Maybe he’s accidentally made one or two or three enchanted tools, but he feels as if he’s fixing something he should’ve fixed long ago. Seeing people laugh and gawk at the results of his on-the-spot research makes him feel warm.

It’s a good feeling. So onward it is.

“I broke my best teapot,” the proprietress explains, laying out the very broken and very small clay fragments before Wei Wuxian. “I understand that it’s a petty thing to ask of a divine being, but if your lordship would allow it, this humble servant would like to ask for your blessing.”

All around them, the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s purples decorate the walls in long banners that proudly bear the nine-petal lotus flower. They cascade endlessly downward, spiralling, falling, tearing into pieces, burning to the ground, and everybody falling around him, bleeding out, dying, and yet all he did was watch—no, he was the one who brought this onto them, and yet he took what little remained and crushed it into pieces, why, why, why—

Wei Wuxian blinks the headache away.

He’s fine. It’s alright. The stranger is whispering nonsense in his ears again.

Wei Wuxian takes in the ambience, the showmanship of it all. This must be a new building. It doesn’t have that same heart-aching pain. Regardless, it’s very ambitious to set up shop in a town that’s still being rebuilt. It doesn’t feel right, but since when has anything Wei Wuxian felt ever been right?

The proprietress doesn’t seem like a bad person. She could’ve asked for anything—power, fame, wealth—and yet all she wants from a god of fortune is to have her teapot fixed.

There’s a certain warmth in seeing people understand the worth of what they have.

“I can fix it,” says Wei Wuxian. A stray thought wanders into his mind, and he pauses. “Actually, I think I can do more than fix it.”

It takes a little while, but in the end, he successful stitches together a talisman that he can’t use for any other purpose than fixing teapots, which is an incredibly specific but incredibly useful talisman.
for maybe a total of three people in all of Lotus Pier. Four, if they really like tea? It’s alright. An
achievement is an achievement, and Wei Wuxian has enough pride to be a little smug about his new
invention.

With a flick of the hand, he tosses it into the broken shards and looks away as a blast of gold light
envelops the room.

When he looks back, the teapot is—well, it’s a teapot. And that’s the point, isn’t it?

“Oh, thank you!” The proprietress looks like she’s about to cry, and as nice as Wei Wuxian feels for
having made someone so happy, he sincerely hopes she doesn’t, because if she really does start
crying, he won’t have any idea what to say. After all, he’s never been particularly attached to any
teapots.

“If you’d indulge me further, may I ask for a cup of tea?” He gestures to the newly restored teapot.
“Using this one, preferably.”

“Of course, I’d be honoured,” the proprietress says eagerly, eyes glimmering. With tears? With
excitement? It’s a little unclear. Either way, Wei Wuxian sits patiently and watches as the proprietress
prepares the tea with skill that’s undoubtedly been honed through years of practice and experience.

It’s a small motion, just a quick turn of the body, but the clear chime of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s
bell is something he’ll never forget. He can’t. He won’t.

He has forgotten so much, but there are some things he’s not allowed to forget.

“Ah,” Wei Wuxian begins. His hands wring into his robes, desperately holding onto something he’s
already lost. “You’re a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.”

The proprietress beams. She’s so young and proud, yet there’s a steel in her spine that’s so
characteristic of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. “Yes. I’m not very skilled with a sword, but I’m great at
making tea, especially for medicinal purposes. I thought I’d be thrown out for having almost no
cultivation potential, but I was told that Lotus Pier could use a teahouse, and that I’d be fit for to
manage it, so here I am.”

It’s the first time Wei Wuxian’s ever heard of a teamaster position in any sect, but it’s a smart move,
especially here in Lotus Pier. Infusing a bit of qi into food and drink is incredibly effective for
warding away illness and preserving health.

It’s such a ridiculous thought. A teamaster, with no sword and no means of purging evil from this
world, is just as meaningful as the most prominent of cultivators.

The purpose of cultivators is to become immortal, some will say. That’s wrong. That isn’t right.
Cultivators exist to protect the common people. At least, if they all had something to defend, always,
maybe they’d be able to understand that peace is so horribly fragile.

To gain something doesn’t necessarily mean that something has to first be lost. The world will take,
take, take, and what little remains will feel like a blessing. It isn’t fair to call that equivalency.

Kindness is not something that is won. Empathy is not something that is earned.

But his thoughts are just the ramblings of a god. Who is he to say how humans should live their
lives? If anything, they should live freely, wildly, to the best of their ability, because they won’t be
here forever.
As Wei Wuxian waits, he sings that same lullaby, the wordless melody brings him comfort in the
darkest of nights and the most painful of nightmares. Perhaps it’s his voice, or perhaps it’s the
resonating notes of a song that yearn for kinder days, forever reaching into the warmth of the past,
where the innocence of childhood gently led him from day to day, carrying him on a gentle tide that
would soon become a storm.

He isn’t sure who exactly taught him the song. Perhaps it was one of those souls that stood by his
side and taught him that the world is not inherently a kind place, but that it could be made into one if
everyone would just try to understand each other.

The last notes of the lullaby drift into the afternoon sky, and for a moment, there’s only silence.
Those who came searching for the voice and the song stare vacantly, as if in some kind of stupor. It’s
only when the proprietress brings the teapot over to the table that the crowd begins dispersing,
whispering amongst themselves.

“That was a beautiful song,” the proprietress says, her eyes wide. There’s that look again: you put
the stars in the sky, you’re a god of the highest calibre, and you can do anything. He doesn’t want it,
but he’s come to accept it. “You—please forgive my ignorance, but are you a god of music?”

Wei Wuxian raises a brow. “Was it really that impressive?”

Flushing, the proprietress looks away. Despite her embarrassment, her hands are steady as she sets a
cup on the table. “I’ve never heard anything like it, and I came from Gusu. Your voice is...” She
hesitates, studying the ridges in the table shyly. “It makes me feel safe. It’s like a calling. Is—is that
strange to say?”

Music is something that’s written into his blood, something he cherishes deeply, but in this life, he
finally has the chance to let the world hear the words they refused to hear before, and it’s vindicating,
in a way.

Of course, it’s just a feeling. He could be creating answers for questions that don’t exist.

“I don’t think it’s strange,” Wei Wuxian answers. He rests his chin on his palm and sighs. “I should
exercise a bit more caution when I sing. Hopefully nobody throws themselves at me because I’ve
offended them.”

“No! No, I think they’re just amazed!” The proprietress claps her hands together. “Back in Gusu,
they’d say that music is the one and only way to know someone’s soul. Not that I was any good at it,
but people are naturally drawn to music because it invokes feeling inside them, aren’t they?”

Wei Wuxian doesn’t know. “Enough about me,” he says instead. “Shall we try your tea?”

The proprietress blinks. “Um, we?”

“It’s awfully depressing to drink alone,” he says, smiling when the proprietress gapes. “Besides, I
want to show you something. Considering it thanks for keeping me company.”

Once the proprietress is seated comfortably across the table, she reaches for the teapot. “Um, please,
at least let me—”

Wei Wuxian holds up his hand. The proprietress freezes. “Just a moment,” he mutters, brushing his
fingers over the fine clay. At his touch, the painted flowers twist and fold in on themselves, dying
and living all at once, weaving themselves into brighter forms.

That... wasn’t exactly what Wei Wuxian expected, but it should work all the same.
“I’m sorry,” he apologizes, because he feels it’s needed. “It seems that I’ve scribbled all over your teapot.” All his spells—his blessings, rather—are so varied in effects that he’s mildly concerned that they won’t dissipate normally like spells. Surely those builders won’t suddenly grow wings when they dream of flying, will they?

Wei Wuxian grimaces. He should check on them later, for everyone’s sake.

The proprietress shakes her head rapidly. “No, no! It’s the teapot itself I care about.” With vague gestures, she attempts to paint the picture to someone who is far more ignorant that herself. “You know, the body, and the texture, and how it influences the depth of taste and...” More abrupt motions, followed by a tilt of the head. “You know?”

Wei Wuxian does not, in fact, know, but it’s nice to see someone so young dedicated to their craft. “Of course,” he says.

“This undeserving servant will be forever grateful for your blessing!” With a deep bow, the proprietress beams, then moves to serve the tea.

They both stare as what appears to be liquid gold pours into the cup. Or, rather, it looks like tea, but it shines like gold and smells of something sweet, fruity and floral.

Well, there’s no harm in trying it. If Wei Wuxian manages to poison himself with his own blessing, that’d almost be impressive. The imperative word there is *almost*.

“Um,” the proprietress begins, then cuts off. She’s probably struggling to find the proper words. “That’s not—that’s not normal. Is it?”

Nothing’s ever normal with Wei Wuxian. “No, but it should be fine.” He hesitates, but continues nonetheless. “I think.”

Before the proprietress can say anything else, he brings the cup to his lips and downs it in one go. Maybe it’s unbecoming of a god, but he needs to make sure he didn’t just give this poor disciple a teapot that brews poison, especially when she’s just trying her best to run this very important establishment for the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.

It tastes of... something. It certainly tastes good, very good, actually, but there’s just something so specific and odd about how it tastes that Wei Wuxian can’t put it in words.

It tastes like a feeling. Or a memory. Like hot summers and shooting down kites, racing in rivers, picking lotus pods in boats meant for far fewer than they insist on believing. It sounds like laughter as they call out his name, cheering him on, treating him as a friend and a hero, back in the days when he couldn’t care less about how many people looked at him with stars in their eyes and saw nothing but potential in him.

Wei Wuxian breathes in and puts the cup down. “Well,” he says. His voice wavers, and he steadies it. “That has to be the most unique cup of tea I’ve ever had in my life.”

The proprietress still stares, her gaze flickering between the blessed teapot, the cup, and Wei Wuxian. “Is... is that a good thing?”

“I think it is,” he answers, which is a lie, but only because Wei Wuxian is the world’s most spectacular enigma.

He can’t tell if what he feels are remnants of the life he’s lost or the whispers of the stranger in his ear. It doesn’t matter. Every happy memory only hurts more, because they sneer and say, *Look at*
what you’ve lost. Look at what you’ve done.

Pain is still pain, no matter whose it is.

“I think you should give it a try as well.” He gestures at the other cup. “I have a feeling it might taste different for everyone.”

With furrowed brows, the proprietress mutters, “Different?”

Wei Wuxian shrugs. “Blessings are strange, I suppose.”

The proprietress nods. “Then, if you’ll excuse me.” She quickly pours herself a cup, studies the lustrous gold liquid with the look of a scholar pursuing a particularly complicated manuscript, then finally takes a drink.

Wei Wuxian watches her expression. She hasn’t passed out, which is a good sign. She is, however, silent for a moment too long.

“So,” Wei Wuxian says, mostly to break the silence. “How is it?”

The proprietress continues to stare vacantly at—Wei Wuxian turns to follow her gaze and finds nothing of interest—absolutely nothing.

He hasn’t just ejected her soul from her body, has he? That would be bad. That would be very, very bad. Can he even shove someone’s soul back into their body? Probably, right? If he sings loud enough and pulls hard enough, he could drag the stars out of the sky. If there’s one thing he is, it’s determined.

Then, slowly, abruptly, inevitably, tears begin to drip down the proprietress’ cheeks.

Oh, hang on, that’s not supposed to happen, what happened?

“Um, are you alright?” Leaning in a bit closer, Wei Wuxian tries to see if she’s injured somehow. A rush of relief courses through him when the proprietress blinks and shakes her head, then flushes a deep red. She turns away hurriedly, using her sleeves to wipe away the tears that dot her face. “What happened?”

The proprietress takes a few deep breaths to compose herself. With a light blush still colouring her cheeks and ears, she turns to face Wei Wuxian again. “I...” Her eyes glaze over. “I saw my parents. They weren’t cultivators, so they—during the Sunshot Campaign, in all that chaos, they got caught in the crossfire.”

Wei Wuxian’s stomach drops. There’s blood on his hands and his lips, but he keeps digging. There’s an ache in his chest that burns, and he doesn’t want it. But it is what it is. “I see,” is all he can say.

“I was—I don’t want to say I was happier then, because I’m happy now. But if I could go back, I would, because there was so much that I wanted to say, but I didn’t, because I thought it didn’t matter.” Regret finds a home on her features, twisting them in a way that’s all too familiar to Wei Wuxian. “Happiness is always relative, I suppose. If I were to forget what I had before, I’d probably be perfectly content now.”

The past is a curse. It’s a blessing. It tears people to pieces, it urges them to fight to return to warmer days. But time only moves in one direction, and those who delude themselves into believing that what once was still exists will drown, exhausted and terrified at the end of all things, forever reaching out like children—
Wei Wuxian sighs.

“It’s not much of a blessing I’ve given you,” he says. “To the people here, it’s much more of a curse, isn’t it?”

As if a fire has been lit beneath her, the proprietress snaps up to her full height in a flourish of violet. She looks at him in—anger, or confusion, or something in between. “It isn’t a curse at all!”

For a short moment, all Wei Wuxian feels is surprise. All those humans, some fearful, others revenant, and others still knowing, yet none of them have ever wielded their emotions against him as a weapon.

The late afternoon sun welcomes itself into the parlour, washing the walls in a nostalgic gradient of gold-faded purple. Around them, the faint creaks of wood created by patrons and their curious shifting has stopped, leaving only the gentle sound of the servers moving about, graceful and undisturbed, their robes catching the light of a kind sun.

A single bell chimes in the silence. The finely-crafted silver gleams painfully, sharply, like the fine sheen of a blade. It would catch the light so much better if it were made of crystal, Wei Wuxian thinks distantly. And it would sound much clearer, too.

As if realizing the weight of her actions, the proprietress ducks her head down and sits quickly. There’s no shame in her posture, but she takes care in smoothing out her robes and folding loose strands of hair behind her ear.

“We can’t change what’s happened, but we can try to grow.” The proprietress gestures in that same halting, abrupt manner as she tries to find her words. “There’s a difference between salvaging what’s left and nurturing what’s left, I think. You can try all you want to piece together what’s left, but in the end, it’s how you move on that’s actually worth anything.” Her hands clench as she lifts her resolute gaze to meet Wei Wuxian. “Let the people try this tea for themselves. Let them understand that they can’t go back to the days they hold closest to their hearts, but let them try to make this city into a warm, beautiful place for all the people who will come after them.”

Her words are laden with meaning, but Wei Wuxian hears something else.

So much has been lost, but I will try to make this world a kinder place for those who no longer need to know what it feels like to watch the world burn.

Wei Wuxian lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He feels—he feels—

“I don’t know why you’ve come to Lotus Pier, but I hope it’s to bless us with peace.” The proprietress looks at Wei Wuxian with such hope that it makes him want to close his eyes. “Everyone lost something in the war, but the Yunneng Jiang Sect lost everything. Sect Leader Jiang lost everything, but he still had the time to take in a girl who could only brew tea. It’s hard for them to move on, but everyone’s come together and pushing through it anyway, because they believe things will be alright.” Looking away, the proprietress stubbornly demands, “So you... you have to make sure their efforts are rewarded, okay?”

You hold so much power.

Will this place fall under your hands again?

What can you even do?

Wei Wuxian ignores the whispers. They’ve been worse than usual ever since he stepped foot into
Lotus Pier, and he doesn’t care for it.

His fingers move between the threads of whatever fate has drawn him here, but that isn’t what matters right now. He feels empty; he feels full. He speaks the song of stars; he breathes the life of the world.

There’s nothing he can say, so he says something worth nothing. “My name is Fuxing,” he speaks, feeling a sharp disconnect between his lips and his mind. “They call me a god of luck, fortune, prosperity, whatever word you like best.”

“Fuxing,” the proprietress repeats slowly. It takes a moment, then two, before she pales and her jaw drops. She jerks back, sitting straight like her life depends on it, which she most likely believes to be true. “The revered golden god, one of the Three Stars, the revered—the revered—”

It takes her five tries to realize that she can’t finish her sentence, which only makes her flush harder. So Wei Wuxian fills the silence. “I seek out chaos and grant humans the power to destroy it. I can’t promise peace, but I recognize its importance.” Gods can only do so much. This world isn’t made for the divine, after all. “But this is a place worth helping, and as a god, I have a duty to offer what I can.”

The same eight notes of his lullaby fill the air with saturated gold. Within his hands, a flower blooms.

“Thank you for keeping me company,” says Wei Wuxian, resting the golden peony on the table. He stands, smoothing out his robes, and tilts his weimao downward with a smile. “What’s your name? I’ll put in a good word with Sect Leader Jiang for you.”

The proprietress hurries to stand as well, bowing long and deep. When he lifts her head, she does so vigorously enough that her hair flaps back against her back. “This one is called Jiang Chenyi. And I don’t mean to impose on you after you’ve done so much, but I would very much appreciate it if you could tell Sect Leader Jiang that I’d like to speak to some more merchants in order to get business rolling.”

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian assures, trying as best as he can to put that somewhere in his mind where he’ll actually remember it. Ah, well. He certainly won’t be forgetting Jiang Chenyi anytime soon.

It’s easy to wave goodbye to Jiang Chenyi. It’s difficult to pretend like he doesn’t notice the small crowd watching him as he makes his way out of the teahouse.

It feels familiar. Wei Wuxian walks onward.

He could help out around town more, but Jiang Chenyi asked a favour of him that he’d rather not forget. Besides, it’s about time Wei Wuxian paid a visit to the young Sect Leader Jiang.

(Are you sure?)

Of course he’s sure. What’s there to be afraid of? Wei Wuxian is a god. He doesn’t want much, but he’d like to give his blessing to Lotus Pier. Even as a god, it would be unspeakably arrogant of him to just assume that Sect Leader Jiang wants the touch of something divine on his land.

The touch of a god.

Your touch.

Never again.
Then Sect Leader Jiang can say that for himself.

Above his head, the sun shines down brightly. It bathes Lotus Pier in a cold heat, bringing cold winds and warm rays all at once, sweeping through the newly paved roads busy with chaos and action. The call of merchants rings out above the cacophony of sounds and smells, and it makes Wei Wuxian smile.

As he makes his way toward the Jiang manor, holding his head high with the knowledge that his hands have the power to chase away the darkness that clings to this port city, the townsfolk level strange looks in his direction. They aren’t like before; not heavy or expecting, but rather anxious. Regardless, they point him toward the river and urge him to “try and understand”.

“Certainly,” he assures them, utterly ignorant as to what they mean. He can tell, however, that empty words are better than none at all.

The walk isn’t as long as Wei Wuxian would’ve liked it to be, but he finds it difficult not to enjoy Lotus Pier in its rawest form, having been dismantled so thoroughly by the carelessness of youth, rebuilt by the knowledge that the only thing you can’t give up on is yourself. The Yunmeng Jiang Sect has always produced disciples with a certain kind of hot-headed determination, stoked on by the stifling heat of summer.

Faintly, Wei Wuxian remembers moaning about the injustice of nature under fog-like humidity, splayed on the cold floor of vacant halls, surrounded by good-natured laughter.

It’s a rare moment of kindness in memories he knows are his. They don’t sing to him, and he doesn’t sing back. They wait for the other. Quietly. Patiently.

Wei Wuxian hears it before he sees it.

It’s the sound of swords clashing and arrows piercing into wood. The methodical cries of training are comforting sounds, reminding him that Lotus Pier has a promising future, both as a home to nurture and to return to.

The training grounds separate the rest of Lotus Pier from the Jiang manor. Unlike other sects, the Yunmeng Jiang Sect has never cared much for holding themselves above the common people, and Wei Wuxian feels that much better for it. When he approaches the sprawling grounds adorned with wooden posts, all bearing marks left by aspiring cultivators, he nods to the townsfolk who have come to watch their benefactors at work.

They bow back, quickly dispersing into a concentrated group of their own. Whispers and murmurs fly between them, accompanied by fleeting glances toward the god before them.

Wei Wuxian adjusts his weimao, smiles, then steps onto the well-worn grounds he has walked upon so many times.

The first disciple to spot him lowers his sword. His sparring partner catches his wide-eyed expression and lowers her sword as well. One by one, they all fall silent, as if time itself has stopped.

To be greeted with silence is almost worse than to have not been greeted at all. Thankfully, Wei Wuxian has long since grown accustomed to shock, displeasure, and fear as a reaction to his divine presence.

“Hello,” Wei Wuxian says, his tone light and airy, ethereal and fleeting. “You’re all disciples of the
Yunmeng Jiang Sect, aren’t you?” He scans the faces before him, finds soft cheeks and round eyes not yet honed by battle. “Young ones, too. Well met.”

“You’re—” One of the bolder disciples, a girl with a single braid tied back into a ponytail, steps in front of the others. Trepidation creeps onto her features with every passing moment, but she fixes her lips into a thin line and stands her ground. “Who are you? Do you have business with the Yunmeng Jiang Sect?”

“I do,” answers Wei Wuxian. “I’ve been here for half a day now. Didn’t you see the waterworks by the pier?”

The disciples discuss amongst themselves. The braided girl listens in, nods every now and then, and turns back. “You’re not supposed to hunt monsters here. Lotus Pier is Yunmeng Jiang territory, so you have to ask permission before doing anything like that.”

“Yes, I’m well aware,” he says. “If possible, I’d like to speak to your Sect Leader about that little incident. Would you do this foolish god a favour and fetch him for me?”

At the word god, all the disciples pale. One fumbles with his bow, dropping his quiver to the ground with a loud clatter. All eyes snap to him, and the braided girl makes a violent cutting motion, hissing something inaudible. The poor boy looks as if he’s prepared to embrace death.

With something between despair and determination, the girl gestures at her sparring partner. “Go tell Sect Leader Jiang,” she says, pausing and taking a deep breath, “that a god wants to talk to him.”

The boy nods, sheathes his blade, and runs off toward the manor without looking back.

With that said and done, the disciples squirm in the presence of a supposed god. Their youth, an endless source of energy and curiosity, has betrayed them in this instance, making them shy and unsure of how to behave in the presence of a being from legends.

Wei Wuxian grins. He’s never found status to be a terrifying trait, but to come face-to-face with the physical form of luck wearing the face of a man is a situation that would discomfort most.

“You seem quite young,” Wei Wuxian states, raising a hand to his chin. A wide smile breaks onto his face. “Congratulations on being accepted by the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. You must all be striving to reach great heights of cultivation.”

The braided girl bears his gaze with formidable strength. “Of course,” she says hotly. “Why else would we be here?”

“Fame, glory, wealth, self-worth, family,” Wei Wuxian answers, casually listing off only a few of the many, many reasons he can think of.

“We wouldn’t stoop so low as to—as to let greed be our guide!”

“Is that so?”

Stepping forward, one slow stride at a time, Wei Wuxian lifts the edge of his weimao and allows the stars in his eyes to swirl on, endlessly, chaotically, into the dark of a future that has yet to come.

“You say that as if it’s something to be ashamed of,” he sighs, finding faint amusement in how the disciples gape. “That’s very sad to hear. After all, as a god of fortune, I exist because of human greed.”
The phrase *god of fortune* holds as much reverence as it does fear, and in no moment is it made more clear than when the disciples gasp loudly, backing away in a disorganized group, some already bowing, others hesitating between standing their ground or chasing after the boy who went in search of their Sect Leader.

“But you—that can’t—” Every word that is born on the braided girl’s lips dies. She makes an aborted motion for her sword, then quickly remembers her place. In an attempt to regain her composure, she blurts out, “Your name! If you’re a god, what’s your name?”

Wei Wuxian smiles as he brushes his veil aside. To be honest, he doesn’t care much for his name or what he’s called, as long as it isn’t what he calls himself. “My name is Fuxing.”

“You name is Fuxing,” the girl repeats unsteadily, taking a few steps back. She doesn’t look well. “The... the Golden God of Prosperity, the auspicious star, the first of the Three Stars, the embodiment of miracles, the—the—”

“You know more names for me than I know for myself,” Wei Wuxian laughs.

No matter what life he lives or what aura he wears, his reputation will always precede him, it seems.

“Well then,” he begins, clapping his hands together, “I didn’t mean to disturb your training. If your Sect Leader comes and sees all of you slacking off, he wouldn’t be too happy, now would he?”

The disciples look for the answer in one another other. Between the revered Golden God and the thunderous Sandu Shengshou, which one is more terrifying?

After some deliberation, they come to the correct answer: the young and proud Jiang Wanyin. The braided girl hurries everyone into picking up their weapons and returning to whatever task they were practicing diligently before.

As she draws her own blade, the braided girl throws Wei Wuxian an anxious look. “Don’t tell Sect Leader Jiang,” she says, a pleading note rising in her throat.

“You have my word,” Wei Wuxian promises.

It takes a while for the disciples to force the shivers and shakes from their bodies, but with the monotonous repetition of exchanging blows and drawing back bowstrings, they slowly but surely slip into their own minds.

As Wei Wuxian watches, it becomes evident to him that these disciples are most likely the children of clans destroyed by the Qishan Wen Sect. Jiang Wanyin made a name for himself on the battlefields of the Sunshot Campaign, wielding Sandu in one hand and Zidian in the other; he brought storms to his enemies with his very presence, his every strike a clap of lightning, his rage an undying tempest.

He was never good at controlling his temper. If things had been kinder, perhaps time would have quelled his anger.

Temperamental or not, Jiang Wanyin’s name is not one to scoff at. Wei Wuxian has no doubt that those who watched as he tore through his enemies were eager to pledge their allegiance to the battered Yunmeng Jiang Sect.

(Perhaps he watched Jiang Wanyin carve his place out in cultivation history, too. Perhaps he fought alongside him.)
The braided girl’s brows are furrowed as she trades blow for blow against her sparring partner. Even though Wei Wuxian can see their motions slowly becoming reflex, something about their stance doesn’t sit right with him.

He slowly realizes. Between rebuilding Lotus Pier, earning merits, and raising a child, who would have time to do all three and train some children?

Distantly, he wonders, raising a child? Where did that come from?

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian calls, clapping his hands again to get the disciples’ attention. They all jump, some more violently than others. “Get over here, all of you. It seems you don’t have a senior leading your training, so I’ll enroll myself in your ranks for a short while.”

“But that’s not allowed,” one of the boys splutters, hugging the hilt of his sword to his chest with both hands.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Wei Wuxian says, waving his hand dismissively. “But your stances are warped beyond recognition. You all carry the name Jiang, don’t you? As you are right now, no sensible cultivator would see that in the way you use your swords.” Beckoning for them to come closer, he ushers, “Come on, now. I won’t bite.”

To their credit, the disciples move in to face him in three straight lines. Even the archers drop their bows in favour of picking up their swords, if not a bit nervously.

Wei Wuxian studies their expressions, then gestures toward the braided girl. “You. You’re the senior disciple in this group, aren’t you?”

Surprise raises the girl’s brows, but she holds her head high with righteous pride. “I am,” she says.

“Very good. Step forward.”

The girl steps in front of Wei Wuxian, keeping a respectable distance between them. Her eyes narrow, half in confusion, half in suspicion. Lifting one hand to rest on the hilt of her sword, she answers, “Yes, sir.”

It’s more subdued than it would normally be, but Wei Wuxian cares little for how he’s addressed. Formality is a luxury, not an honour.

“Let me see your stance,” Wei Wuxian commands. “Raise your blade however you want, or how you’ve been taught.” When the girl hesitates, unsure if it’s blasphemous to point her sword at a god, he shakes his head. “Imagine me as your enemy. I’ve insulted your honour. I’ve made some threatening remarks. I certainly expect to be put into place. What do you do?”

The girl presses her lips into a thin line. With a deep exhale, she draws her sword, a finely crafted blade adorned with a crescent moon, and levels it at Wei Wuxian. Her eyes burn with embers that will one day be stoked into raging fires.

Her posture isn’t bad. For someone who most likely had very little formal training before joining the Yunmeng Jiang Sect, it’s actually quite impressive.

“Now what?” the girl asks, shifting her balance from side to side, as if expecting an attack.

It’s a good habit to have. Very good, in fact, for what follows.
Wei Wuxian smiles as he flicks a single coin out of his sleeve, snatching it by the hilt when it materializes into its full, golden glory. Under the orange light of the falling sun, the sword gleams a brazen crimson, dragging the warm light down the length of its sigil-etched blade.

“Now,” he says, resting the blade against the girl’s sword, “listen carefully. Watch carefully. I have no intention of harming you, but I welcome any hostility you have toward me. I’ll show you how to exchange blows as a disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.” He pauses and watches as the girl’s expression melts from silent shock to fierce determination. “Understand?”

“Of course,” the girl says roughly. She jerks her head toward the rest of the disciples, and they move silently into formation, separating into groups of two. They draw their blades in tandem, cross them, and wait eagerly.

They’re extraordinarily disciplined, just inexperienced. Good. This is very workable.

“Go ahead and try to land a hit on me,” says Wei Wuxian, his lips curling into a grin.

He doesn’t need to convince the girl further. As soon as the words leave his lips, she lunges forward with a vengeance, twisting her body to strike at the weakest point she can find.

She’s quite lethal, because the first place she thinks to open a wound is Wei Wuxian’s neck.

It takes little effort to step out of the way, knock the girl’s blade from her hand, and twist her arm against her back. He does so, of course, as gently as he can manage, just enough to make his point clear.

With a flush crawling to her ears, the girl struggles in his grip. “That’s foul play!” she shouts accusingly, stumbling to scoop up her sword as soon as Wei Wuxian releases her. “You don’t have —you don’t have any etiquette!”

“Etiquette,” says Wei Wuxian, twirling his blade to familiarize himself with its balance, “is for people who have too much time on their hands.” With a raised brow, he throws a joking smile at the girl. “If we were in Gusu and had to follow their three thousand-some rules, it’d be a different story.”

The girl grumbles, readying her stance once more. “Then what do you want me to do?”

“Come at me again,” Wei Wuxian commands. “And remember: no formality. I’ll disarm you every time you try to mimic anyone else.”

Back and forth and onto the ground, Wei Wuxian trades blows with the girl. He disarms her again and again, but she picks up her sword every time and stares him down with an unspoken promise.

When she attempts a maneuver that’s far too ornate and complicated for something as simple as a duel, Wei Wuxian disarms her.

“What are you trying to do?” he asks, tossing her sword back to her. “Are you trying to draw something with your sword? A blade will cut no matter how you land it. We don’t have the luxury of showmanship that the Lanling Jin Sect has. Get to the point.”

When she loses her temper and swings at him in exaggerated, wide arcs, Wei Wuxian disarms her.

Again, he throws her sword back. “Anger is a fine motivator, but if you let your emotions control your sword, you might as well stab yourself in the foot and be done with it. Even the Qinghe Nie Sect understands that they have to control their anger. Why don’t you?”
Again and again, over and over. Slowly but surely, the girl begins to understand his movements and adopt them, parrying more blows and dodging more counters. When she falls to the ground, she tries to take Wei Wuxian with her, and one she stumbles back, she rights herself, but not before kicking dirt in his face. In one particularly audacious move, she catches his sword in her tassel and almost succeeds in disarming him.

It’s very impressive. She can’t be older than fifteen, yet her prowess with a blade is impossible to ignore. With continued practice and the right guidance, she could very well take on senior cultivators and give them a little surprise here or there.

Time for a test, then.

Wei Wuxian lunges in, his sword etching a deep gash into the earth beneath his feet as he arcs it up.

The girl’s eyes widen in an instant. With a curse, she leaps out of the way and swings the mightiest punch she can muster at Wei Wuxian’s face.

He takes it in stride. His cheek throbs, of course, but he finds himself beaming. “Well done!”

Turning to the other disciples, he asks, “Did you catch that?”

They nod quickly, nervously, eyeing the girl with something between shock and disbelief. The girl looks down at her fist, blinking rapidly, her mouth open just a little.

“You did very well,” he tells the girl. To adapt to teachings so quickly is an incredible skill to have.

“Do understand what it is the Yunmeng Jiang Sect brings into battle?”

At first, the girl is silent. Her sword hangs by her side, and her fingers slowly unclench around the hilt. Then, as something in her eyes sparks, she raises her head. “It’s... endurance, ” she declares. “Or stamina. It’s about fighting to win, not just to fight.”

Wei Wuxian nods. “Kick, punch, struggle and retaliate with all your might.” He holds his golden sword before him, then throws it upward, where it shatters into ethereal fragments. “A blade should only be drawn when you mean to end a fight. Then, of course, the most honourable thing you can do is end it as quickly as possible. Or, if your opponent is being stubborn, outlast them.”

That’s how the Yunmeng Jiang Sect has always made it to tomorrow. Even if everything has fallen, a life is a valuable gift and a fine weapon.

With his spiel finished, Wei Wuxian turns to the girl and tells her to supervise the other disciples as they spar. She nods, then hurries off to whip her fellow disciples into shape.

Before he’s done, though, there’s one more thing he needs to say. “Oh, and if anyone asks where you learned this from—”

“Then,” a new voice says, cutting deep into Wei Wuxian’s flesh even without a blade and twisting deep into his heart, “I’ll have to ask for your name.”

There is a storm that rages, and the beast within him is terrified. No, it cries, clawing desperately at the walls that trap it in. No, not like this, I didn’t mean to.

The stranger is absent, and even so, Wei Wuxian hurts, he feels nauseous, he wants to go far away and never return—

But he’s better than that. He’s above that. So he pulls his weimao down, steadies his veil, and turns to face the formidable Jiang Wanyin.
In the darkest depths of his mind, Wei Wuxian thinks, *he looks just like he did before.*

From an outsider’s perspective, there is little to indicate any difference between a disciple and the Sect Leader from their uniforms. There is power in unity, and unlike the Gusu Lan Sect, which holds their precious rules above all else, those who wear those purple robes stand together to form a wall, a fortress against attack. They stand together. They fall together.

And the most formidable of all of them is the man who stands before Wei Wuxian, thunder in his voice and lightning in his hands. His eyes hold the same fury as they did before, and distantly, Wei Wuxian wonders if the fire that burns within him has ever rested.

“What a welcoming sight,” Wei Wuxian says blandly, taking in Jiang Wanyin’s tense posture, the snarl on his lips, and Zidian in his hands. His heart pounds so quickly that it almost aches.

Jiang Wanyin isn’t dissuaded in the slightest. If anything, his hackles rise even further, and the sharp smell of an oncoming storm surrounds him. “Get out,” he snaps at the disciples, who quickly flee the scene, wide-eyed and terrified.

The braided-hair girl looks back at Wei Wuxian one final time, then joins the rest of her friends. Their figures disappear into the manor, so small against the looming shadows that cast upon them.

“Well met, Sect Leader Jiang,” Wei Wuxian says, balancing his words like a newborn’s first steps. His voice wavers for a moment, and he rights it in a single breath. “It seems you’ve been eager to meet me as well.”

Anger doesn’t deserve to find a home so readily on Jiang Wanyin’s features, but it’s festered too deep and for too long. “I would recognize that voice anywhere.” His voice rises as he marches toward Wei Wuxian. “So you’ve come back, have you?”

“Not this again,” Wei Wuxian sighs, spreading his hands.

The sect leader barely stumbles. He only moves forward, always, never stopping, never resting.

(Things are never easy with Jiang Cheng.)

Wei Wuxian releases a sharp whistle. The sound pierces through to the stars, dragging them down in the form of arches that snap down on Zidian, pining it to the ground. Even still, Wei Wuxian holds a tight grip on his strings.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” says Wei Wuxian, the warning evident in his voice, “Jiang Wanyin. If I’ve done something to offend you, I would prefer we hold a civil conversation instead of jumping to conclusions.”

“Don’t think you can fool me with your shoddy acting,” Jiang Wanyin says, his voice as cold as Wei Wuxian feels. “How dare you come here. After everything you’ve done, everyone you’ve killed, do you still believe you belong somewhere?”
The words are like poison in Wei Wuxian’s blood. It trickles slowly, quietly, filling his lungs and his heart until he drowns in his own hypocrisy. He’s dying, and the one who led the storm home was nobody but himself.

Or so he feels. But if there’s one thing Wei Wuxian has learned, it’s that his feelings will always find a way to betray him.

“Jiang Wanyin,” Wei Wuxian calls. Listen to me, he doesn’t say. “I have had this conversation a thousand times, and I would very much appreciate it if you didn’t force me to repeat it.”

For a moment, something flickers on the young sect leader’s face. “What conversation?”

Wei Wuxian allows his grip to loosen. “This may sound very foolish to you, but gods of luck are born with abysmal luck,” he says. When confusion clashes with anger, Wei Wuxian sighs. “Imagine being born into the world, not a memory to your name, with the form of a demon. You can imagine how bewildered I was when people began calling me by a name I was entirely unfamiliar with.”

Every word is a lie. He takes a breath and feels a blade in his gut. He looks down and sees nothing but peonies.

As suspicion takes anger’s place, his eyes narrow. The aura of his lightning surrounds him, protects him. “And what name was that,” Jiang Wanyin demands, not asks.

“Why, Wei Wuxian, the infamous man-turned-monster,” he says, forcing his own name off his tongue as fluidly as he can feign. Putting on a bitter smile, Wei Wuxian lifts his eyes for Jiang Wanyin, wondering if he’ll ever find what he’s searching for in that endless spiral of stars. “That treacherous man must have been dragged to the deepest depths of hell to suffer. It’s unfortunate that I’ve been given the form of such a vile thing, but—”

Zidian snaps with a violence and fury that startles Wei Wuxian from his words. It writhes under the divine grip of the stars, burning deep gashes into the ground like a caged beast.

Jiang Wanyin’s face is warped with a rage so palpable that Wei Wuxian can feel the flames on his skin. “Don’t you dare speak of him so casually!”

Why is he so furious? The Yiling Patriarch belongs to everybody in the sense that he’s slandered and spit on by everyone. Yet here Jiang Wanyin stands, holding the right to his existence as if it’s an heirloom, and Wei Wuxian is rightly confused.

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian finally says, relenting. With a snap of his fingers, the arches disappear. “Well, you’ve heard me out. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to convince you, but think long and hard if the heavens would ever choose a murderer to fill the position as a god of luck. After all—”

A small small, a tilt of the head. The stars in Wei Wuxian’s eyes shine like they never have before.

“Gods exist to save those who suffer. Was the Yiling Patriarch ever able to save anyone?”

There’s a war waging within Jiang Wanyin, and it shows on his face. His breathes are deep and ragged, then shallow and quick, and he finally dispels Zidian.

“You will remain in Lotus Pier until you—prove yourself worthy of your words,” snaps Jiang Wanyin, the stumble in his words almost imperceptible. His every word is a command, and Wei Wuxian is beholden to him. “If you’re lying, then you’ll greet death for the second time at my hands.”
Maybe I’ll stay gone this time, something within him whispers, unable to tear itself from the darkness that falls over the sect leader’s face.

The stranger’s back, is he? Good. Let him watch, and let him die.

Wei Wuxian lets his head fall slightly to the side. “If I really cared about my status, I wouldn’t be so kind.” He shakes his head, then gives a tired smile. “But I’ll accept your generous hospitality. What would you have me do, Sect Leader Jiang?”

The question feels right. In a kinder world, the words would be spoken again and again, until the sun set on a world at peace and two brothers united, always, never—

There is something here that he has lost and can never reclaim. It’s alright.

Jiang Chenyi said to him, there’s a difference between salvaging what’s left and nurturing what’s left.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t even know what he’s nurturing. All he knows is that he wants it to heal and prosper.

Before him, Jiang Wanyin is unmoving. He studies Wei Wuxian’s form for a long time, but no matter where he looks, all he sees is a god.

“You will watch the junior disciples and see to their training,” he says at last, spitting out the words as if to rid himself of them as quickly as possible.

“Very well,” Wei Wuxian answers with a dip of his head. “Then I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

As he turns to leave the training grounds, fully prepared to seek out the inn from whence he came, Jiang Wanyin’s sharp voice calls out, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To an inn.” Gesturing to the setting sun, Wei Wuxian stares back. “Is there something wrong?”

“You’ll stay in the Jiang manor,” the young sect leader orders. His voice leaves no room for debate, and his eyes are dark.

That isn’t a problem, but the way Jiang Wanyin curses and looks away says otherwise. Regardless, Wei Wuxian is in no position to argue. He has no reason to argue.

“Then,” he begins, unsure of what to say, “if you could please lead the way. I would appreciate it greatly.”

Jiang Wanyin turns before he can speak any further. Lightning arcs in his steps, lashing out at anything that moves, but Wei Wuxian follows closely behind.

You can demand anything of me, he thinks, feeling his heart close as the shadow of the manor falls over him and the cold of the halls strikes his very soul.

I will try to do better, he thinks, struggling to remove a blade in his stomach that doesn’t exist.

I’m sorry, he can’t say, because his words will never be enough.

He feels empty. He feels full. He’s so, so empty, reaching out desperately to fill the ache inside him; he is utterly full, having gorged himself on all those he killed. He is nothing. He is everything. It doesn’t matter anymore.
I missed you, he wants to say, the desire clinging to his lips so desperately that the words almost spring from his tongue.

But it’s too late. There’s no fixing what has been torn apart.

All Wei Wuxian can do now is reach out and try to build something better, something brighter, where the sins of the past can finally give way to the beauty of the future.

Once, twice, three times. To trust someone fully is to heal. Slowly but surely, the wounds will mend. The bridges will be built.

Step by step, Wei Wuxian follows after Jiang Cheng.

(I broke my promise. I couldn’t stand by you then. I’m sorry.
But I’m here now. I’m here. I’m here.
Whether or not you accept me—
Whether or not you forgive me—
I’ll be here.)

The river by Lotus Pier is a marvel of nature, vast but gentle, a silent being that cuts its way through the earth and eases the very essence of life into the path it treads. The first settlers who found their way to the edge of the waters must have looked deep into the strange world that reflected back, eyes full of wonder, for if they simply reached out their hands a little further, the stars would be within their reach, blooming among a sea of lotus flowers.

When the early morning sun peeks just over the horizon, all is still until the first of the boats set sail to collect the lanterns that float by the pier, the gilded lotus lights that guide the way for those who travel under the veil of night.

Wei Wuxian believes that most of the boatmen despise him with a burning passion. He is, after all, their local god-turned-menace.

Standing atop the roof of the disciples’ quarters, Wei Wuxian clears his throat.

Then, raising two golden swords in above his head, he clashes them together with an awful, dissonant sound that pierces violently through the haze of sleep. The very air around him vibrates, shakes, and shatters as Wei Wuxian gleefully hops from roof to roof, knowing very well that the children must be scrambling to arm themselves.

“Wake up!” he yells, throwing his own tone to the cacophony. “You know the drill! The lucky disciple who gets the most lanterns chooses who goes in the river!”

Beneath him, the disciples barge through the doors as if they’ve been possessed. They barely look at Wei Wuxian, instead choosing to mount their swords as swiftly as possible. In mere moments, all of them have already shot off toward the pier.

As someone who has a fraction of the energy these lively, chaotic children possess, Wei Wuxian opts
for a leisurely stroll instead. He leaps from rooftop to rooftop lightly, taking care not to disrupt the rare few who sleep on even after witnessing calamity incarnate pass over their heads.

A familiar group atop the watchtowers catches his eye.

“Good morning,” he greets the night watchmen, who peer down at him from the towers with such stony expressions that they could become one with the walls and look no different. Wei Wuxian levels his typical bright smile at them, and as usual, it’s as effective as attempting to charm a wall into moving. “I’m sorry for the noise. Children will be children.”

The guards sigh as if to expel all the life from their bodies. “Yes, of course,” one of them snarks back, deadpan as always. “The whims of gods and children are far too complex for mortals like us to understand.”

The others nod despairingly, running their hands down their faces in half-hearted attempts to scrub the exhaustion from their eyes. With the arrival of their junior disciples, their shifts are officially done for the day. In any other circumstance, they would most likely thank the gods for their mercy, but ever since meeting Wei Wuxian, their silent mutterings have ceased entirely.

It’s a respectable decision. Wei Wuxian wouldn’t put his faith in any god, much less himself.

As the sun slowly begins its ascent into the vacant skies, it leaves the echo of night in its wake. The clouds tear and shred in its presence, folding into whatever shape the morning light bends it into, awash with any and all radiance they can capture within their tumultuous forms.

It’s a good day. It’s a normal day. It’s simply a day, a morning, and that’s what makes it beautiful.

There is laughter in the wind that doesn’t belong to him or to anyone else. However far it should carry, however long it should choose to resonate, it’s a choice to be made by those who hold enough courage and innocence to face any challenge and find humour in the absurdity of it all.

That’s exactly what Wei Wuxian has been training these disciples to do, after all.

The wood beneath his shoes is already slick with remnants of what can only have been a battle for the few remaining lotus lanterns. Before him, panting and heaving and protecting their collection of lanterns as if their very lives depend on them, are sixteen children that any lesser person would assume attempted to bring bloody vengeance to the river and fled in disgrace when they learned that you cannot, in fact, win against nature.

Among all of them, there isn’t a single set of purple robes that can be considered remotely dry.

“Well done,” Wei Wuxian chirps, pinning the veil of his weimao back. “You get faster and faster every day. Nobody fell in the river this time, I hope?”

Sixteen razor-sharp smiles rise to meet his challenge. They used to be so shy, so meek, so unsure of how to treat a god, and now they point unseen knives at him with glee.

With a dignified huff, Wei Wuxian gestures dismissively. “Fine, fine. Count away. Who won this time?”

Common courtesy dictates that the disciples lay down their swords as a gesture of peace, but competition reasons that it’s only natural to set down territorial markings as to avoid accidentally counting another’s lanterns.

Faint mumbles fill the air, slowly trailing off as those who realize they didn’t fly quickly enough
curse under their breaths and fall back onto the wet wood. One by one, the methodical counting fades, until only one voice fills the void.

“Seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three,” the last disciple says, rising in both volume and pride when he realizes he’s won. “Seventy-four,” he continues smugly, placing down another lotus lantern down with purpose. “Seventy-five, seventy-six!”

Some cheer, some huff with frustration, and some petulantly shout, “That isn’t a record or anything!” Seventy-six isn’t a record, but it’s an impressive number nonetheless. It doesn’t make a difference. Wei Wuxian feels the same pride swell in his stomach whether the number is one or one hundred.

“Alright, settle down,” he says, waving for everyone to sit down. They do so without complaint, falling onto the pier as the tension drains from their limbs and the weight of their waterlogged robes begins to outweigh their excitement.

With their morning routine completed, there’s only one thing left to do.

Wei Wuxian turns to the victor, removes his weimao, and hands it to him. The boy takes it gingerly, splaying golden peonies across his arms, but his self-satisfied smile betrays him.

“Since I won,” the boy says, reciting the same words Wei Wuxian has heard every morning for the past six months, “I choose Fuxing to get thrown into the river!”

Immediately, the children all surge up in one united wave, wearing grins that smell of mischief and the endless blue skies after heavy rains. They push at him with their tiny hands, still so soft and warm, laughing like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

When Wei Wuxian’s feet are just barely over the edge of the pier, the disciples take one deep breath and shout, “Are you ready?”

“Of course,” he answers, and the words barely leave his lips before a force far greater than children should be able to exert throws him into the river.

He is, as usual, wearing his divine garments. There’s a sadistic sort of enjoyment to be had in ruining something precious, and Wei Wuxian won’t take that away from the juniors. By the time he’s had enough of watching the current go by, they’ll have all finished breakfast and completed their sword forms.

For now, Wei Wuxian is alone, and he is at peace.

The world beneath the surface of the water is a quiet one. At first, all that fills his ears is the rush of his robes and the beat of his own heart. Humans have an urge to feel proof of their own lives no matter where they are, and Wei Wuxian is no different.

But as he raises his hands to his ears, the faint rumbling of his blood becomes the steady heartbeat of the world. He opens his eyes to a land that is cold and dark but not unwelcoming. The light that peers through the ebbing boundary above him scatters like falling stars, etching rippling lines of marble onto everything it touches.

Wei Wuxian allows himself to be one with the water for only a moment.

He has a duty here, and under no circumstances will he allow himself to shirk it. So he shakes himself free of his thoughtless daydreams, breaks the surface of the river, and lifts himself back onto the pier with the aid of his strings.
"I see you still insist on forcing your childish ways upon the junior disciples."

There is a storm that finds its home in Lotus Pier. It wields its fury in furious bolts of lightning and roars of thunder. There is a storm in Lotus Pier, but no storm can rage forever; what lies between those spectacular bursts of energy are endless blue skies, so utterly kind and proud.

There is a storm that protects Lotus Pier, and upon its shoulders rests the regalia of a man beholden to a world that has given him nothing.

(Wisteria. Jiang Wanyin is like wisteria. He will hold onto what he loves even if it should break in his grasp.)

"Jiang Wanyin," Wei Wuxian greets, nodding his head. His robes cling to his body and drip into a sizeable puddle, but he smiles all the same. "Good morning. I sincerely apologize if we woke you up."

"Don’t flatter yourself," the sect leader says, unimpressed. His arms are crossed in that achingly proud posture of his that always smells distantly of rain. "I thought I told you to stop fooling around and take your duties seriously months ago, yet you’re still doing—" A sharp gesture, a half-twist of the wrist, followed by an expression of displeasure. "Whatever this nonsense is."

Despite the disapproval in Jiang Wanyin’s voice, Wei Wuxian knows that it holds no real animosity. The fire in those eyes burns, burns, and burns, but only when something throws more kindling into the flames. Exhaustion and weariness are far more common on his stiff features.

So Wei Wuxian instead focuses on wringing out his robes, weaving drying sigils onto the waterlogged garments once he’s done. "There’s more to training than meditation and sword forms," he says. "Spiritual growth is fine for a cultivator, but it’s emotional growth that makes a respectable person respectable. Let the other sects have their disciples repeat the same dull days over and over; it’ll take tragedy for them to mature, but the children of Yunmeng will learn to flourish without drawing their blades."

Jiang Wanyin’s unwavering gaze studies Wei Wuxian and relents by only a fraction when he finds no deceit. "If you were anything less than a god, I would throw you out of Lotus Pier and see that you never return," he snaps.

"If I gave you empty results, I’d throw myself out," Wei Wuxian says, offering a bright grin. "But the juniors have been making incredible progress with their cultivation, haven’t they? So they’ll keep collecting lanterns and pushing me into the river."

With a snap of his fingers, heat dances from the collar of his robes down to his feet, expelling the water into a neat orb and crushing it with vaporizing heat. A passing boatman gives him an irritated glare for having disrupted his morning routine with sixteen audacious children on flying swords.

Wei Wuxian waves back. Jiang Wanyin snorts. The boatman, upon catching sight of Lotus Pier’s revered sect leader, bows in a fluster.

"Well, I doubt you went through such lengths to find me so early in the morning when you could have left it all for dinner," Wei Wuxian says, setting his weimao back on his head. "Is there something you need me to do?"

Jiang Wanyin lets out a short huff. "The Discussion Conference is taking place in Lanling this year," he explains.

That’s some ways northeast of Yunmeng. Wei Wuxian has yet to travel any further than Yunmeng.
and though he feels no yearning to reach more distant horizons, he would like to see how far his freedom will take him. “I see.”

“I have no doubt whatsoever that the Lanling Jin Sect will shamelessly flaunt all their newly acquired assets regardless of what Jin Guangyao says,” Jiang Wanyin spits, viciously displeased.

Wei Wuxian isn’t surprised. The death of the Yiling Patriarch left a void in the cultivation world; those who banded together to defeat him were quick to stumble over each other in an attempt to be the one to fill that void. With riches and status, it isn’t very surprising that the Lanling Jin Sect should find their footing faster than any others.

Jin Guangshan’s death was a small blessing. Under the guidance of Jin Guangyao, perhaps there will be brighter days ahead.

“It’s quite petty,” Wei Wuxian mutters, the faintest itch of irritation scratching at him, “and very arrogant.”

“Of course it is,” Jiang Wanyin says, and Zidian’s sharp scent reaches Wei Wuxian’s nose for a short moment. Then the sect leader’s stormy eyes give way to something else, and he lifts his chin. “Which is why you’ll be going with to the Discussion Conference as well.”

For a moment, Wei Wuxian finds himself at a loss for words. His stomach through his feet and he feels dizzy.

So many cultivators, all with familiar names, familiar faces, united in their hatred for him, demanding his swift and painful annihilation—yet he couldn’t care less what their names are, what sickly blood they carry in their veins, what pointless drivel spouts from their filthy mouths. All he wants is for everything before him to end, to stop breathing, to stop living, to stop existing, and in the emptiness that follows after, he wants to tear his heart to shreds and laugh at how trivial, how utterly absurd every waking moment of his life has been. He wants there to be silence. He wants to be alone. He wants to end.

And then he breathes, his hands flush with gold, and there is a man who has lost far too much and gained far too little standing before him, his eyes narrowed as he watches Wei Wuxian blink rapidly.

Wei Wuxian coughs into his sleeve. He tastes blood on his tongue that he knows doesn’t exist. There are words on his tongue that linger even after all this time, and he is very careful not to ever let them slip.

Instead, he lets his head fall to the side, blinks innocently, and asks, “Is that a wise decision?”

Jiang Wanyin’s burning gaze flickers once, twice, and finally finds a home in the lonely pavilion that stands among in the most beautiful of lotus flowers. “It’s my decision,” he declares, an ice that burns like fire coating every word. “They may think me young and naive, but I refuse to let them look at Yunmeng and see something pitiful.”

His last words are bitter and cutting, a challenge to the entire world.

Jiang Wanyin’s pride is a mystifying thing. There’s nothing that can be compared to it; its existence is far too unique and complex to degrade into something simpler. If Wei Wuxian were a foolish man, he would say it resembles the sun, always present no matter how devastating the storm or formidable the tempest.

It’s accurate, in some ways. But Wei Wuxian knows better.
Jiang Wanyin’s pride is a mystifying thing because it’s so deeply intertwined with who he is as a person. And Jiang Wanyin is a mystifying man.

“I don’t belong to anyone,” Wei Wuxian says. He feels wrong. His hands are clammy and his mouth is dry. He shouldn’t say this. He needs to. “I’ll bless your disciples, your lands, and your future, but you will not use my name as a weapon.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Jiang Wanyin sneers, his fury turning on Wei Wuxian like a wildfire. “When did I ask to own you?”

He never did. Wei Wuxian is just a coward.

Always, forever, Jiang Wanyin is swathed in so much despair and anger, yet what twists his expression is something desperate. His voice is younger, he smells of ash, there are hands closing around Wei Wuxian’s neck that burn with hatred and demand he return the lives he stole. “You’ve left your touch everywhere in Lotus Pier. In the buildings, the people, the disciples—you can never get enough, can you?”

Wei Wuxian can’t breathe. The flames choke out his every breath, filling him with soot as black as night. “Jiang Wanyin—”

“No matter what, you always find a way to take everything!” Jiang Wanyin’s voice is all around him; it doesn’t exist, it is born again. It echoes forever, it is, it isn’t. The smell of lightning surrounds him, and the storm is endless. “Is it entertaining, having the luxury of choosing your own home? Does it make you laugh when you’re given the things we have to fight for? When will you be satisfied?”

He rages, he despairs, he seeks answers from a shattered mirror. He grasps at the remnants of something that has died and will never return.

“Jiang Wanyin,” Wei Wuxian says, forcing the thrum of divinity into his voice. It tastes of sickly sweet honey and drips down his throat like blood. “You should hold those questions to your heart until you find the one who truly needs to hear them.”

In an instant, Jiang Wanyin’s breath stutters, and his fury wavers.

Wei Wuxian is many things, but he is not the man Jiang Wanyin is searching for.

Distantly, Wei Wuxian thinks of how the disciples will stare at him with innocent curiosity when he is late to give them their guidance for the day.

There’s no use in continuing this conversation. “I won’t go to the Discussion Conference,” Wei Wuxian says, following the slump of Jiang Wanyin’s shoulders as exhaustion finally catches up to the young sect leader. “Politics have always been a travesty of a thing to me. You know that flaunting a god before the eyes of the entire cultivation world will only bring chaos to Lotus Pier.”

The thought of being paraded through golden streets as a weapon is sickening. It cuts a hole in his heart, fills it with tar, and laughs as he struggles to rise to his feet and face the world. He can’t do it. He won’t do it. Not again, not ever.

For a while, Jiang Wanyin is silent. He rests his face in his palm, shutting his eyes as if he’s in pain. There will be no apology from him, and Wei Wuxian is better off without it. To one each other, always, they will never be able to say I’m sorry.

“You look like you’re about to keel over,” Wei Wuxian sighs, clapping a hand over Jiang Wanyin’s
shoulder. The man doesn’t so much as flinch under his touch, and Wei Wuxian knows that his outburst was a result of exhaustion and frustration more than anything else.

“Don’t touch me,” Jiang Wanyin grumbles, shrugging out of his grip. His voice is petulant rather than truly upset. “We leave in ten days. If you so much as make any of the disciples fall ill, I’ll break your legs.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Wuxian agrees easily. “Now go and rest. I’ll get one of the children to call Jiang Chenyi to help you with the trade agreements.”

“I’m not that weak,” the sect leader snaps, though he says nothing about refusing help. He turns to return back to the manor, and Wei Wuxian follows with a bright smile.

Jiang Chenyi is an intelligent young maiden. Being a morally righteous and upstanding individual, she won’t drug her sect leader. Being a merchant and a businessperson who understands that rest and recuperation are the truest methods to achieving efficiency, she’ll most likely slip some choice additives into whatever tea she serves Jiang Wanyin, then whisper for the servants to help escort their sect leader to his quarters.

It isn’t as outlandish as it seems. Wei Wuxian has seen it happen before. There is a very good reason as to why he holds both respect and fear for Jiang Chenyi.

Wei Wuxian is quick to shape the conversation into something more pleasant. He speaks of everything and anything he can think of: new spells he’s invented, the state of major construction projects, his amusement with foreign merchants who stumble over themselves after accidentally calling out to a god, the disciples’ steady progress in cultivation. He has always been good at filling silence with incessant noise, and Jiang Wanyin fills the breaks in his sentences with sharp comments of his own.

Over the past six months, their relationship has grown and strained, has been pulled taught and released. They will act as if they’ve known each other their entire lives, teasing and angry and casual, and then Jiang Wanyin will find something in Wei Wuxian that drags them both back to the past.

It’s alright. It’s better than anything Wei Wuxian could have ever wanted. It simply is.

“Sweet dreams,” Wei Wuxian chirps as Jiang Wanyin steps into his study.

The young sect leader gives him a withering glare, and before anything can be thrown his way, Wei Wuxian is already gone.

What a strange existence they lead. It’s ridiculous to think that, once, Wei Wuxian looked at humans and found their emotions and interactions to be a subject of study, a curious detail that required explanation or reasoning.

Where is he now? What is he now? How is he any different than those strange, nonsensical beings?

It doesn’t matter. The Discussion Conference will soon be upon them, and there is much fun to be had in destroying the expectations of others by grabbing hold of their pride and destroying it.

There are many curious aspects to being a god.
Divinity and absolute control over luck is what gives Wei Wuxian the name Fuxing. He is a god, a
divine being whose fingers pluck out strings of fate to weave into lavish tapestries and dramatic tales.
He holds the stars in his hands and owns everything and nothing at once. He is unmatched in his
ability to usher in change.

The most curious object in his arsenal of peculiar talents, however, is his ability to rend the barrier
between reality and its reflection.

There is a sky above Wei Wuxian that sings ancient hymns of creation and destruction. What hangs
in the delicate balance between the skies and the heavens laughs distantly, each resonating note a
burst of gold and silver. To any lesser being, they're simply stars. To Wei Wuxian, they are the
unfortunate souls whose curiosity has trapped them within an unfamiliar world with unfamiliar rules,
where they will spend the rest of their eternal lives hunting down the spark of life from beyond the
blackened skies.

Let them seek all they want. Perhaps they expect an easy meal or an entertaining chase. What they
will find instead is sixteen disciples with silver bells to tether them back to reality, armed with bows
crafted from the finest wood and arrows enchanted with the most divine of spells.

“Fuxing,” Jiang Muai calls, her sharp voice echoing through the ever-shifting trees, “we’re just about
done!”

Her voice grows closer and closer, and with a soft huff of exertion and a gentle thud against the
hollow forest ground, a mass of shadow walks toward him.

Wei Wuxian only recognizes Jiang Muai by the brilliant full moons that shine in place of her eyes.
There is, of course, also the single braid that trails back into a ponytail.

As if summoning the others with her voice, a small crowd of shadows slinks from the hanging trees,
separating themselves from the darkness of the forest to writhe under the light of the false moon
above them.

Fortunately, Wei Wuxian’s head count results in sixteen child-sized monstrosities. They watch him
with eyes that study his every move, tracing the wisps of his golden aura as it repels the influence of
the realm, and although it is and has always been unnerving, it would be shameful if Wei Wuxian
refused to place the same amount of trust in his students as they have in him.

“Congratulations on clearing out the dusk sprites,” Wei Wuxian says, clapping his hands together
with a smile that cuts through the darkness in more ways that one. “As you all know, we could have
exorcised them as ghosts back home, but that would be a hideous waste of a rare opportunity.”

The shadowy disciples before him grumble. Their luminous eyes glint back in faint irritation.

“Don’t give me that,” Wei Wuxian scolds, his hands on his hips. “The Discussion Conference will
be upon us in no time at all. That means, of course, that Sect Leader Jiang will be expecting at least
one of you to place in the top four.”

Speaking Jiang Wanyin’s name has the same effect as unsheathing the first inch of a blade. It scatters
the dark tendrils that cling to the disciples for a fleeting second, revealing young, soft cheeks pulled
taught with determination. Their fingers tighten around their golden bows as they gather around Wei
Wuxian, and they swing their quivers over their stomachs for him to refill.

“You’ve all done very well these past few days,” Wei Wuxian says. His fingers move separately
from his mind, weaving together arrows made of fallen stars. “Today will be the last day we spend in
Jiang Muai’s lustrous eyes narrow. “Are we shooting moving targets on the watchtowers again?”

“Yes,” answers Wei Wuxian. That was an enjoyable experience. He feels sorry for the disciples on duty at the towers, but he also appreciates their sacrifice.

“Sect Leader Jiang didn’t like it when we did it before,” Jiang Muai says, with emphasis.

Wei Wuxian snorts. His fingers linger with stardust even after he slides the last arrow into the last quiver. “Jiang Wanyin is a killjoy and far too stressed to understand what fun is. Besides, we aren’t quite done here.”

There is a lilt in his voice that demands the undivided attention of all those who reside within his presence. His disciples fall silent. Their forms are warped and bleeding black as night, yet they will never be lost, not with his guidance, not with their strength.

“A certain creature resides in these woods,” Wei Wuxian says.

His words summon a gale as cold as death and as furious as the storm. It’s almost laughable. How could the children of Lotus Pier be intimidated by storms when the man they respect the most embodies it?

“She is a maiden of great beauty and power,” Wei Wuxian continues, his every word lyrical. “In this forest of night, she is the only being who retains her light. She carries her light in a sash of flowers, rumoured to be one of the most powerful magical artefacts known to either side.”

“What do you want us to do?” Jiang Muai asks.

Ah, Wei Wuxian wants. He can feel it: the Other Realm shouldn’t be, it shouldn’t exist under any means, and the further he breaks the false deities who hold the light captive, the more this strange world will reveal itself to him.

“Shoot her down,” he commands, grabbing hold of the roaring winds and shattering them in his grip. They die with a trickling scream, and he smiles. “Bring me her sash. Make me proud.”

Wei Wuxian knows that any more words are unnecessary. With a single firm nod, Jiang Muai releases a sharp whistle, and with a burst of shadow, the disciples are gone. He’s given them the scent; they’ll return with the spoils soon enough.

Distantly, the call of the hunt rings out.

Someone screams, struggles, and falls silent.

Another moon falls.
Oftentimes, he will forgo sleep in order to bury himself in manuscripts. There are countless spells that could be created in order to make Lotus Pier stronger, safer, happier, all for the people, for the undying spirit of the river that calls to its children no matter how high the flames reach, for the ache in his heart that has slowly faded to a yearning.

There is so much to do, and not nearly enough time to do it all in the meager hours of daylight. He wants so badly to rekindle the embers of innovation within him. He aches to prove to the world that a golden core can be lost, can be given, can be born, can never be had at all.

But Wei Wuxian sees the exhaustion in Jiang Wanyin’s eyes. He hears the sigh in Jiang Wanyin’s voice when they share a table for dinner. He watches Jiang Wanyin’s anger burn, burn, and burn until there is nothing left but embers that flicker and ashes that are lost to the wind. He pretends not to know that Jiang Wanyin wakes from his nightmares with ragged breaths in his throat and wordless cries on his lips.

Jiang Wanyin is many things. He is not, never has been, and never will be weak.

There are nights where Wei Wuxian and Jiang Wanyin cross paths in the moonlit halls. Sometimes their steps falter, and eyes that bear storms will meet eyes that slay stars. Sometimes they cannot bring themselves to accept the other’s presence, and they continue endlessly into the night, alone, always.

Goodbye is not a phrase either of them know how to say.

The distant lights of the lotus lanterns ebb, rising and falling. Silver bells chime through Wei Wuxian’s foolish self and shame flows through him like the river.

How has he deluded himself into believing his selfishness will ever be anything kind? What will it take for Wei Wuxian to finally learn what selflessness truly is?

Surely Jiang Wanyin knows, but—

But Wei Wuxian feels that if he should ever ask Jiang Wanyin what it feels like to lose and expect nothing in return, the fragile friendship they’ve built will shatter irreparably.

(He was a man who was like cracked glass.

No matter how much water you poured into him, he would never be filled. He has power, he has status, he has the fear and admiration of all who speak his name, and yet he is always riddled with despair.

Who was it that put the crack in the glass?)

Days pass, nights pass, and Wei Wuxian is beholden to Jiang Wanyin.

What can he do? How can he show that he wants to help, truly, without taking away any more than he already has?

The night is cruel; the night is kind. Whenever Wei Wuxian reaches his hands out to help, he pushes those he loves aside and turns away as they burn. So he does what he knows best.

He stitches divine protections into any and all robes he can get his hands on. He carves bells from jade and whispers blessings into their gentle chime. He etches sigils onto blades that will one day see battle. He lowers his hand again and again, and no matter how many lanterns may fall within his empty tears, his hands are steady.
But the night can only last so long. The early morning light render the lotus lanterns obsolete, and Wei Wuxian will always allow himself to smile as he makes his way atop the disciples’ quarters.

Jiang Wanyin has asked him the same question too many times for Wei Wuxian to count.

Wei Wuxian will never give the same answer.

Always, never, stagnating, changing, they will never be able to agree.

But Jiang Wanyin knows the junior disciples are making incredible progress, so he throws biting words and smells of lightning, but never once does he raise Sandu at Wei Wuxian. His duties keep him from doing more, pulling him away over agreements and documents that sound dissonant and painful to the ear.

It’s rare for them to meet during the day. They both have their duties, and they both understand that there is something to prove and so much to lose.

Training the junior disciples feels like freedom. To them, Wei Wuxian is their teacher and their friend, a little strange, very powerful, but well-meaning and always willing to pull some coins out of his sleeves for a good meal or a quick snack.

“Fuxing,” they call, eagerly beckoning for him to come. They’re so young, but the curve of their bows fits so well into the arch of their backs; their hands grip swords as if they were born to wield them. “Mingyue said she heard about a water ghoul problem in a town down south! Can we go take care of it?”

Who is Wei Wuxian to deny them?

The children are swift and steady. They fly as one, always aware of each other at all times, wary whenever something occurs that they don’t understand, cautious even when executing formations they have practiced thousands of times.

Freedom will allow them to grow, but Wei Wuxian watches the skies closely.

Even in victory, they are united. All sixteen of them, led by Jiang Muai, will always return home, and Wei Wuxian will always be there to receive them.

“Well done,” he says, laughing as they gather around restaurant tables. They’re so full of life, so unashamed in their exploits and accepting of their mistakes that something great and powerful in Wei Wuxian shifts, and he finds himself cheering and pushing and teasing with them, part of their happy world for only a moment.

Then the distant song of the river calls out, and Wei Wuxian feels the weight of golden flowers in his hair and duty resting upon his shoulders.

When he is utterly alone, he’ll think, what am I doing? Why did you leave their lives in my hands? Aren’t you scared? Don’t you know how scared I am?

It doesn’t matter. The world has not been kind to Wei Wuxian, and one day, it will choose not to be kind to these children. When that day comes, instead of keeling over and cursing their weakness, they’ll look forward, always forward, and walk on, no matter how slowly their steps fall.

Keep moving. Find strength in yourself and others.

Training the junior disciples feels like freedom. With them, the thoughts that plague Wei Wuxian are
kept at bay. The chaos of youth keeps him on his feet at all times, and as clever as the children have
grown over the past six months, they always find ways to give him heart palpitations. It’s very
stressful.

“Now, be very careful with the sash,” Wei Wuxian says, keeping his voice as calm and steady as he
can manage. His gaze flickers between each of the sixteen exhausted but beaming children before
him. They each carry a segment of the Spectral Maiden’s sash in their hands, weaving like a thin
river dotted with blush-pink petals, which would be a welcome sight if the maiden’s vengeful spirit
hadn’t suddenly decided to hunt them down to the ends of the earth.

It’s an unfortunate situation, but Wei Wuxian is more than familiar with unfortunate situations. He
retrieves the sash from the children, ensures that his flat gaze is seen by all of them, and declares, “It
was nice playing with you, kind maiden, but we’ll be taking our leave now.”

The following escape is a bit more dramatic than Wei Wuxian would have liked, involving an
unexpected but not unappreciated retreat using the trees as catapults, shields, and weapons (the first is
entertaining, the second is nerve-wracking, and the third is, frankly, terrifying).

If Wei Wuxian were by himself, the chase would be a bout of dramatic fun. With the juniors,
however, he feels as if he’s slipped into Jiang Wanyin’s constant state of gut-wrenching panic. He
calls out each and every one of their names and breathes a sigh of relief when they answer. The
divine arrows Wei Wuxian slipped into their quivers rend the unending darkness with golden
threads, each hit more accurate than the last.

When all has been said and done, Wei Wuxian drags the disciples out through the rippling boundary
with his strings.

“That was so much fun!” Jiang Muai says, her eyes still shining with the touch of full-moon pearls.
“Can we do that again sometime?”

The others are eager to voice their agreement, thrusting their bows into the air. Wei Wuxian feels
warm. He feels stressed. He isn’t sure if the two feelings are related in any way. Despite it all, he
smiles and promises to bring them on more night hunts if they behave.

As expected, Jiang Wanyin yells at them with thunder in his voice when they return. The juniors
hide behind Wei Wuxian as their sect leader spits words they’ve all heard a hundred times.

You can’t catch lightning in a gourd. Similarly, you can’t shoot down the stars. Jiang Wanyin is
always angry except for when he isn’t. Wei Wuxian remembers nothing except for when he
remembers everything.

It’s alright. Jiang Wanyin has never been good at facing his emotions. He is cutting when he is kind
and furious when he is concerned.

Don’t you dare go away without telling me, he doesn’t say.

You wouldn’t understand even if I told you, Wei Wuxian doesn’t say.

It’s simply another curious tangle in their relationship. Even the youngest of disciples know better
than to inquire too deeply about why their sect leader shares such a strange bond with their resident
god.

In archery, in swordsmanship, in penmanship, in whatever Wei Wuxian can possibly think of and
imagine, the disciples grow in leaps and bounds. They hone their skills not only because they desire
strength, but also because they love their family, their sect, everything within Lotus Pier’s gates.
Wei Wuxian knows how much they love what life has given them. He watches as they stop to admire the rising sun above rippling waters and feels his heart ease.

When their morning routines are over, Wei Wuxian dismisses them with a nod of his head. Their heads bow to him, so honest and innocent, and they turn to do their part in town. Their small backs disappear into a great, wide world, and Wei Wuxian looks up at the sky.

There’s so much to do, and he will never know if he’ll be able to do it all before the chances die around him. So he sets out after his disciples. Will they ever understand how much they’ve given him? Will they ever know?

Never, always, the words are lost.

Sometimes, Jiang Chenyi asks for his assistance in discussing trade agreements. Wei Wuxian knows that all he needs to do is look presentable and smile kindly, because any and all foreign merchants who catch sight of Lotus Pier’s god of luck will pale and agree to anything.

Sometimes, Jiang Chenyi will invite Wei Wuxian to tea. Over the past few months, her behaviour toward him has changed entirely. She’s calmed down, in a way. She’s grown. Or maybe she simply sees Wei Wuxian for what he really is.

She smiles and laughs when Wei Wuxian speaks of the junior disciples’ antics. She listens quietly when Wei Wuxian’s words stutter and he speaks of Jiang Wanyin. No matter what Wei Wuxian says, she seems content in simply sitting across from him and watching the smooth flow of his voice shake and shatter. Running her fingers in her palms, on the rim of her cup, over her knuckles, she is quiet but not silent.

“You’ve done a lot for Lotus Pier,” she says. The proud banners of Yunmeng Jiang fall down endlessly, swaying in the gentle breeze like wisteria. “Sect Leader Jiang won’t ever say it, but I think he’s grateful.”

For what? To whom?

Jiang Chenyi doesn’t say, and Wei Wuxian doesn’t ask.

Sometimes, when the days are too long and the rain falls relentlessly, Wei Wuxian will sing a wordless lullaby for everyone who seeks refuge under the high roofs of the teahouse. They know him well, and they know his song even better. Some hum along, while others trace their fingers on their tables, and others still sigh and rest.

Lotus Pier is rebuilding, and Wei Wuxian is helping. He’d like to believe it. It would be nice if he could believe it.

For the most part, the days are good. His disciples look to him for guidance and find strength in the freedom he has given them. The townspeople greet him kindly and call for him to try their products or lend his knowledge. The Yunmeng Jiang Sect respects him and listen attentively when he speaks.

This is what I wanted, Wei Wuxian thinks in the darkest of nights. I don’t want anything but this.

This is what it could have been, something in him whispers. This is what you had, and you turned away from it.

Sometimes, Jiang Wanyin will leave Lotus Pier to fulfill his duties. He leaves with his head held high, smelling of rain and flowers. In his absence, Jiang Chenyi works twice as hard, filling in whatever void her sect leader has left with her extensive knowledge of legal procedures and local
problems.

“The swordsmiths have been trying to get their hands on some experimental ores, but they’re awfully expensive and our budget isn’t as flexible as I’d like it to be,” she mutters to herself. Her brush taps once, twice, three times on the table, and she looks up at Wei Wuxian. “I hate to bother you, but could you talk to them and see if it’s worth considering?”

Nobody here asks him for wealth or blessings. They simply ask him for help.

It makes him feel warm. It makes him feel as if he isn’t only the strings he weaves.

The swordsmiths greet Wei Wuxian warmly, eager to show him their recent works. They hand him blades etched with lotus flowers and crescent moons that fit comfortably in his grip and bend to his will. Each blade speaks of immeasurable skill and smells faintly of fire.

When Wei Wuxian asks them why they desire unfamiliar ores when everything they create is already so fine, the swordsmiths look nervously at each other.

“We kinda just wanted to get your attention,” they admit. “You’re always running around town, and we wanted to take a peek at your swords. You know. The eight gold ones?”

Wei Wuxian does, in fact, know. “Of course,” he says easily, more than willing to summon his weapons in a flash of gold and pass them around for the swordsmiths to ogle at.

There is no reason for Wei Wuxian to be so cheerful when he can barely answer any of the questions the swordsmiths ask him about the metal, the design, and the forging process, but it makes him incredibly happy to know that his attention and presence are valued.

When he returns to report his findings to Jiang Chenyi, she simply nods and flips to the next document. “Then let’s see what else there is to do. Sect Leader Jiang already has a lot on his plate, so if we get through the worst of it before he comes back, he’ll feel better about it, won’t he?”

Better about what?

They both know the answer. They’ll never speak it aloud.

Sometimes, Jiang Wanyin leaves Lotus Pier.

Sometimes, he comes back with someone in tow.

Wei Wuxian is not a liar. Even now, as the storm howls with rage that can never be quelled and the violet edge of a blade glints painfully against the setting sun, Wei Wuxian knows that Jiang Wanyin has never raised Sandu against him.

Twisted in fury, fuelled by regret, the man standing before him is not Jiang Wanyin. This is a child who demands answers from those with no breath in their lungs and no life in their eyes. This is a child who has been stretched until the point of breaking. But he will never break. And he will never yield.

For the second time, Wei Wuxian breaks his promise.

“Release him,” Wei Wuxian demands, the sickly-sweet trickle of honey coating his tongue, closing his throat. Every breath he takes is frigid cold, and it hurts to breathe. The gold of his blade pulses like a heartbeat he once lost.
“Do you intent to stand in my way again, Fuxing?” The words expel themselves from Jiang Wanyin’s lips in claps of thunder. “Why do you care for what I do? Do you think yourself above me? Do you think I owe you anything?”

The disciples have long since retreated into the long sunset shadows. They listen and they tremble. Zidian tightens its unrelenting grip, and the bloodied man lets out an aborted cry of pain.

*Is it my fault? Is it my fault? Is this my fault?*

Wei Wuxian owes the world everything. Jiang Wanyin owes the world nothing.

“You’ll kill him,” Wei Wuxian says, his voice raising, raising, and raising until the song in his words shatters.

Why is he so angry? He has no right to be angry. So why does he feel no shame?

There is molten gold in his eyes. He burns, burns, burns, and he hates what Jiang Wanyin has become. “What are you doing, Jiang Wanyin? Do you plan to seek out everyone who practices the heretic path and murder them with your bare hands?” Zidian’s aura snaps outward; Wei Wuxian bats it away in a brilliant burst of gold that smells of blood. “Do you hold all of them guilty for the sins of one man?” Do you want to kill me? Do you want me to offer you my neck and laugh? “If I dragged your brother’s mangled, disgusting soul from the depths of hell and threw him before you, would you kill him as you’ve killed all these innocents?”

Something dark and deadly finds a home within Jiang Wanyin’s heart and swallows it whole.

Sometimes, Jiang Wanyin will try to make himself into a murderer, and Wei Wuxian will bleed all the blood he has left to ensure it never happens.

Their fights are bloody and angry. They demand everything and nothing from each other. They open wounds that take weeks to heal. *Why?* they scream. *Why, why, why?*

In the end, neither of them fall, and in the end, neither of them apologize. The flames in Jiang Wanyin’s eyes simply flicker one too many times, and he throws the subject of his fury at Wei Wuxian’s feet.

“If you truly are a god, look at him and decide for yourself whether he’s worth saving,” Jiang Wanyin spits, his voice dripping with poison that corrodes, destroys, and ends. “You made the choice for them years ago.”

And he turns with a snap of violet, the shadow of his back fading, fading, and fading. His disciples step out from the sunset-born darkness, their steps faltering as they look between their god and their sect leader.

Some of them bow. Some of them nod their heads. Others only look forward. In the end, they all follow after Jiang Wanyin. Where the light illuminates their features, Wei Wuxian can’t see; his eyes chase after their shadow-painted backs, always, forever.

The man at his feet is silent. His wounds bleed sluggishly and his skin burns with Zidian’s touch, but he looks up at Wei Wuxian with so much gratitude and reverence that is so horribly misplaced.

It doesn’t matter. Wei Wuxian kneels, his fingers bleeding gold, and pulls a gentle smile onto his lips. “You’ll be alright,” he promises. “I’m here now.”

Jiang Chenyi receives them quickly and quietly. She offers the man a room for the night, leaving
medical supplies and herbal teas without asking any questions. She doesn’t need to. She has seen this scene more times than she wants to remember.

The man’s wounds are deep. A dark haze of resentful energy wraps around him, circling his neck like a noose, and as Wei Wuxian tends to the burns on his arms, he repeats the same question he’s asked each and every one of these demonic cultivators: “What made you walk this path?”

Their stories are so different, yet all of them are the same. *I had no choice*, some say. *I was tempted*, others say. *I didn’t do this for myself*, others still say.

Wei Wuxian harbours no grudge against them. He understands that demonic cultivation is a tempting force, a mysterious power with so much untapped potential for those who carry no warmth of their own in their chests. But the road to isolation has been walked too many times by too many unfortunate souls for Wei Wuxian not to recognize when the first step has been taken.

Under the light of the moon, Wei Wuxian asks them what they desire. Almost always, he works to purge the resentful energy from their bodies and ignite the first spark within them. Whether that spark dwindles and dies or carries flame through their veins is something they must decide on their own.

Sometimes, Wei Wuxian will allow them to walk the path they have chosen. When he sees them off, he whispers a blessing and connects their strings to another, anyone at all, someone in that great, wide world who will ensure they are happy and healthy—someone who will love them unconditionally.

But there are some people who are rotten. There are some people who laugh when he warns them of consequences, of hatred and destruction, of losing everything and everyone.

When they speak, tar drips from their eyes and mouths. They bleed maggots, festering in the disgusting filth of their greed, and their hands reek with the stench of blood. They hunger to break more, to end more, to use the darkness that has gripped their sanity to bring chaos unto the world.

Wei Wuxian takes them to the river and slits their throats. When their souls reach out, he brings them close and crushes them.

When the sun rises, the demonic cultivators will be gone. In one way or another, they will be gone and will never return.

But bad nights are just that: bad nights. For the most part, the days are kind, and life is rewarding.

On the morning of the disciples’ return from the Discussion Conference, the rain pours down relentlessly. Thunder rumbles in the distance as the ground becomes slick with rainwater, and Wei Wuxian is thankful for it.

It rains, it storms, it dries, and it repeats. Lotus Pier is always changing, but the river will always be the same. No matter what happens, it’ll always be there to greet its children back home.

Wei Wuxian waits by the pier with an umbrella and little else. His robes are wet; it’s impossible to escape the rain no matter how hard you try.

The juniors must have performed well. They’re young, of course, and surely there were cultivators with far more experience competing against them. But how many of those cultivators have seen the world not only for what it is, but also for what it could be? How many of those cultivators have followed a god into a world entirely warped and put cracks into it with their tiny, soft hands? How many of those cultivators find strength in weakness and laugh in the face of hardship?
Not many, Wei Wuxian imagines. The world can change as much as it wants, but the people who live in it will remain all the same.

Beyond the veil of rain, several boats flying with the nine-petal lotus banner break through the waters.

“Fuxing!” The juniors’ shouts and cheers echo far even through the rhythmic beating of the rain. “Fuxing, you won’t believe it!”

Wei Wuxian can believe a lot of things. When Jiang Muai takes a running leap off the boat and catches her foot on the edge, he moves to catch her. He’s caught these young, vibrant children too many times for the motion to be anything but reflex.

The umbrella clatters to the ground behind him, and the rain quickly makes a home in his hair and robes. Jiang Muai isn’t any better, having been half-soaked, now proceeding hastily toward completely soaked.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian holds her up like a cat, brows raised in amusement. Her razor-sharp grin peeks out of her lips, and she kicks her legs in the air. “What’s got you so riled up?”

Jiang Muai quickly pushes herself out of his arms, her excitement too great to be stifled by embarrassment. “Fuxing, we won,” she breathes out. “We got two places in the top four! I got first!”

“I got fourth!” Jiang Mingyue yells victoriously, scrambling to make her way off the boat. She more or less clambers over the other juniors, pushing her way through the group in order to stand beside Jiang Muai. With a smug expression, she slings an arm over Jiang Muai’s shoulder. The two share identical grins. “You should’ve seen the looks on their faces! They thought we’d be novices, but we shot down that notion, didn’t we?”

The juniors whoop and cheer, pumping their fists into the air despite the heavy downpour. With how energized they are, perhaps they don’t even realize it’s raining.

The older disciples shuffle off with much more discipline, but Wei Wuxian can see their smiles.

It would be a lie to say that Wei Wuxian’s surprised. He trained the juniors himself; he knows exactly how much potential they possess. He’s seen them face danger with brilliant smiles and shoot moons out of the sky. They hold the future in their hands, and the world is better for it.

Soon enough, the children compose themselves. The older disciples usher them inside with congratulations that they will most likely never tire of hearing.

Soon enough, Wei Wuxian turns to Jiang Wanyin. The words welcome back die on his lips when he sees the small golden figure that totters after the sect leader.

Jiang Wanyin frowns as the child tugs eagerly at his robes. The umbrella in his hand bathes him in a gentle purple hue. “Don’t run off on your own and get lost,” he says, his voice kinder than he means for it to be. “Do you understand, A-Ling?” The child tugs again, harder, and Jiang Wanyin repeats, “Do you understand, Jin Ling?”

Ah.

(The wind is blowing.)

Wei Wuxian is still. His blood freezes. He’s drowning, and the only one he can blame is himself for creating such a storm. All he can hope and pray for is to be the only one to go, that nobody else will
fall victim to his naivety, yet in the end, there is nothing left but waters that have frozen over long ago, and whatever resides beneath the ice no longer draws breath.

He aches, it hurts, it’s a heart-wrenching pain that tastes of regret and blood and rings of words cut short by a gleaming silver, and—

And he pushes it down, the memories that belong to him, that aren’t his at all. Wei Wuxian smiles, he is a god, he wants to be kind, and the rain falls, falls, and falls.

“Hello,” Wei Wuxian says, the lilt of his voice gentle. Jiang Wanyin turns to face him, and his frown deepens. “How was the Discussion Conference? From what I’ve heard so far, it seems to have been quite entertaining.”

“It was as dull as it always is,” Jiang Wanyin answers. There’s a twitch in his face. He turns away. “The juniors performed well,” he adds dismissively.

Wei Wuxian smiles. Jiang Wanyin has never been good an expressing his emotions, and it’s unlikely that he’ll get any better. “I’m glad to hear that.”

And then there is a warmth against his leg: two small arms that are so, so young and a face that is so, so innocent, staring up at him in wonder.

Wei Wuxian takes a piercing breath. He shouldn’t—that isn’t—the only thing that he hasn’t taken away from Jiang Cheng, he can’t—he has no right—

“Jin Ling,” he says. The name cuts at his tongue, drawing molden gold from his wounds and choking him with it. The smile on his lips feels as if it’s been stitched on. It hurts, but he wants to be kind. So he peels himself from the child’s grip and kneels, a hand raised above their heads to ward away the rain. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

(I gave you another name, once.)

“Uh-huh,” the child—Jin Ling, it’s Jin Ling, but you have no right to his name, and you never will—the child nods quickly, then grabs a handful of Wei Wuxian’s peony-dotted robes. “Why does Uncle have gold robes?”

Wei Wuxian’s smile falters. He can’t bring himself to look at Jiang Wanyin, because he knows what expression the man must be wearing. “Don’t call me Uncle,” he says. The words leave him quickly, desperately, and he doesn’t know why. There is a breath in his lungs that shakes and burns cold. “You should—you should save that for the people who love you most.”

Jin Ling’s brows crease in confusion. His little hands grip Wei Wuxian’s robes tighter. Let him take whatever he wants. He doesn’t have much left. “But you have flowers in your hair and you wear gold and Uncle likes you,” he says, peering curiously in Jiang Wanyin’s direction. Wei Wuxian’s heart breaks a little more. “Who are you?”

Children ask the most innocent of questions, and it’s those questions that Wei Wuxian fears the most. He is a god, he should know all, yet he can’t answer anything. Always, always, always, he can never understand. Not a single thing.

And yet here he is, alive and breathing; he knows nothing, but isn’t he happy regardless?

It’s alright. Everything will be okay. Jiang Wanyin has allowed Wei Wuxian into the depths of whatever is left of his heart. His world is in Wei Wuxian’s hands, again, always, and this time, Wei Wuxian refuses to break it.
“You’re a curious little boy, aren’t you?” Wei Wuxian reaches out his undeserving hands and lifts Jin Ling into his arms, laughing lightly when the child pouts. “My name is Fuxing. And no, I don’t belong to Lanling Jin.” As if revealing a great secret, he looks from side to side, and in a hushed tone, he whispers, “I’m a god.”

Half a gasp escapes Jin Ling’s rounded lips. “A god!” His eyes widen as the words escape him, and he quickly covers his mouth and looks toward Jiang Wanyin.

There is something beyond the storm, but Wei Wuxian will never know what it is. When their eyes meet, that something fades behind dark clouds, and Jiang Wanyin snorts. “Everyone in Lotus Pier knows you’re a god,” he says, entirely unimpressed. “Don’t let him fool you, A-Ling. He might be a god, but you don’t need to treat him like one.”

“Rude,” Wei Wuxian huffs. He turns his comically sad expression to Jin Ling. “Your uncle is being very mean to me. What do you think we should do?”

“Uncle must be tired from the trip!” Jin Ling declares, his head raised high, cheeks soft and full with a pout. Accusingly, the child points at Jiang Wanyin as if to admit all of his uncle’s wrongdoings. “Uncle kept telling me to sleep, but he didn’t go to sleep at all! He’s only being mean because he’s tired!”

Despite everything, Wei Wuxian is unable to keep the smile from his lips. With great effort, he swallows his laughter and turns toward Jiang Wanyin, whose face appears to be having a difficult time deciding what to do as betrayal and exhaustion wage war within him. “Why, Jiang Wanyin, it seems you’ve been ignoring Jiang Chenyi’s advice,” Wei Wuxian says, his voice a teasing song. “She can be very scary when she’s determined, and personally, I am very scared of her.”

“But you’re a god,” Jin Ling says, eyes wide with fear.

“Jiang Chenyi is capable of defeating the mightiest of beings,” Wei Wuxian says dramatically. “In fact, I believe your uncle has been defeated by her many times—”

“Shut up,” Jiang Wanyin snaps, his grip on the umbrella tightening audibly. There is nothing he can say to deny either his fatigue or Jiang Chenyi’s single-minded, warpath-god-like nature when she has a goal in mind, because both are equally as real and as present as the other. “A-Ling, we’re leaving.”

Wei Wuxian sets Jin Ling down. The child grabs onto his sleeve for a moment longer. “Show me your magic,” Jin Ling demands. “Mingyue-jiejie said you could do magic!”

“Let’s leave that for tomorrow,” Wei Wuxian says. He raises his hand to brush Jin Ling’s thick, rain-kissed curls back, and finds himself flinching back. He’s so young. He’s so young, yet his parents could only love him for a moment; he’s so young, and the world has already cursed him. The burden of legacy rests on his tiny shoulders, and he doesn’t deserve any of it.

Wei Wuxian rests his hand on Jin Ling’s head. The child looks up at him with eager, curious eyes. Wei Wuxian doesn’t deserve it. Not this, not any of this; not the kindness that he’s been shown, not the respect he’s been given, not the fragile acceptance Jiang Wanyin has come to live with, and most certainly not the innocent, childish wonder Jin Ling holds toward him. But he wants it so desperately that it aches, festers, and spills into him so deeply, staining his existence with the possibility of what if.
Wei Wuxian has done nothing to be worthy of their love. But he still loves them. For as long as that love exists somewhere, within them, within him, he will work to deserve it.

So Wei Wuxian smiles. It’s a soft, quiet thing. “If you listen to your uncle, I’ll show you my magic every day,” he says. “But your uncle is very tired today. Shall we get him to rest first?”

Determination writes itself onto Jin Ling’s features. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Then Uncle needs to go and rest!” With teetering, unbalanced steps, Jin Ling runs to Jiang Wanyin’s side and looks up at the man who loves him most. “If Uncle doesn’t go and rest, Jiang Chenyi will make him rest, and that sounds scary.”

It is a perfectly fair assessment to make. Jiang Chenyi is, in fact, terrifying when she wants to be.

Jiang Wanyin’s expression is something strange and deep. For a moment, his gaze catches Wei Wuxian’s, and they both look away.

“Don’t get lost,” Jiang Wanyin finally says, moving to lead his nephew toward the manor. Jin Ling follows after him, matching his steps with bouncing skips. “And don’t think you can tell me what to do.”

Jin Ling looks back. Wei Wuxian smiles and waves.

There is a storm in Lotus Pier that brings down rain and lightning and roars of thunder. There is a storm in Lotus Pier who is lonely even among the people who respect him most. There is a storm in Lotus Pier that is far kinder than he believes himself to be, yet he’ll never allow himself to accept it.

There is a storm in Lotus Pier that is so angry, and he doesn’t need a reason why. Can’t people find rage in despair and fury in guilt and live for what little they have left? Why is it that everything disappears, and so soon? Why is it that the most important words are never spoken? Why is it that anger is the only thing that survives when everything else has died?

There is a storm in Lotus Pier with nothing left, and yet—

That isn’t right. There’s something that still exists, and Wei Wuxian will give all he has to protect it.

(A courtesy name?

Then how about Rulan? Jin Rulan. It’s nice, isn’t it?)


Beyond the horizon, the rain has finally stopped.

A new day breaks through the dark clouds.

Daily life with Jin Ling is a curious, entertaining thing.

Wei Wuxian knows that Jiang Wanyin will do anything to keep Jin Ling safe from harm. Even if he
were deaf, dumb, and blind, he would understand it very well.

“Uncle is busy today,” Jin Ling says, chest puffed out proudly. “So I came here by myself!”

The early morning sun greets them gently, bathing the proud purple banners in orange hues. Wei Wuxian’s own robes bloom silently under the warmth of something brighter, and Jin Ling’s bright gold robes gleam almost painfully, a little too audaciously for Wei Wuxian’s taste.

Normally, there would be nothing wrong at all with Jin Ling’s marching boldly into Wei Wuxian’s duties. However, the early morning sun is far too early for a child as young as Jin Ling to be awake, and looking at the child’s unruly appearance, it is very likely that he simply woke up and decided to escape from the manor.

Wei Wuxian smiles, then quickly turns to call one of the disciples to tell Jiang Wanyin where his nephew has gone before he turns all of Lotus Pier upside down looking for him. Then, with a simple flick of the wrists, Wei Wuxian drops a rabbit woven from golden strings onto the ground.

Jin Ling’s attention is instantly captured. “It moves!” he says, mouth wide with wonder.

“Of course,” Wei Wuxian chirps, gesturing for the rabbit, and by extension, Jin Ling, to follow. “Should we get to business as usual, then?”

“Uh-huh!” The response is lightning fast and bounces in tone along with Jin Ling’s half-skips. “I want to see what the disciples do! I want to see them collect the lanterns!”

There’s not much for Wei Wuxian to do while the juniors compete to sweep the river, so he lifts Jin Ling up into his arms, grins, and says, “Let’s head off. Hold on tight, now.”

When the watchguards catch sight of Wei Wuxian on the roofs, they heave a collective sigh. When they spot Jin Rulan in his arms, however, they pale as if all the blood in their bodies has been stolen by a certain god-turned-menace and child-turned-accomplice.

“Good morning!” Wei Wuxian calls, taking the time to ensure that each and every one of his leaps is longer and higher than usual.

“Good morning!” Jin Ling repeats with twice the vigor and an octave higher.

One of the watchguards slumps over in a dead faint and almost falls off the edge. The others wail despairing as they drag their unfortunate, amusingly weak-willed friend back to safety.

Wei Wuxian catches the falling spear with his strings and tosses it upward, where one of the thicker-blooded watchguards snatches it back, responding in turn with what must be the flattest, emptiest, most deathly expression Wei Wuxian has ever seen on a living being.

In his arms, Jin Ling laughs and claps his hands together. “They’re funny,” he says. “Are they your friends?”

“I would like to think so,” Wei Wuxian answers.

Oh, they’re great friends. Every morning, they greet each other with hellos tailored to their own person, and it never grows old. It’s a ritual that is foolish, almost childish, but it comes as naturally as the sunrise; thus, it stays.

They land on the pier without much fanfare. Everything to be said has already been said, only this time, Wei Wuxian has arrived before all the lanterns have been collected.
Sixteen violet-clad disciples fly across the surface of the river, bent low at the knees, sweeping down like birds of prey in order to claim their count before others steal it from them. While their speed and control is truly something to marvel at, the entertainment comes mostly in the form of watching these chaotic children sabotage each other.

Water splashes everywhere in great waves and veils; the light paints gentle rainbows onto abandoned battlegrounds, only to be destroyed by the sheen of fine metal breaking the haze. One by one, the lotus lanterns fly into baskets resting on the pier, and one by one, Wei Wuxian puts out the golden flame that burns bright still.

Honour is important, of course, but outsmarting your rivals is an incomparable satisfaction.

Jin Ling gasps, pulling himself out of Wei Wuxian’s arms. He hops to the very edge of the pier, leaning as far as he can above the water without losing his balance. His hands reach out toward the disciples, the flowers, the lanterns, and he and watches with brilliant stars in his eyes.

“They’re so fast,” he breathes. Beside the woven baskets, his figure is so small, so young, yet his eyes burn with the same sparks that have long since grown into a storm within Jiang Wanyin. “Will I do that too?”

“Of course,” says Wei Wuxian. He pulls Jin Ling back gently, then begins to work on righting his robes. Jin Ling is far too distracted to care, which makes retying his sash and pulling up his boots a simple task.

“You taught them! You taught those disciples to go as fast as they can go now.”

“That’s right. It’s been about eight months, but I promise you they weren’t nearly as impressive back then.”

“Will you teach me too?”

“Yes, I—”

The words catch on the image of a beautiful woman dressed in purple, always smiling, always gentle but so brave, her voice a peaceful melody that was always too forgiving, too good. It shatters in an instant, bleeding blood as black as his soul, and there will never be a second chance.

Jiang Wanyin has lost so much. What little time he has is given freely, generously, without a second thought, to Jin Ling.

That bond is precious. That bond is one of the only things Wei Wuxian has yet to tarnish.

(But I want—if the world will allow it, I want—I want to be a part of it, too—

It doesn’t matter what you want.)

“If your uncle allows it,” says Wei Wuxian, hiding his shaking hands under his sleeves, “I will do everything I can to teach you all I know.”

Jin Ling beams. His smile is as golden as the threads in Wei Wuxian’s calloused hands with all the innocence that Wei Wuxian lost long ago. “Then it’s a promise!”

“It’s a promise,” Wei Wuxian says, a softness in his voice that he remembers only in fragmented memories. He’s tired of making promises only to break them. For as long as he lives, this oath will live with him. “So you must live for the day you can make your uncle proud. Alright?”
“Alright,” Jin Ling agrees easily, with all the confidence of people who have already seen the world in all its splendor and cruelty. His confidence, while misplaced, is commendable and adorable.

As always, the disciples collect all the lanterns with impressive speed, and as always, they plaster themselves against the wet wood of the pier, heaving deep breathes in order to fill their lungs and count their bounties in one breath.

“A very good morning to all of you,” Wei Wuxian says cheerfully, standing his ground even as sixteen manic gazes turn to him. “I’m sure you’re tired of hearing the same words every day, but you just keep getting faster. Even Jin Ling was impressed.”

“You went really fast,” Jin Ling says proudly, lifting his chin as if their merits are his own. His little feet stumble over to the looming baskets, and with a righteous huff, he slaps a hand down on each and every one of them, nodding to the respective disciple with an unwavering gaze fit for a three year-old going on thirty. “You were fast,” he repeats, until all of them are holding back wide smiles to preserve what dignity they have imagined for themselves.

Jiang Muai wages war with her lips to wrestle them into a flat line. She’s only partially successful as her expression sucks in and puckers with great effort. “You’re up early today, Jin-gongzi,” she manages to say, disguising the tail end of a laugh into a cough.

“Not early,” Jin Ling argues. Almost immediately, a long, deep yawn draws a thick veil of sleep over his watery eyes and into his bell-like voice.

Wei Wuxian peers down at Jin Ling. The boy’s head swivels upward to face him with great denial and a flush that reaches the ears. “Of course,” he says, with no particular inflection.

Clenching his hands into his robes, Jin Ling stomps his feet and puffs his cheeks out in a pout. “I’m not tired!”

“Of course,” the disciples repeat in one united voice, which only serves to add to Jin Ling’s determined scowl.

Wei Wuxian sighs. Pulling a petulant Jin Ling into his arms, he smiles helplessly at his disciples. “Looks like we’ll have to leave the rest for tomorrow,” he says. “I’ll be back soon. In the meantime, get counting, get changed, and we’ll meet in the training grounds.”

His disciples are quick to heed his orders. When he turns, they bow to him. They bow to the shadow of his back; they bow to his words; they bow because they have found respect for him as the rest of Lotus Pier has. There is a miracle somewhere in that strange turning of time, and Wei Wuxian is grateful for it.

The shadow of the manor is dark but not cold. The sun has climbed higher into the sky, not quite breaking through the deep violet of night, but the gentle closing and abrupt jolting of Jin Ling’s eyelids have little to do with what the day wants.

His steps fall quietly. There are those who have yet to wake and greet the morning. It’s here and now, in these still, lonesome halls, that the whispers of the past are loudest and the warm touch of family lost brushes over his shoulders, his cheeks, his head.

For a moment, Wei Wuxian looks back. He catches himself and wants to laugh.

What echoes in his ears is the distant thrum of the river. What rests on his shoulders are divine garments that bloom gold; on his cheeks, a smile that dies and is born again; on his head, a veil to protect himself from the world, and the world from him.
Whatever has been lost cannot be reclaimed. Isn’t it mortal tradition to toss out the old in place of the new every year?

Perhaps Wei Wuxian has lost more than he can ever imagine, but the one thing he can never lose is time. The one thing he would like to lose is time. It haunts him, it follows him, it cries out to be reclaimed. Yet there is no place for it here.

(Who are you kidding, Wei Wuxian?

How can you lose something you refuse to let go of?)

The years turn. He is alive. Soon, the river will carry the wishes of all its children into the night, where the new year will embrace them, trade their regrets for promises that are always more fragile than they seem.

For now, though, he holds something in his arms far more precious than his own life, that breathes and lives and will stay alive.

“You should rest well,” Wei Wuxian scolds gently. He brushes the hair from Jin Ling’s soft features, rests his touch on his head for a moment longer. “It’s far too early. The disciples need to train, but you’re far younger than them.”

“Don’t want to be small,” Jin Ling says. His hands grip into Wei Wuxian’s peony-dotted robes. “Don’t want to be weak.”

“Unfortunately, you have no say in that,” Wei Wuxian sighs. “Everyone must be small and weak at some point in their lives.” He pokes Jin Ling’s nose teasingly and smiles when the boy bats his hand away with a pout. “The role of those stronger than yourself is to ensure that you live long enough to become strong. Your uncle is one of those noble people, isn’t he?”

A rebuttal works its way onto Jin Ling’s lips, but it dies when he hears praise for his uncle. “Uncle’s the strongest,” he says proudly, thickly, his voice trickling to a murmur.

The lull of his arms invites Jin Ling to the land of sleep, beckoning for him to allow himself rest. Yet the child squirms, battles against what he sees as weakness. For someone so young, he does a very good job at convincing both himself and others that he feels as proud as he stands, but Wei Wuxian knows exactly where to look for those tiny cracks.

“Jin Ling,” he calls softly. The boy in his arms stirs. “Would you like to hear a song?”

Jin Ling’s head rests on Wei Wuxian’s chest, and his slowing breaths stutter as he shapes his short answer: “Okay.”

There is a broken mirror that reflects brighter days. It’s been shattered so thoroughly that no time or magic will ever make it whole ever again.

But there’s a song on Wei Wuxian’s lips, a prayer in his voice, an oath in his blood. He has no words to offer; no comfort could ever lie in the rise and fall of what remains of him. All he has to give is a wordless lullaby that reaches desperately toward light that has faded and shadows that have died.

Sing a song for the departed. Let them hear your regret, your sorrow, your unspoken apologies.

Sing a song for the living. Let them remember a time long ago, before the weight of the world crushed your dreams and your promises.
Sing because there is nothing left to say. Your words will never be enough.

Grant them rest from this weary world. Their eyes may never see the night, but yours will.

What else can you do?

Jin Ling has already sunken into dreams, but Wei Wuxian sings on. There is a child in his arms whose entire world has been destroyed, but as long as there is life, and as long as there is light, Jin Ling will march onward. Always.

The juniors flock to Jin Ling as if they have nowhere else in the world to be.

Wei Wuxian isn’t entirely sure how they became so attached to a child younger than them by more than a decade, but he would be lying if he said he wasn’t incredibly pleased.

Perhaps they see Jin Ling as someone to protect, or perhaps they simply think he’s entertaining. Regardless of the reason, they are always eager to play with Jin Ling when everyone else is occupied, or when Jiang Wanyin tells someone to watch over his nephew while he finishes the last of his duties for the day.

At first, Jiang Wanyin is reluctant to let Jin Ling out of his sight. He keeps the child close to him, within range of his protection, where Sandu’s cold glint and Zidian’s unrelenting bite can reach.

It’s understandable. It’s respectable. It can’t be called forgivable, because there’s nothing to forgive. Out of all the people in this world, Jiang Wanyin is perhaps one of the most tragic of them all. What does it matter if he wishes to keep close the only surviving member of his family?

And although it’s achingly understandable, there is only so much one man can do. In those first few days, Jiang Wanyin stands strong, with one arm holding up Lotus Pier and the other, his newphew. He doesn’t yield, and he doesn’t admit weakness, because he never has and he never will. But the cracks appear, and he creaks, wavers, yet he never falls. He’ll never allow himself weakness, and that’s exactly why his pride is so dangerous.

Jiang Chenyi sits him down one night and speaks to him. Wei Wuxian isn’t part of the conversation. Whatever words she imparts unto him strike him rigid, then lax, and finally compliant for a short moment.

In that moment, Jiang Chenyi tells him something of great importance. He doesn’t buckle under the weight; rather, it weighs on him like the noble violet regalia on his shoulders, yet another duty that he must carry alongside his stone heart.

Whatever words were exchanged that night are between Jiang Chenyi and Jiang Wanyin alone. Wei Wuxian never needs to know.

Soon enough, though, Jiang Wanyin remembers that all of Lotus Pier is under his protection. Those who know his name also know of the golden boy whom he loves with all his heart, whose wellbeing and happiness is worth more than any tangible treasure.

And so, after only a few weeks, Jin Ling is free to roam the streets under the watchful eye of the Yunmeng Jiang disciples. The juniors are often among those who lead the child around, introducing
him to the best restaurants, the shiniest trinkets, the most fragrant of teas, and the tallest trees.

It’s so easy to adore Jin Ling. There’s a haughtiness in his spine that melts into wonder in the blink of an eye. He holds enough pride in himself to be confident and self-assured in every step he takes, yet he reaches out his hands to be lifted or held when there’s something beautiful outside of his reach. He explores the world with such unbridled curiosity that the sun itself could fall out of the sky and he would appreciate each and every thing left in its blazing path before admiring it.

Wei Wuxian just wishes his disciples weren’t such awful enablers.

“Be careful,” Wei Wuxian says cautiously, ready to avert disaster at any moment. “If you drop Jin Ling in the river, I won’t be helping you when Jiang Wanyin runs you through and ties you to the gates.”

“I think you need to calm down,” Jiang Mingyue says, rolling her eyes. “Besides, what could go wrong?”

Jiang Muai smiles reassuringly. It is not, in fact, very effective. “Don’t worry, Fuxing. I’ve got a good grip!”

Wei Wuxian has a very long and extensive list of how things could go horribly wrong. He decides to swallows his words and keeps his focus on Jin Ling, who appears to be having a wonderful time picking lotus pods. Normally, there would be nothing to worry about. The stress comes in like a gallant crusade with the inclusion of Jiang Mingyue, who’s holding Jin Ling out into the open waters for a “truly immersive experience”, and also Jiang Muai, who’s in turn grabbing onto Jiang Mingyue to ensure they don’t topple into the river.

Every disciple of Yunmeng Jiang is a competent swimmer at worst, so Wei Wuxian has no reason to be worried about either Jiang Mingyue or Jiang Muai. However, Jin Ling is essentially an infant with little to no experience in water, and Wei Wuxian isn’t eager to see how well he takes to swimming.

“I got it!” Jin Ling cries, lifting up a lotus pod above his head victoriously. He beams, which in turn makes Mingyue and Muai beam as well.

The boat leans dangerously to the right. Jiang Muai leans hard to the left. Wei Wuxian feels his heart leap out of his chest and dive into the water.

Jin Ling squirms in Jiang Mingyue’s grip, making the boat wobble in a way that is most definitely not intended. His eyes light up as another cluster of lotus pods comes into view. “I see more! Go! Go!”

“Let’s slow down a little,” says Wei Wuxian, a veteran lotus pod-picker who would like to avoid watching someone drown or flayed to death by Zidian. “Jiang Muai, if you could—”

Jiang Muai jams the rod into the river and propels them all forward with startling speed. Jin Ling squeals in excitement as Jiang Mingyue’s grip slips for a short moment. She recovers with ease, spinning Jin Ling forward to experience the so-called thrill that comes with steering a boat as if you fear neither the gods nor death.

Wei Wuxian wants off this boat before Jiang Wanyin comes sprinting across the water with vengeance in his eyes and lightning in his throat.

Their days are chaotic. Jin Ling digs fallen stars from the most mundane of things, asking questions of why things happen the way they do, why his uncle is so busy all the time, why he and Wei Wuxian dance around each other so delicately.
Jin Ling is a very observant child. His words are sweet one moment and biting the next. Sometimes, no intentions are worse than bad intentions. Children are so utterly unaware and innocent, and knowing that one day that innocence will be torn away from them or abandoned is a harrowing reality.

For now, though, the days are bright, and there is so much to see.

When Jin Ling asks to try Wei Wuxian’s share at a restaurant, the juniors caution him with just enough respect to preserve Wei Wuxian’s dignity. They all have a good laugh when Muai describes his taste as “if you set fire on fire and burnt off all your taste buds”, which is a very dramatic way of saying spicy. Strangely, while he chuckles, the disciples throw wide-eyed, nervous smiles at each other.

Unfortunately, Jin Ling never does get to try anything from Wei Wuxian’s palette. The juniors usher him away at every opportunity, stuffing him full of as many local delicacies as they can possibly think of until Jin Ling’s eyes are drowsy with sleep.

The juniors treat Jin Ling with kindness, yes, but they also treat him as an equal, in a strange way. They never speak to him to berate him for what he has yet to understand; rather, they are eager to teach him all the whirling ways of the stars that pass above them. They hold his hand through crowds and let him run free through less hectic streets. They ask for his opinion and value his words, no matter how nonsensical or naive they may be. They treat him as a brother, not a liability, and something in Wei Wuxian’s heart swells and blooms.

One day, Jin Ling returns to the manor with violet robes and a nine-petal lotus flower.

Perhaps it was impulse. Perhaps it was youthful thoughtlessness. There’s nothing strange about it; even guest disciples don the uniform of Yunmeng Jiang as long as they study in Lotus Pier.

Jiang Wanyin takes one look at Jin Ling and his voice catches in his throat.

“Look, Uncle!” says Jin Ling, running forward and twirling in a small circle to show the fine tailoring of his tiny robes. He smiles, a radiant, proud thing that lifts softly at his lips, and lifts a jade bell hanging from his sash. Its chime sings the first eight notes of a wordless lullaby, and Wei Wuxian feels his heart stutter. “I look just like you now! We can go night-hunting together!”

The distant thrum of thunder invites an oncoming storm. The disciples, having no doubt caught the scent of rain and lightning, bow deeply and dismiss themselves.

Wei Wuxian tilts his weimao downward and steps back into the growing shadows of the sunset.

“A-Ling,” Jiang Wanyin says, the tremble in his voice almost imperceptible, “where are your robes?”

“These are my robes,” Jin Ling answers, his chin held high.

(In wonder, in kindness, in emotional integrity—

Jin Ling has always taken after his mother.)

Jiang Wanyin is silent for a moment too long. He is silent to begin with. Jiang Wanyin isn’t one to allow silence to be his answer; he’s suffered the silence of the world for too long, has had his prayers go unheard and unanswered for a lifetime too long, has walked the same steps through the same ancestral hall under the same unforgiving moon a hundred, a thousand times.

Light as much incense as the flames that burn within you desire. Kneel before those who have
passed before you. Beg for forgiveness, for absolution. Ask whatever questions plague your mind and wonder how everything went so wrong.

Wallow in the silence of the night. The dead have no place in this world. For as long as they are silent, never allow yourself silence.

Even Jin Ling senses something great and terrible and wrong. The curve of his smile drags downward, yet the remnants of pride still shine in his eyes. Someone so young should never have to make that kind of desperate expression.

“Was I not supposed to wear them?” he asks in a hushed voice, his small hands digging into his violet robes. His feet scuffle and he looks toward the ground. “I’m sorry.”

Awash in the melancholy of the setting sun, something small and new is born. It is not for Wei Wuxian to ever hold. It is not something he will ever understand. Yet what is created and cherished will always grow into something greater, and at the very least, he can appreciate it.

There is a storm that lives in Lotus Pier, and for the first time, it dissipates, the clouds clear, and there is something so, so kind in Jiang Wanyin’s gaze.

“It’s fine,” he finally says, kneeling before Jin Ling. Their eyes meet; Wei Wuxian can’t see what it is that makes Jin Ling’s gaze fill with such wonder and joy. He doubts he ever will. “It’s alright. Your uncle is... very happy.”

The words leave Jiang Wanyin slowly, hesitantly, as if he isn’t sure if what he feels is happiness or not. But when Jin Ling laughs and throws himself into Jiang Wanyin’s arms, a yearning turns into an answer, and that’s all.

Wei Wuxian has no place here.

The shadows are kind to him as he slips away, silently, wordlessly, always, forever. He has no right to nurture a happiness that doesn’t belong to him. He has no right to choose his family when he made the decision against them long ago.

Jin Ling can’t be called a miracle, because a miracle is something that should not have been. He deserves the world; he deserves everything that has been taken away from him. He can only be called a survivor, and that fate is too cruel to give to anyone.

But here, in Lotus Pier, there are people who love him unconditionally. They will teach him, protect him, guide him, and raise him into a brilliant sun.

The years will pass, and Jin Ling will grow. When he is old enough, Wei Wuxian will meet him as a mentor, a teacher, and nothing more.

(Why don’t you come up with a name, A-Xian?)

(Ah, but—)

Does love that is never returned mean anything?

Is something that vanishes and is gone the same as something that never was?

I ask myself, but I know the answer very well.

It does mean something. It always has.
“Jiang Wanyin,” Wei Wuxian says one night over dinner, “how about we take a trip to a nice town down south tomorrow?”

There is a very long moment where Wei Wuxian is convinced either Sandu or Zidian will escort him kindly to a second death.

Jiang Wanyin stops, then narrows his eyes. “You’re kidding,” he says, not asks.

“Everyone needs a break sometimes,” Wei Wuxian declares. The sweet taste of wine lingers on his tongue, but it’s far from invoking even the slightest hint of drunkenness in him. “You’ve been working yourself to the bone. When was the last time you took some time off for yourself?”

“I don’t have time for myself,” Jiang Wanyin snaps, his hands clenched into fists. Every word is spoken through gritted teeth, more frustrated than truly angry.

“Then make time,” Wei Wuxian says. He prods at Jiang Wanyin’s chest, the home of his strength and overbearing warmth, and sighs when his hand is batted away. “You’re strong, Jiang Wanyin, stronger than anyone I’ve ever met, but you’ll burn yourself away if you refuse to stop for a moment and just breathe.”

There’s a violent creak in Jiang Wanyin’s heart that screams, screams, and screams. Yet he pretends it doesn’t exist and walks onward.

The conversation-turned-argument stalls, lilts, rises and falls. Jiang Wanyin repeats the same words he’s always said: I don’t have time, you wouldn’t understand, don’t tell me what to do.

Wei Wuxian refuses to step down. He’ll never say that he knows anyone’s heart best, but he can tell when someone is reaching too far, doing too much, running ahead into the storm while the wind and rain strip them of the embers that stoke flame within them.

That, and he made a promise a year ago in that strange town by the river. Something was born in his foolish hands, a flower and an oath, and for once, what he desires and what his duty calls for him to do have aligned.

Jiang Wanyin’s tenacity is commendable, but Wei Wuxian is nothing if not skilled at weaving his words into something more.

“Jiang Chenyi is perfectly capable of taking over your duties for a single day, and the juniors love Jin Ling,” he says, knowing that Jiang Wanyin has no rebuttal against the undeniable truth. “I believe you understand it very well, but your presence—or rather, your lack thereof—is simply another aspect of life in Lotus Pier. Learn to live, Jiang Wanyin, or this great, wide world will take everything you love and make it into a matter of survival.”

*It already has*, they both know. Yet neither of them speak those words.

What good would it do? What use is there it admitting that surviving his good enough in the face of a happiness that could be if just a little more time was given to appreciate it?
In the end, Jiang Wanyin abandons whatever words have formed beneath his tongue. “Fine,” he finally says, standing with a clap of energy, turning in a flourish of violet. “But only for the night. Do you know how much I have to do tomorrow?”

“As much as today, and yesterday, and all the days before and after them,” Wei Wuxian says simply. Jiang Wanyin snorts. He has no words to waste as he leaves the main hall behind, always in motion.

There are always unspoken words between them. Perhaps they can’t bring themselves to say them; perhaps they expect the other to understand even without speaking as the words fade into nothing and die on their lips.

For now, that weight is alright. One day, when everything has been said and done, they’ll be able to sit across from each other and unearth everything they have buried.

The nights in Lotus Pier aren’t particularly long. When Wei Wuxian finally rises, a weariness in his limbs that so often plagues him after bearing the burden of silence alongside Jiang Wanyin, the moon has already found a path high into the skies. Its silver light is a gentle, soft song, tickling his skin with the whispers of what if, what if.

It’s a perfect night. Jiang Wanyin must be out there in the darkness, leading a night-hunt with the juniors, making rounds of Lotus Pier, doing anything and everything he believes will make up for the time he’ll be losing tomorrow.

Jiang Wanyin finds the strangest ways to seek equivalency. Hurt those who have hurt you, seek out that which has been lost, give time to make time.

As Wei Wuxian reaches for his weimao, a single jade bell tumbles from his sleeve.

He pauses. Right. Of course. If Jiang Wanyin ever noticed anything missing from Jin Ling’s Yunmeng Jiang robes, he chose to keep it in his heart.

With a sigh, Wei Wuxian picks up the tiny bell. It gleams an ethereal white for only a moment as the moonlight reaches out to cusp it.

Jin Ling deserves something better than the fanciful whims of a helpless god. Let the craftsmen of Lotus Pier create something wonderful and worthy of such a wonderful child. Home is never far away, and Wei Wuxian refuses to impart his touch on something that doesn’t belong to him.

The bell is dead and meaningless in his hands. He would destroy it, but that disgusting, undying beast in his belly writhes in pain at the notion of seeing something forged by nothing but aching hands and the light of lotus lanterns shatter without ever having the chance to live.

Wei Wuxian takes a deep breath and holds it. The air fills his lungs, squeezes them, and finally escapes.

He’ll leave the decision to Jiang Wanyin.

The empty halls greet him with the somber rumble of sleep. The river sighs a deep, echoing hymn that reaches to horizons Wei Wuxian will never be able to touch. White and silver bathe his robes under a curious moon on a perfect night, and there is nothing to be afraid of. While the day reveres him, the night protects him.

Wei Wuxian’s steps falter only slightly before he breaks the boundary between the Lotus Pier he knows and Jiang Wanyin’s quarters.
The purple banners of Yunmeng Jiang flow beneath the pearlescent gaze of night with a resolve so unflinching and unwavering that a mighty wisteria tree could find its roots here and nothing would change. But there’s nothing to say about quarters that speak no words; there’s a bed that sees more nightmares than dreams, a desk that carries the whispers of ramblings with no meaning and bitterness with no voice, an incense burner that will never drown out the smell of lightning and fire that has sunk so deeply into the walls and floors.

There’s not much to say. What Wei Wuxian knows with certainty is that this room is far too cold and far too empty for a man who burns for all those who have left and who have stayed.

Wei Wuxian keeps his eyes low to the ground. It feels wrong to intrude on Jiang Wanyin’s privacy like this. All he needs to do is leave Jin Ling’s bell somewhere safe, and the night will be over.

Another sigh escapes from him. Maybe if he leaves it in a drawer somewhere, Jiang Wanyin will believe that Jin Ling was the one who misplaced it, or perhaps the bell will simply be one among many, worth nothing more than a short moment of confusion.

The first few drawers Wei Wuxian pulls open are all empty. That won’t do; the more there is, the more naturally the bell will fit into place.

So he moves on and pulls open another draw. A clatter greets him as something rolls free from a bundle of black cloth.

Wei Wuxian flinches. He didn’t break anything, did he?

Reaching into the still shadows, Wei Wuxian wraps his hands around the cloth and the clattering thing, pulling them under the watchful eye of moonlight.

All the blood in his body freezes.

His breaths are so loud, shaking and stuttering and shivering as he struggles to bring air into his lungs, to breathe, why does it hurt so much?

There is an ebony dizi in his hands that croons under his touch, painting his eyes with the crimson of blood, dragging him into the hatred of the monsters he commands, those he has killed, those who raise their weapons and turn everything he once fought to protect against him, and—

(It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter anymore.

There’s nothing left, and still you demand everything from me. Why can’t you see? Why can’t you understand? There’s nothing left for me, for anyone in this wretched, cursed world. It’s all the same!

You want me dead? You want to kill me? So what? Is there anyone in this world who even wants me here? Do you truly believe your hatred is greater than mine?

I should’ve known it would have come to this. Everyone I loved, everything that was worth anything —where is it now?

This path I’ve walked, it—

Ah, it doesn’t matter. Inevitable. That’s all it is. Inevitable, it can’t be helped. Of course.

If this is how everything ends, then this world can burn.)

His head aches with all the pain of a life he once lost, that he doesn’t want back. It hurts so much,
why does it hurt so much?

The dizi’s shrill song courses through his blood, grips his dying heart with bloodied hands. It laughs, it cries, all the noises it makes are nonsense, yet Wei Wuxian understands it all so clearly.

He stumbles, confused, disoriented, clutching at—at his chest, at his head, at his ears, at anything at all. It’s all too much, and he doesn’t understand, but he does, all he’s doing and all he has ever done is run away from reality.

Sickly sweet honey drips down his throat. It tastes like blood. He feels nauseous. He wants to—to go somewhere, to go away, to leave this place behind and leave the dead where they belong, and yet—

Chenqing. A fitting name, no?

Chenqing. At the end of all worlds, there was nothing but Chenqing. Even as blood filled his lungs and throat, choking him on all his sins, the only thing left beside him was the black of night and his regrets.

His heart pounds in his chest, beating against a golden core that is wrong. It shouldn’t be there. He knows, because that irreplaceable warmth was cut out of him and given to someone whom he took everything from.

There is—there is—

There is a storm in Lotus Pier—

There is fire upon the river—

There is a god in Lotus Pier—

There is a monster who will never be full, who will continue to destroy everything he touches, who will cry as the the sun sets on the ruins of a family he tore apart.

When will he learn? When will he ever learn?

Wei Wuxian’s breath hitches sporadically. With every wheezing gasp that escapes him, the world around him fades more and more. He raises a shaking hand up to his face and tries to laugh when they glisten wet with tears. He chokes on a sob and claps his hand over his mouth as a pathetic keening wrenches out of him.

He can’t do this. Whatever this is, he can’t do it, he can’t even breathe. His legs collapse beneath him, and he splays onto the ground, cold and shaking and fighting back tears he doesn’t deserve.

Once, twice, three times, the world spins, spins, spins, and then—

And then—

He’s falling, plummeting into a darkness he knows will swallow him whole. His flesh tears apart. His tears feed the monsters who revel in his suffering. Every cry for help is crushed from his lungs.

How dare they. How dare they.

He carves his survival into the bleeding hills, laughing when they scream out for mercy. Their bloodlust turns to terror so readily in his hands, and they learn that before him, they must either submit or suffer a fate even worse than the one they have been given.
His fingers bleed as he crafts his only ally in this wretched place from wood rife with the resentment of all those who have met their ends here. He is so, so angry, and he will make them pay back everything they have stolen tenfold.

There is a man who has wronged him and razed his home to the ground. Watching the foolish boy slowly rip himself apart with his own hands, one gash at a time, is a satisfaction unlike any other.

But then—

*Come back to Gusu with me.*

The world tilts, slants, and breaks.

There is no winning against a storm, but Wei Wuxian will protect this precious corner of the world until his dying breath.

Lightning strikes at his skin. He bleeds and bleeds, but his song only grows more powerful. There is a violet blade in his gut and he sneers as he thrusts his mangled body into place. His gentle ally, someone who deserved so much more than the fate he fell to, who Wei Wuxian failed twice over, roars and fights for a peace that is so horribly fragile.

How did it come to this?

Why did this happen?

Where did we go wrong?

*Haven’t you had enough yet?!!*

On that day, something breaks, shatters, and will never be whole again.

(Somewhere in between those gaps, a familiar face steps into his life. With a child in his arms and a rare levity between them, a knot in his heart unravels. One leaves his life that day, and one opens his eyes for the second time.)

But there is still hope. There are brighter days ahead, with the birth of a golden child who has the whole world to explore, and this time, it will be better.

There is a silver bell in his hands that sings of protection and grace. It's ironic, in a way, for the culmination of his talents to be used to create something for peace, for someone who will lead the next generation to kinder days.

And then—

There is a man in gold with a sword that weighs of legacy. He stands resolutely, nothing in his eyes but the family he loves, yet Wei Wuxian’s anger burns, threatening to consume him.

Why is it that he can never have even the simplest of things? Why does he bring chaos to everything he touches? Why does the world despise him so much? What will it take for them to just listen?

*A-Li is still—*

Ah.

No.
No.

There is an empty void in his chest. It grows and grows until it swallows him whole. It isn’t Wei Wuxian’s hands tearing through flesh, yet he looks down at his hands and finds them covered in blood.

He can’t breathe. He doesn’t understand. What’s happening? What’s going on?

No. No, no, no, this can’t—this can’t be happening. It can’t be real. All he wanted was to give this blessings to his newborn nephew, and now—now—

Everything I touch dies.

(What have I done?

Just why have I been locking myself in this hellhole all these years?

Why do I have to suffer all this?

Why did I choose to walk this path in the beginning?

Why did I make myself like this?

What do others see me as?

Just what have I gained?

Have I gone mad? Have I gone mad? Have I gone mad?)

He’s so tired of being abandoned. He’s so tired of being alone. Always, forever, he is left behind, reaching out for someone to save him, because every time he has saved himself, it has been at the expense of others.

Ah, now that he thinks about it, perhaps he wasn’t meant to be saved at all. If only he could stop living this moment, maybe there would be something better awaiting him.

Ha.

Who does he think he’s fooling? A murderer like him, finding peace in death? All there is for him on the other side is whatever just punishment he will receive for his curse of a life.

What does it matter? Isn’t this exactly what he deserves?

Where are you going? You’re marching to your deaths! Don’t you see? Don’t you understand?

Don’t go!

But no matter how loud he cries, or how desperately he begs, or how furiously he calls, there is nothing. There will never be anything for him.

The people who reached out to him and lifted him up when all was lost, and when all was lost again—they’re gone, and there is nothing left of them.

There is nothing left for him.

All that he feels is the wrath inside him. Everyone has died. Everything is gone. There are a thousand
words on his lips that will never be spoken, that will be lost forever, and it doesn’t matter.

They want him dead, do they? Then why do they lust after power badly? Their expressions twist in disgust at the very sight of him as if those pathetic maggots aren’t monsters themselves. Together, they crave his slow and painful demise. Let them face him one by one, then, and watch as they beg for mercy and grovel at his feet.

Pathetic. Despicable. What is there to preserve in this awful world? What good do those fools see?

All of them are rats beneath his feet. He feels nothing but anger in his blood and in his breath, yet the song that fills the rancid air of the city is cold as death. Every note is chaos; every shrieking tone is bloodshed.

Through the haze, someone cries his name.

*Wei Ying!* 

White on white in the dark of night—

So it truly has come to this.

Even the truest of them all, the only one in whom the last ember of hope had yet to die, wants nothing more than for *Wei Wuxian* to stop existing.

He wants to laugh. He wants to cry.

How naive of them to think themselves different from the monster that stands before them when they all desire the same thing.

But then—

Then—

*A-Xian*!

A name no one calls him anymore. A name that he squandered the right to. Yet it breaks through the night, cracking open *Wei Wuxian’s* heart, and everything stops.

Why is she here? She can’t be here. It can’t—if she is, then—

Where is she? Why does she still care? Does she still care at all?

Panic courses through his limbs, throwing him forward, through the blood and the violence around him, because if she’s here, then nothing else matters. *Wei Wuxian* has given up on everything except her.

Distantly, someone else calls her name. It doesn’t matter. It hasn’t mattered for a long time.

Scarlet rips open his heart and her flesh.

No, no, *no*.

He can’t do this. His hands are shaking and he understands nothing. Everything is spinning wildly out of his control, slipping from his pathetic grasp. He begs for control, but his mind, his heart, his soul, whatever still remains, fails him. He wants everything to stop. He wants everything to *stop*. But he can’t.
A-Xian, you... you should stop first.

Don’t... don’t...

(Silver. It shines under moonlight and wards away evil. Isn’t it a beautiful colour?)

The world tilts one last time, and—

Words that will never be spoken. Words lost forever to the timelessness of death. There is everything, and then there is nothing.

A righteous blade jutting through her neck, a thin crimson trail dripping down her lips, the words of vengeful child: it all washes away as Wei Wuxian awaits a final judgement that will never be given.

Her body is still. Her gentle caresses, her bell-like laughter, her steady arms, always there to greet him and welcome him home even if the skies should fall, are swept away by glassy eyes that will never look into his ever again.

And then—and then—

*It doesn’t matter anymore.*

The seal comes together.

*It doesn’t matter anymore.*

Everything falls.

*It doesn’t matter anymore!*

Someone calls out his name, and then there is darkness.

And then...

And then what?

It aches. It hurts. Why is it—there should be nothing, but instead, what remains is—

*Wei Ying. I am here.*

The scent of sandalwood washes over him, and for a moment, it brings him relief. Comfort.

But the sluggish bleeding of his open wounds, the endless void that has torn open his chest and filled it with tar, the sorrow and despair that has consumed all that he is, drags him down into an abyss of his own creation.

There is a voice that echoes through the cavern, and something strange blurs his eyes.

Reaching out to him is a vision of when they were young and naive and had nothing but each other and a wordless song, the world was kinder, and there was something to life for.

How fitting it is for Wei Wuxian to be punished with the possibility of *what if* long after the chances have already been destroyed.

A hollow laugh breaks from bloodied lips. There is something wet on his tongue, and he swallows it down.
Wei Ying.

Only one person in the world calls him by that name, in that voice, with that weight.

I love you.

Something great and powerful stutters in Wei Wuxian.

Love. Love? Even after all this, even after everything has come to an end, someone loves him?

Ha.

Who are you fooling, Wei Wuxian?

Get lost.

It smells of sorrow and desperation. A calloused hand cups his cheek, and he can feel warm breath on his skin.

No. No, what—

Get away. Get away.

Get lost.

There is nothing left.

There is nothing here.

It doesn’t matter.

Nobody will come rescue him.

It’s better that way.

Please, no more.

Get lost.

The achingly familiar glare of a blade that has been pointed at him so many times moves in the darkness, and for the last time, something in Wei Wuxian is born and dies.

The world does not tilt. There is nothing left to break. What remains only exists to be lost.

But there is one thing that Wei Wuxian cannot afford to lose. He knows that he will not live to see the sun set and rise on a new day.

His hands only know how to break and shatter, but please, to any gods who might be listening at all, let this child survive.

Live for me.

Please.

Please.

Xian-gege!
And then—

The flames lick the darkened skies. In violet robes, surrounded by lightning, his once-brother calls his name.

Look at him. He fits those robes so well. What happened to you, Jiang Cheng? When did you... when did you carry such thunderous storms in your eyes?

The Yiling Patriarch. The scourge of the world. His last act, in a sense, betrayed him.

Finally,

Inevitably,

Inexorably,

It ends.

**And it begins anew.**

There is a god in Lotus Pier, and he shakes, cracks, and breaks. No; that isn’t quite right. He has always been broken.

So what is he?

Wei Wuxian grasps at his chest, at the brand on his chest that divinity has purged. Each breath he expels feels like his last, and the crystalline tears that drip down his face have long grown cold and quiet.

Chenqing waits, as it has for three years, under the light of a moon that mocks him for all his failures.

Wei Wuxian. Wei Ying. Fuxing. Who is he?

What has he been running away from this entire time?

*Why was I thrown back into this world?*

He understands. He doesn’t. He does, he does, he **does.**

Among all his faults and regrets, the greatest is his inability to comprehend the consequences of his actions.

Of what little he can hold close with pride, what he treasures most is his ability to move forward.

Move forward. Never stop walking. Even if it hurts, you must keep going. What does it matter if you— if you know what haunts your dreams and whispers in your ear? What does your pain matter to a world that begs to be saved?

(There is a god in Lotus Pier, and despite it all, he has found a home here.

He doesn’t deserve it. He never will. Now, more than ever, his touch is poison.

As Wei Wuxian, he has no place here.

As Fuxing, he...)

With trembling hands, Wei Wuxian pushes himself to his feet. He wipes his tears away with a
peony-dotted sleeve that glistens with gold he has never deserved.

Wei Wuxian is alive.

Fuxing is alive.

He knows how to live as one or the other.

What does it mean for him if both ache so badly to live?

(I can accept all of the words that were spoken, given, thrown at me.

But you—

Why?

I don't understand. I don't...

Lan Zhan, I—)

“So you finally decided to fulfill your promise, did you?”

The strange, strange woman Wei Wuxian met a full year ago eyes him with curious humour. Something twitches on her face, as if she’s seen something she was looking for, and her smile lowers just a bit.

Wei Wuxian smiles. It slips off his lips in a way it never did before, yet he can’t bring himself to right it. “I’m very sorry for being so late,” he says, voice flowing like sweet honey. “Unfortunately, Jiang Wanyin is a very busy man.”

The name plasters to his tongue and refuses to leave. No matter how deeply he pretends that everything is the same, nothing remains.

Beside him, Jiang Cheng frowns. “Give us a private room,” he says, the natural thunderclap of his voice muddled by faint exhaustion. He huffs a sigh, blinks heavily, and looks as if he’s prepared to drink them out of business.

The woman raises a brow, but says nothing more. “Of course. Then, if you’ll follow me.”

The room she leads them to is humble but separated from the rest of the chaos. Without speaking a single word, she hefts five jars of liquor that smell like poor and expensive decisions after them.

“Take your time,” is all she says before she takes her leave.

Then there is silence.

For a moment, all Wei Wuxian can do is study his trembling fingers. The distant smile that sits on his features falls, falls, and falls, until all that remains is parted lips that take in gentle breaths, one after the other, carefully, because the words that lie buried beneath his skin have all been unearthed and sit just beneath his tongue.
Jiang Cheng is the first to grab a jar. He does so casually, drinking directly from the jar in one deep breath.

“That’s a choice you’ll certainly feel tomorrow,” says Wei Wuxian.

The words slip out so easily. Even with the memory of all his sins rooted so deeply in him that to destroy it would be to destroy himself, he can’t help but feel at home beside Jiang Cheng.

(Chenqing is tucked away in that lonely drawer in Lotus Pier.

Someday, Wei Wuxian will return for it.

Not today. He can’t—he can’t forsake the name Fuxing just yet.

Not when he’s built a home that he once lost. Not when he’s built a home that he cherishes with all his heart. Not when there will always be people to smile at him and look up to him as a teacher, a mentor, a friend, an ally. Not when he can return to the warm embrace of welcome back.

He’ll always be a selfish fool.)

“What’s with you today?” Jiang Cheng suddenly asks, his breath sweet with fine liquor. His eyes narrow accusingly, almost childishly, as the buzz of alcohol begins to work its way into his voice and mind. “You seem so quiet today. Where has your nonsense gone?”

It died along with my ignorance, Wei Wuxian doesn’t say. He simply tilts his head down, reaches for a jar, and runs his fingers over the rim. “I’ve had a lot on my mind recently,” is what he chooses to say.

“I would’ve never guessed,” Jiang Wanyin snorts. “What could possibly be troubling the Golden God of Prosperity?” He raises the jar to his lips again, and a flush creeps to his cheeks.

Wei Wuxian feels sick. He can’t say it. He shouldn’t say it. But he needs to say something.

“Jiang Wanyin,” Wei Wuxian calls, a desperate, unseemly thing, “what do you think of me?”

For a moment, Jiang Cheng freezes. Lowering the jar, he looks into Wei Wuxian’s eyes with a storm that rages strong even behind a veil of drunkenness. He takes in a deep breath, holds it within him, and keeps whatever words he has always hidden in his heart.

“There’s nothing to say.”

Wei Wuxian wants more than that. He doesn’t deserve it, but he needs to know. “What do you think of me as a god of prosperity? What am I—do you think I’ve done well?”

“Why are you so insecure all of a sudden?” Jiang Wanyin asks, irritation creeping into his voice. “You’ve been here for a full year and you only ask now?”

“I want to know if I’m walking the right path.”

It’s a lie. It isn’t. Wei Wuxian just wants to know, please, Jiang Cheng, say anything at all, as long as you acknowledge everything that’s been done—

Jiang Cheng’s fist slams onto the table with enough force to send the cups rattling. Even through a flinch, Wei Wuxian hurries to catch them with his strings. For the first time, they tangle in his hands, and a single cup drops onto the ground and shatters.
There is a storm that rages in Jiang Cheng, and it will never calm for Wei Wuxian.

“You’re a fucking idiot, Fuxing,” Jiang Cheng snarls, tossing his empty jar aside. “What do you think, you stupid god? You walk into my city, run around as if you’ve known the streets for years, help me rebuild everything from the ground up, train my disciples, raise my nephew, and you have the audacity to ask if you’re walking the right path?”

His voice rises and rises until it catches on a hitch of breath. Wei Wuxian stares at him still, even as his voice begins to slur and his motions grow heavy.

“You come back with his face and his voice, you try to fix the promise he broke years ago, and you expect me to answer you like a human to a god?” His voice is thick with the yearning and despair he won’t allow himself to feel. His breaths grow more ragged as he struggles to take in air. “If you really were him, then I’d almost—"

Forgive you, he doesn’t say.

He can’t say it. Wei Wuxian can’t hear it. No matter how much time passes or how distant or close they become, their words will always be carried to the grave.

Wholly empty and drained of energy, Jiang Wanyin slumps. The violet line of his shoulders falls, the tenseness in his limbs seeps out, and he shakes his head. “You’re asking the wrong questions,” he finally says, tired. Defeated. “What you’re doing now is unquestionably right. So why didn’t you do anything before?”

Wei Wuxian doesn’t know what to say. Hesitantly, he echoes, “Before?”

“You follow chaos. Where were you during the Sunshot Campaign? Where were you in the fallout that followed?”

There are a thousand answers he could give, and none of them would be the full truth.

Jiang Cheng has suffered the unending cruelty of a world Wei Wuxian broke. Somehow, in the past year, they’ve built something new and precious. If Wei Wuxian were to break it again with his foolish words—

“It’s my fault,” is all Wei Wuxian can say. The words are thin, fragile, quiet. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t know what to say?”

Lightning strikes; thunder claps. The rain pours and pours. Jiang Wanyin’s fury weaves into his voice like a serpent of fire.

Bitterness drives him, but the honey-sweet alcohol dulls his sharp tongue. “Fine then,” he says, his laughter bearing all the grudges he’s carried within him. “You can sit in front of the graves of everyone who died until you think of the words you want to say!”

“Jiang Cheng—”

“You wouldn’t understand,” spits Jiang Cheng, his face flush with the haze of alcohol. His words slur; his gaze stutters. He points accusingly at Wei Wuxian, burning in the flames that kindle his anger and give him reason to live. “You would never understand. Do you remember what you once said? Gods exist to save those who suffer.”
Wei Wuxian remembers. He spoke those words. He smiled at Jiang Cheng, hungry for answers as to why such a furious man could live for so long without scattering his own ashes to the wind, why such a despairing man could stand tall and build upon the unmarked graves of everyone who made his home, why such a foolish man could cling so desperately to the shards of a wretched past.

Wei Wuxian was a god, foolishly twisting everything that fell into his pathetic hands, and he told Jiang Cheng that at the end of the world, he’d be there to save those who have fallen.

What is he supposed to say? What is he supposed to do?

Jiang Cheng laughs. It’s a bitter, grating thing, and the one who poisoned it was none other than Wei Wuxian. “Where were you? Where were you when the world burned down and everyone cheered?”

There is a truth that lodges in Wei Wuxian’s throat. It cries to be heard, yet it knows that if it were ever to reveal itself, Jiang Cheng would never trust again. Always, forever, Wei Wuxian will force the consequences of his ignorance onto those he loves.

He can’t do it. All he can do is keep the oath he once broke.

“I wasn’t there then,” he says, praying that his heartache remains only where he feels it, “but I would like to be here now.”

“It’s always what you want,” Jiang Cheng spits. Though the vitriol in his voice stings, the burning anger in his eyes dwindles. He heaves a sigh, then downs the last of his jar in one go.

Wei Wuxian pushes the other jars toward him. If he’s so eager to forget tonight, then let him be.

There’s nothing for Wei Wuxian to do except pluck at the golden strings between his fingers as Jiang Cheng drowns his all the anger and sorrow he’s carried for the past three years.

The silence between them is almost deafening. They know each other so well that they expect their words to translate even when nothing is said: perhaps that’s where they broke.

Debts owed, debts repaid. Jiang Cheng holds grudges because that’s all that has stayed with him. Everything else, no matter how much he loves them, has shattered before his eyes.

“I think that’s enough,” Wei Wuxian says, breaking the boundary between them. He places a hand on the half-finished jar before Jiang Cheng and tugs it away. The man is barely conscious enough to form a coherent reply.


Wei Wuxian’s heart catches.

There are so many regrets between them. While Wei Wuxian is stumbling on the remnants of the past, Jiang Cheng forges forward, in fury and in sadness, doing his best to nurture what’s left.

He’s always been strong. He’s always been the reasonable one.

Distantly, Wei Wuxian thinks, he’s always been a lightweight, too.

With a sigh, Wei Wuxian props his once-brother up as best he can. When the woman returns and sees a completely sober god and a completely inebriated sect leader, her brows shoot up into her hairline.

“Seems like you two had a nice conversation,” she says, revealing too much knowledge she
“It was... enlightening.” Wei Wuxian answers, shifting his posture to stop Jiang Cheng from slipping. “I hate to impose on you, but could please you find us a room for the night?”

The woman’s gaze flickers to Jiang Cheng, who mumbles inaudible nothings. She lets out a loose laugh. “Why, if that’s what your divine lordship desires, I couldn’t possibly disobey.”

A year ago, Wei Wuxian came across a small town on the road home. It didn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean anything.

But a single person pointed north and asked him to make Lotus Pier into a great city. Wei Wuxian is many things, and right now, he’s a god. Back then, he was a god, too.

Duty and desire are so hard to unravel from each other. Maybe, just maybe, in this life, they’ll finally align.

The inn the woman leads them to is humble but comfortable. The walls smell faintly of flowers and smoke.

Wei Wuxian herds Jiang Cheng onto the bed and sighs when he passes out almost immediately. “I don’t blame you for trying to drink yourself into tomorrow, but it won’t be my fault when Jin Ling has to walk you around Lotus Pier.”

When they were children, the first time they decided to drink was an awful experience. Sneaking out in the middle of the night, convincing the most exhausted waiter to pass them a few jars, and then downing it all like water—needless to say, the following morning was hell on earth.

They were children then, and they believed that they’d always be Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng.

It was a foolish dream to carry. Now, they’re Fuxing and Jiang Wanyin, and there is a lifetime of regrets between them.

It’s fine. It’s alright. No matter how much they have to say to each other, nothing will ever be said.

(There’s nothing to say. You’ve always been right, Jiang Cheng.)

Tomorrow, Wei Wuxian will return to Lotus Pier beside Jiang Cheng.

Tomorrow, Wei Wuxian will leave Lotus Pier before the sun sets.

(If the world is kind, one day, he’ll return at sunrise.

Maybe he’ll have someone to bring back.

And maybe, just maybe, someone will smile and tell him, welcome home.)

The river by Lotus Pier is a beautiful thing, vast but gentle, a silent but knowing being that cuts through the earth and eases the essence of life into the path it treads. When Wei Wuxian was a child, fascinated with everything his new home tempted him with, he found his way to the edge of the waters and looked deep into the strange world that reflected back, eyes full of wonder, for if he
simply reached out his hands a little further, the stars would be within his reach, blooming among a sea of lotus flowers.

When the setting sun waves its goodbye just over the horizon, all is still until Wei Wuxian’s steps ripple past the lanterns that float by the pier, the gilded lotus lights that guide the way for those who travel under the veil of night.

“You’re really leaving, then?”

He turns back and meets Jiang Cheng’s blank expression. The thunder in his voice is vacant, and for a rare moment, the storm stands still.

“I need to continue onward,” says Wei Wuxian. “The world is a vast place, and there are people out there who need a divine touch to get them up again.”

Silence. Then, with a weight both of them understand all too well: “Don’t take too long.”

It’s everything Wei Wuxian could have asked for and doesn’t deserve. His breath catches, but the smile he returns is a reflex of brighter days. “Of course. Though, I must say, I’ll miss——”

“Fuxing!”

His name flows so easily off for everyone but himself. For his disciples, for Jiang Chenyi, for Jin Ling.

As they hurry to the pier, Wei Wuxian blinks at them in mild surprise. “Hello,” he greets, peering up at the setting sun. Its touch just barely paints the dark horizon in the bold colours of a chaotic day. “It’s a bit strange to see you all here at once.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were leaving?” Jiang Muai demands. “We could’ve—we could’ve——”

“We could’ve had a huge party and it would’ve been great,” Jiang Mingyue finishes, equally as heated. The rest of the disciples shout out in agreement, but their voices overlap into nonsense.

Jiang Chenyi steps forward, a strange emotion Wei Wuxian can’t place on her features. “I’ll assume you have a good reason for leaving so abruptly,” she says. “I can’t say anything about it, but I’m sure Jin Ling can.”

At the call of his name, Jin Ling pushes his way through the disciples that tower over his young form. His face is scrunched up, half in confusion, half in anger as he grabs onto peony-dotted robes. “Don’t go,” he demands, so firmly and so desperately that something in Wei Wuxian shakes.

There is a god in Lotus Pier——

And despite it all, he’s made a home here.

Wei Wuxian is alive, he’s living, and he deserves none of it.

Even so, there is a place for kindness in this strange, nonsensical world, and it’s something precious and irreplaceable.

“Don’t worry,” he says softly, because the words thank you and I’m sorry will never find a home in him again. “I won’t be gone for long. Once I’ve done enough, I’ll come back.”

Jin Ling tugs firmly Wei Wuxian’s robes. “But you’re already doing so much!”
“There’s always more to do.”

“Then when will you be done?”

Wei Wuxian takes a breath. The river flows gently. It smells of flowers.

It’s so beautiful and bright here in Lotus Pier. Wei Wuxian won’t say he helped to raise any of these children, because that would be a lie.

But for now, his work here is done. This world will raise these children into strong adults, and when they rise to meet tomorrow, they’ll do it with stars in their eyes.

“I don’t know yet,” he answers, smiling as Jiang Chenyi moves to lift Jin Ling into her arms. “But I promise to come back before you all start missing me. Alright?”

There’s no room for argument. Jiang Chenyi hushes the disciples, who fall silent on their own accord when Jiang Cheng sighs.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” Jiang Cheng finally says. He holds his head high and wears his burdens with pride. “We’ll talk when you return.”

There’s nothing to say. Not now, at least. Maybe, in the future, things will be better.

The river greets him gently. His steps create ripples that reach into horizons he’s travelling to see. Behind him, the cries of goodbye and come back soon resonate and find his heart.

Wei Wuxian looks back over his shoulder one last time.

He meets his disciples’ bright smiles, Jiang Chenyi’s soft grin, Jin Ling’s young pout, and Jiang Cheng’s stormy eyes.

There is a family he’s found in Lotus Pier—

And one day, sometime into that unknown future, he’ll deserve it.

Chapter End Notes

so. i originally intended for this chapter to cap at 13k. i am a fool. i will never learn. in other news we have officially broken 100k words!! which is honestly more of a testament to my lack of self control than anything else!!

accidental wordbomb aside, i was really eager to write this chapter bc a) jiang cheng is a human disaster and i love him b) The Reveal and c) i love angst but wow was it harrowing to write. i like to call this chapter A Case Study of Denial (Just Talk About Your Feelings You Emotionally Repressed Losers)

for clarity's sake, this chapter takes place very shortly after chapter 1. so wwx is still a baby god and trying to figure out what's going on, which is just so much fun.

if it isn't clear yet, i have every intention of giving everyone friends. lwj and jc are priorities. jesus christ someone get these lonely boys some friends or even some acquaintances. god
for me, jiang cheng is an incredibly difficult to character to write bc it's so difficult to pin down how his anger evolves over the years. 13 years is a long time to wait, and it's a long time to think about things, whereas three years isn't exactly as long. personally, i think his character revolves around the fact that he has a ton of anger and regrets and no way to express them in a healthy way. he misses wwx like hell, but there's no way he's ever admitting that, so he just sits there and steeps into a very angry and bitter tea.

i should probably use my curiouscat since i remembered i have one, so if you have any questions, feel free to ask away!

thank you so much for reading this behemoth of a chapter! feel free to talk to me on twitter!
"Things blossom in their time. They bud and bloom, blossom and fade. Everything in its time."


There are a million words that Wei Wuxian wants to say. Out of all those, half of them are regrets, and the other half are secrets.

*Hello,* he could say. *How have you been these past three years,* he could say.

*I was cruel and arrogant to you,* he could say. *I was running away from all the mistakes I couldn’t fix,* he could say.

*I don’t understand what you see in me,* he could say. *You must have suffered for me, and I don’t understand why,* he could say.

*Thank you for all you’ve done,* he could say. *Thank you for never giving up on me,* he could say.

Or he could raise his head, ready his heart, and smile.

“Lan Zhan!” he calls, the weight of possibility ebbing within him like the tide. Once, twice, three times, he steps forward, forward, forward, into the unknown. “It’s been a while since we last talked, hasn’t it?”

In all those tumultuous, unsteady years Wei Wuxian has passed through, there is little that keeps its balance. He has fallen time and time again, and each time he rises, something within him twists, shifts, and sets into place. From a boy to a god to whatever he is now, the chaos he chases and leaves in his wake has shaped this strange, nonsensical existence into something incredible, brilliant, entirely undeserved, and yet—

Look at him. Of all the impermanent, ephemeral things in this world, why is he so utterly steady?

Even after all these years, Lan Wangji dons the same white robes and bears the same strange weight in his golden eyes. It’s wrong to say that he has grown into his title, because he has never been undeserving of anything.

Perhaps they’ve both grown up. Does Wei Wuxian still look the same in Lan Wangji’s eyes? When the revered Hanguang-Jun shifts his gaze to him, can it still settle as it did so many years ago?

Lan Wangji finds the stars in his eyes and nods. “Mn,” is all that leaves him.

There’s no taking back the words Wei Wuxian once said to him. Both in the life before and this one, Wei Wuxian always seems to take what freedom he’s given for granted.

(What do you do when you’ve lost the right to someone’s love?)
There’s no use wallowing in the past. What’s been done is done. Forget all those unspoken words; forgive all the debts that linger. Nothing will be born out of what burnt to ashes and died again. All Wei Wuxian can do is believe that forgiveness will come with acceptance, and what lies beyond may be something more.

What’s there to grieve about? All those questions Wei Wuxian has carried for five years, all those fragmented emotions that he still can’t put together after all this time—why not take this chance and put to rest the final regrets that hold his heart?

At the very least, Wei Wuxian is very good at holding his head high and trying to nurture what he once destroyed.

“I see you’re just as eloquent as ever,” says Wei Wuxian, a smile rising to his lips. He spreads his hands, almost like an apology, almost like an embrace. The peonies on his sleeves bloom gently. “A-Qing didn’t ramble on for too long, did she?”

“Wei Chengfeng wrote about worrying matters,” Lan Wangji half-answers, his voice revealing nothing.

Hearing A-Qing’s name—hearing her carry the name Wei, especially from Lan Wangji’s mouth, unravels a strange knot in him. “Yes, well, we’re always involved in worrying matters of some sort. Hopefully you weren’t too worried for us.”

“You are all very capable,” is all Lan Wangji says. There’s a pause in which Wei Wuxian expects nothing but silence to follow, but then: “Stay safe.”

Wei Wuxian’s smile falters for only a moment. It’s just a simple phrase, a small courtesy he’s heard a thousand times, but the weight in Lan Wangji’s golden eyes makes it into something more.

If there’s one thing A-Qing is undeniably right about, it’s that Wei Wuxian is a fool when it comes to matters of the heart.

Tracing his braids with his fingers, Wei Wuxian laughs. It’s a light, breathy sound; if he puts too much of his heart into it, he’ll break. “Come on now, Hanguang-Jun. Between a god, a vassal, and a sword spirit, how much trouble could we get into?”

Lan Wangji frowns. “Do not force yourself,” he insists, a steel underlying his words like the cold sheen of his blade.

“There’s no need to be worried,” Wei Wuxian says. “I assure you, Hanguang-Jun, that we’re all perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves.”

You don’t need to fight for me, he doesn’t say. Don’t suffer for me.

Lan Wangji’s frown only deepens, and his lips part in an attempt to continue down the same determined, set path he has chosen. “You—”

“Enough about us,” Wei Wuxian says, feeling little shame in cutting Lan Wangji off. It’s a conversation that will lead nowhere, and he has no interest in repeating the same words over and over again. Instead, he searches desperately for another topic, something to say, something gentle to ease in a comfortable conversation and then ask the questions that he’s held for years. “How have you been? A-Qing’s awfully secretive about the letters you two exchange. I wouldn’t be surprised if she knows how to write your name better than mine.”
An expression of what can only be displeasure slowly folds itself into shape on Lan Wangji’s perfect features. Nonetheless, he falls silent. Then, as if choosing his words very carefully, he says, “I have been well.”

It doesn’t sound like a lie. Rather, Lan Wangji wouldn’t lie. But something about his words strikes Wei Wuxian with a sense of wrongness that wrenches at his gut.

“Good.” is all Wei Wuxian can say. His voice shakes imperceptibly, and he rights it with a bright smile. “That’s good.”

Silence falls between them. It settles like the weight of acceptance, the weight of grief. It’s ridiculous. Laughable. What could they possibly be grieving?

One, two, three breaths. Lan Wangji’s eyes are so clear. Why does he still look at Wei Wuxian with that—with such an unwavering gaze when he can’t possibly care anymore?

So many questions, and no answers. It’s fine. It’s alright. The road to Qinghe is a long one, and Wei Wuxian has time. He’s never known how to talk about himself to those who knew him in a past life without hurting them: his existence is a troubling thing at best and a curse at worst.

As long as there is something to fill the void between them, it doesn’t matter what it is.

“Has A-Qing told you about her new sword forms?” Wei Wuxian asks, clapping his hands together. “It’s incredible! Instead of commanding Jiangzai, she shares it with Xue Yang. It’s difficult to explain, but once you see her in action, you’ll be wondering why cultivators don’t give their swords physical forms more often!”

Lan Wangji sighs. His eyes fall closed for only a moment, yet that one moment makes Wei Wuxian lose his grip on the words that follow.

Of course. Here Wei Wuxian stands, a god with no understanding of the consequences of his words and actions, sauntering through life as if the very world belongs to him, pretending all their past grievances have already turned to ash.

Who does he think he’s fooling?

Swallowing the words that sit beneath his tongue, Wei Wuxian shakes his head. “I won’t bother you any longer, Hanguang-Jun. Let me fetch A-Qing for you. I’m sure you have more to say to her than to me.”

“Wei Ying.”

Three times. First, in that dark, lonely cave in Yiling, with open wounds seeping blood as black as tar and a heart twice-shattered by despair; second, under an endless sky blooming with lantern-like stars, singing hymns that will always be heard, will never be heard; and third, while walking a path set by freedom and duty, in the company of those who deserve Lan Wangji’s presence far more than he does.

Three times, Wei Wuxian has heard the same voice call out the same name with the same heart-wrenching emotion. Twice, he turned away.

He can’t—if he repeats it all, he’ll—there’s no use chasing a impossible dream, and yet—

Wei Wuxian is above this. Right? He’s lived this long, come this far. He can’t run away from all the regrets he swore to make right.
“Lan Zhan,” he says simply, turning to face the object of all his warped, twisted, broken emotions. He knows very well that the smile he wears is vacant. He doesn’t know what to put into it. “Is there something you want from me?”

“No,” Lan Wangji answers with such conviction that he could say, *even after everything, I love you* and Wei Wuxian would almost believe it. “Not from you. Never from you.”

A little piece of Wei Wuxian’s heart breaks. It groans, creaks, and falls, deep into the the shadows of everything that could be and everything that is.

(Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Wangji, you’ve always been so good at making it so clear where you stand.)

Wei Wuxian tastes honey on his tongue and bitterness on his teeth. He wets his lips and feels blood that doesn’t exist colour his smile. “I see,” he says, when he doesn’t see at all. “I don’t want anything from you, either.”

*You can’t give something you don’t have,* he doesn’t say.

For some odd, dissonant reason, Lan Wangji takes in a sharp breath. What does that mean? What is it supposed to mean? What is it he carries within his heart right now?

It doesn’t matter. It never has. Wei Wuxian has destroyed everything that once was; he has long since accepted the consequences of his actions. Slowly but surely, he’s rebuilding what he can, piecing back the shards he scattered.

Perhaps this... simply wasn’t meant to be.

Wei Wuxian wants to—laugh, cry, maybe, but he won’t. It would be awfully pathetic for such a selfish desire.

Just because he wants something that can never be doesn’t mean that Lan Wangji is undeserving of his kindness, his respect, his silent thanks. It’s better this way, isn’t it? They can simply be two people, allies, without any of the convoluted turns that affection brings. This way, they owe each other nothing.

“Anyway,” says Wei Wuxian, calling upon the gold in his blood and the stars in his eyes to give him purpose, “if you’re so eager to suffer my company, then please, be my guest. I know you aren’t fond of nonsense, but unfortunately, I have nothing to say but nonsense.”

With a thrum of blood, a single heartbeat, Lan Wangji’s golden gaze settles to meet Wei Wuxian’s. There’s nothing special, nothing strange, yet he feels so warm, like the soft whisper of sunset in a river town so far yet so close to home.

“I will listen,” Lan Wangji says, and nothing more.

“I’ll bore you before long,” says Wei Wuxian, the curve of his lips falling.

“You will not.”

“You’re awfully persistent, Hanguang-Jun. Then again, I should’ve expected it, from your chaos-chasing ways and whatnot.”

Displeasure colours Lan Wangji’s features once more. It’s a motion that Wei Wuxian has memorized by now: his brows will furrow, the corners of his lips will drag, the light in his eyes will hone like the breath of frost upon his blade, and he will sink into silence until that resolute heart of his lays down
judgement.

But he remains silent, and Wei Wuxian sighs.

Even in youth, even in the fallout that followed, they’ve never been this distant. Not once have they expected anything from the other—perhaps that’s where it all went wrong, or perhaps that’s what Wei Wuxian misses most.

It’s fine. It’s alright. There’s nothing that needs mending between them. Wei Wuxian is a god of prosperity, of fortune, and he wields the stars at his fingertips. What cannot be mended must simply be built again.

“Come on now, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian says, lighter, brighter, with a teasing lilt. Their younger days were quite fun, weren’t they? “I’m just playing around. I don’t blame you for being curious. I’ve had my fair share of adventures, and there’s no harm in telling a few of them. But first, we should get moving before anyone gets too suspicious.”

Always, like a crystalline river upon which nothing moves or is lost, Lan Wangji makes a single sound of agreement: “Mn.”

Some things never change. No matter how many years may pass, how many times the old gives way to the new, Lan Wangji will remain as he is. Nobody is above the passage of time, yet there is something so utterly stable and patient that keeps him still and standing, even after everything.

Wei Wuxian feels breath fill his lungs. It smells of flowers, stardust, sandalwood. No obligations, no debts to be owed.

“Then let’s see how our merry band of travelers is doing.” Wei Wuxian says brightly. He gestures for Lan Wangji to follow. “Your presence, while unexpected, is certainly very much appreciated. Of course, if your duties ever pull you away, feel free to do as you wish.”

“I will stay,” Lan Wangji answers, horribly and tremendously sure of himself.

The flowers in Wei Wuxian’s hair feel so heavy. He feels so warm. He simply says, “If that’s what you want, then do as you please.”

(Let him stay.
Don’t push him away.

He said I love you, once, but that life burnt along with all the promises and regrets that you carried.)

There’s nothing left to say between them. With Wei Wuxian’s—acceptance, acknowledgement, agreement, something warped and entirely unnecessary, Lan Wangji settles. The fall of his shoulders softens, and Wei Wuxian laughs.

“Off we go, then,” he says, stepping toward those who look at him still, who tread the same path he does. “We’d be happy to have you join us on our pilgrimage.”

Lan Wangji follows him in three steady strides, a brilliant light that stands beside him, unchanged in all his glory, having no doubt lost what that selfish, disgusting beast in Wei Wuxian desires most.

For now, there is a long road ahead of them, and time is their ally. Let the sun fall, and let the stars follow in their wake; the world itself may come to an end, but at the very least, Wei Wuxian will have put to rest one of the regrets that still croons to be remembered.
Travelling with two other companions, one of which is incorporeal half the time, is a routine that Wei Wuxian is more than familiar with. A god and a girl, sometimes a sword spirit, make for a strange but mostly inconspicuous group.

Travelling with eight other companions, the least conspicuous being an up-and-coming research genius and the most conspicuous being a tight competition between the admirable Hanguang-Jun, the infamous Ghost General, and a literal god, makes for a very entertaining and not very discreet band of merry-go-lucky pilgrims.

“So,” says Wei Wuxian, “we’ll travel in smaller groups. I don’t expect anyone to get caught or interrogated, but we’ll draw less suspicion if we keep with the companions people expect to see us with.”

It’s a simple, haphazard solution, but it’s one that will work. That means, as usual, that Wen Qing is incredibly unimpressed.

“If you can find me a single person who expects to see the Ghost General and the ghost of his dead sister, I’ll take back everything I’ve ever said about you,” she says, mustering such flat sarcasm into her voice that she could pull a knife from her robes, brandish it, and it would all be the same.

“Rude,” Wei Wuxian pouts. The injustice! “Wen Ning’s great at hiding, and you can disappear at will. If you two get caught, there’s no hope for the rest of us.”

“Bold of you to assume there was any hope to begin with,” A-Qing mumbles in a shocking display of betrayal.

Wei Wuxian gasps, stumbling back and clutching at his chest. “A-Qing! I trusted you!”

The expression on A-Qing’s face almost matches Wen Qing’s, and that’s actually quite worrying, now that Wei Wuxian thinks about it. Two people with emotional intelligence, moral integrity, and common sense? Is the world ending?

“I’d be surprised if anyone in Gusu didn’t know we’re travelling to Qinghe,” A-Qing continues, sending Wei Wuxian a razor-sharp bombardment of venomous glares that is only partly deserved. “You might as well have serenaded every single town we passed by to tell them what we’re doing.”

There’s a moment in which Wei Wuxian faintly recalls hopping onto the tallest roof after drinking his body’s weight in alcohol, securing his strings to a plank of wood, and entrancing half the town’s inhabitants with his shoddy, makeshift guqin and not-as-shoddy voice.

It wasn’t a bad night, but it definitely was, without question, a poor decision.

Xue Yang makes a hobby out of finding reasons to mock him, so his riotous laughter was as inconsequential as the bustle of merchants on the streets. A-Qing, on the other hand, was not as amused.

Where on earth did she get that temper from? Wei Wuxian didn’t raise her like that. Right? He’s a good guardian. Right?

“Well,” he begins, only to be cut off when A-Qing elbows him in the waist.
“But I guess it would be weird if people saw us travelling with two people who’re supposed to be dead, and two more people who everything thinks are dead.” Her words are reluctant but understanding as she gestures to Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen, who watch on with the same amused expressions. “So... maybe we should just split up for now.”

There we are. Was it so difficult?

It doesn’t take much convincing to separate the group once more. Everyone came on their own accord, so it’s only right they should accompany those they care for most.

Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen have little to say, but they face Wei Wuxian and bow nonetheless.

“We will be with you shortly,” Song Zichen says as Xiao Xingchen laughs a gentle goodbye to A-Qing. “Be careful.”

“And we’ll be watching from a distance,” Wen Qing adds, eyes narrowed and full of warning. “If you do anything foolish that compromises the plan, I’ll kill you.” Turning to A-Qing, she exchanges a silent vow that’s all too terrifying. “We’re in agreement, aren’t we?”

A-Qing has the audacity to bow in front of Wei Wuxian—really! Everyone’s turning on him today, and he doesn’t appreciate it. “Of course!”

“Um, please be careful, Young Master,” Wen Ning says, voice whisper-soft, his hands held to his chest with a kindness so often mistaken for shyness that not even death can claim. “Please don’t tease Young Master Mo too much.”

“You wound me,” Wei Wuxian cries. “Do you truly think so lowly of me?”

By reflex, he leans into the person who stands closest to him—A-Qing, of course, she’s never left him and will always entertain his antics, no matter how furiously her temper reacts—except the warmth he presses against stiffens, and Wei Wuxian realizes too late that the still presence behind him burns cold of soundless winters and milky precious-wood.

Wei Wuxian’s voice narrows to a stutter. What an... unfortunate lapse of judgement.

For a moment, he considers uttering a short apology or joke of some sort. But then he realizes: what does it matter? He’s come this far, and he’s not about to be embarrassed by feelings that don’t exist between them.

So he settles against Lan Wangji, crosses his arms, and huffs a deep, exaggerated breath. “Mo Xuanyu is an incredibly talented researcher,” he says, meaning every word. “I’m sure he’ll be able to achieve great feats!”

Some ways away from him, Mo Xuanyu flushes, his ears burning scarlet. He stares at his feet as if they hold the answers to life, existence, the world itself. It’s a fruitless endeavor; Wei Wuxian would be the wisest being to ever grace these lands otherwise.

Lan Wangji’s breaths are slow and steady against him. If Wei Wuxian were to close his eyes and feel nothing else but the heartbeats that thrum against his, would he be able to find the words he wants so desperately to say?

Of course not. They’re no longer Lan Zhan and Wei Ying, except they are, in a convoluted way. But there are some words that will simply be lost forever.

Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen are the first to depart, followed shortly by Wen Ning and Wen
Qing. They disappear into the woods with A-Qing’s resounding goodbyes trailing close after them, and Wei Wuxian has every confidence that they’ll be alright.

All of them have suffered the cruelty of the world. They’ll be wary, certainly, but nobody knows hurt better than those who have been hurt.

“Well,” Wei Wuxian finally says, pushing himself off Lan Wangji, “it’s about time we set off as well.”

“This side of the Other Side?” A-Qing asks, swinging Jiangzai over her shoulder.

“We’ll switch when we need to.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’ve brought guests along before. Surely there’s no difference now.”

“Oh,” A-Qing begins, though the flatness of her voice betrays her. Her gaze flickers to Lan Wangji briefly. “Whatever, I guess.”

Whatever indeed. Let the shadows come and try to snatch up Mo Xuanyu and Lan Wangji if they dare. The former is under the revered Fuxing’s protection, and the latter is more than capable of banishing evil to whence it came. A few steps in the Other Side is of no matter to anyone. If anything, it’ll make for some varied sightseeing.

Mo Xuanyu, rightly confused, shuffles in place. “Um, what other side would you be speaking of?”

“The other side of the world, its warped reflection, what you see when you look into a mirror and your reflection looks back,” A-Qing answers.

“Um,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” A-Qing says dismissively, waving her hand as if traversing through the Other Side is as inconsequential as signing her name at the bottom of each letter she writes to Lan Wangji—short, methodical, and an experience exclusive to a select few. “If anything happens, you just need to sing a short song, and we’ll come running.”

“A song?”

“A song,” A-Qing repeats, almost insistently. “Don’t you know it? It goes something like…”

Eight notes begin the lullaby, woven in god-spun gold, rising high into the unending skies as flower-born lanterns, echoing of legacy, of tragedy, of hope undying; what follows is a wordless song that carries no meaning until a heart breaks and is lost.

One voice is a lonely call. So Wei Wuxian lifts his chin, feels stardust in his veins and moonlight in his breath, and lifts a second voice into the fragile oaths that so foolishly seek out what lies beyond.

Two voices die, lost to the relentless passage of time, and then there is silence.

A-Qing breathes in, breathes out. She clears her throat and tucks her hair behind her ears. “Something like that,” she says simply.

Mo Xuanyu’s reaction is understandable. He wavers on his feet, a steady back-and-forth to a beat that no longer exists, and he blinks slowly. “Oh,” he says, softly. “I think—I think I’ve heard it before.”
“Doesn’t surprise me,” A-Qing mutters. “It’s basically a children’s song in Yunmeng, anyway.”

That’s fair to say. When Wei Wuxian stepped into Lotus Pier with nothing but river-sunken robes on his shoulders and a song in his blood, he never could have predicted that his voice would precede him. Honestly! Turn back time by eight years, and he would have laughed if anyone told him that one day, the common people would flock to hear his voice.

Curiously, A-Qing levels her gaze at Lan Wangji. “What about you, Hanguang-Jun? Have you heard it before?”

“I have,” Lan Wangji says, and Wei Wuxian can’t help but be a little surprised.

“And where did the revered Hanguang-Jun hear of such an obscure tune?” Wei Wuxian asks, turning to raise a brow at the pristine man before him.

Lan Wangji holds the stars that swirl before him with unwavering conviction. “You have saved many,” he says. “Those who remember you remember your song.”

Ah. Of course. He who chases chaos, he who reaches out to any and all who cry out to be saved, he who is unquestionably righteous—of all people, Lan Wangji would know the trials and tribulations of the common people best.

“Well,” is all Wei Wuxian can say. “I suppose you know it well by this point.”

“I do.”

Does he ever falter? Is he ever unsure of himself? Of course not. Lan Wangji doesn’t falter. “That’s good,” Wei Wuxian laughs, a teasing lilt upon his tongue. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to you when we’re travelling through the Other Side, now would we?”

A-Qing’s elbow greets his side again, and the rest of his words cut off with a yelp of pain. “You should be looking out for yourself before Hanguang-Jun,” she snaps. Turning to Lan Wangji with half an apology, she bows deeply. “Sorry for his behaviour. He’s always like this.”

“I’m always a pleasure to be around,” Wei Wuxian whines, feeling very betrayed. His eyes catch Mo Xuanyu’s, and he smiles brightly. Life has been especially cruel to a boy as sweet as Mo Xuanyu, and Wei Wuxian will do everything he can to ease their new companion into their strange yet surprisingly peaceful travels. “What do you think, Mo Xuanyu? I’m a respectable person, right?”

There’s a jarring silence that cuts through the conversation as Mo Xuanyu’s eyes threaten to escape their sockets.

“I think,” Mo Xuanyu begins, his face slowly turning a worrying shade of red, “I think that. You are. A very respectable person.”

There really is no need to split one perfectly fine sentence into three, but Wei Wuxian decides that speaking such a thought aloud may stop Mo Xuanyu’s heart entirely.

Even though all the words have left his lips, the poor boy’s cheeks continue to bloom vibrant crimson. He isn’t holding his breath, is he? “Remember to breathe,” Wei Wuxian provides helpfully.

Mo Xuanyu sucks in a piercing inhalation, then shuffles to stand as close to A-Qing as possible, which is very sweet. He’s such a precious boy, so shy and meek yet so utterly kind. Wen Ning would love his company; perhaps Wei Wuxian should find a way to let them meet more often.
“Stop teasing,” A-Qing demands. “They’ll leave us all behind at this point! Are we using the Other Side or not?”

“Not now,” answers Wei Wuxian.

“But it’s faster to use my briars than to travel on foot. And we can’t use swords, either.”

“Not now,” Wei Wuxian repeats.

Irritation flickers over A-Qing’s youthful features. She’s grown so much, seen so much, and though she reigns over her temper nowadays, she can never fully shed the burning determination that kept her alive until she found something gentler. “Now now? Then when?”

The crisp wind, so much colder and fresher than that which sweeps through Lotus Pier, billows gently past them. It smells of oncoming winter, carrying the faint scent of sparkling snow and soft chime of bell-like twinkling. Wei Wuxian feels the muted glory under his skin, peeling back his selfish desires for what the god within him seeks.

“As soon as we leave Gusu,” he finally says, something strange stirring within him. “For now, I’d like to enjoy the scenery a bit more.”

A-Qing gives him a look that’s far too wise and far too knowing for a girl of her age. Nevertheless, she turns her small back to him and steps toward Mo Xuanyu. “If that’s what you want.”

While A-Qing busies herself arming Mo Xuanyu with pre-made talismans—this one’s for protection, and this one’s for stunning your enemies, but this one explodes, so be careful—Wei Wuxian focuses his attention of Lan Wangji, who stands like a grand willow tree, his ink-black hair spilling over his back.

Distantly, Wei Wuxian wonders how soft it would feel between his fingers.

“It’s nice to hear that you know my song so well already,” Wei Wuxian says, because he has nothing else to say. “To a cultivator of your standing, I doubt it means anything more than a fanciful little melody, but it does have a touch of divinity.” With a wag of his finger and a teasing grin, he sings, “Use it wisely, Hanguang-Jun!”

“I will,” Lan Wangji replies immediately. “Only when I wish to seek you out.”

Oh.

Perhaps teaching him the full song was a mistake on Wei Wuxian’s part.

Then again, if they’ll be travelling together for however long it takes for this mess of a political scandal to be resolved, what does it matter if Lan Wangji knows? They’ll always be walking within an arm’s length of each other. What could he possibly try to find?

There’s nothing to find. In the end, no matter how long they search, all there will be is Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian. Lan Zhan and Wei Ying.

“I’m not a very difficult person to find,” Wei Wuxian says, the words falling off his lips like molten gold. When he smiles, it feels heavy. “Ah, but we have fun passing time with songs. What’s your favourite, A-Qing?”

At the call of her name, A-Qing’s head snaps around. “Huh? My favourite what?”
“Your favourite song! Tune, hymn, lullaby, or whatever else.”

“Don’t have one,” she says, albeit reluctantly. Then, with her lips pressed together in a tight line and her brow creased in focus, she mumbles, “Maybe the Song of Three Stars, if I really had to choose.”

“What a... creative choice.”

“Oh, shut up,” A-Qing snaps, a growl resounding off the last of her words. Without a second glance, she spins back around to show Mo Xuanyu the remaining talismans with renewed energy.

Wei Wuxian sighs. Of course he’d raise A-Qing to be just as sentimental as he is. All those painful, gut-wrenching memories, and she still holds such a song close to her heart.

It’s amusing, watching Lan Wangji’s perfect features fold into a frown. The air shifts around him, and before he can open his mouth to ask, Wei Wuxian already has the answer.

“The Song of Three Stars,” Wei Wuxian explains, “is a very, very old hymn. Ancient, even.” Holding up three fingers, he grins from the corner of his mouth and watches Lan Wangji’s eyes trace the curve of his lips. “Three gods, three verses, one incomplete song.”

“A hymn for the three golden gods,” Lan Wangji says.

Looking up at Lan Wangji in surprise should no longer be—well, surprising. Yet it is, it always is, and it’s a little spark of joy that is unexpected but not unappreciated. “That’s right. How did you know?”

“It was the most plausible answer.”

“Even our noble Hanguang-Jun can throw out a few guesses every now and then,” Wei Wuxian chuckles.

Neither of them say anything more, and Wei Wuxian is thankful for it. Perhaps Lan Wangji can see that the memories surrounding the song are not kind; perhaps he simply has nothing more to say. Both are just as likely as the other.

It doesn’t take long for A-Qing to finish showing Mo Xuanyu all her talismans. In the end, Wei Wuxian has to pry the explosive talismans from her fingers while explaining in as gentle a voice as possible that giving slips of paper that explode is not, in fact, the wisest choice for a beginner’s talisman.

“He’s not a beginner,” A-Qing argues, her arms crossed petulantly. “He knows what he’s doing!”

Mo Xuanyu clears his throat in a very loud, distinct matter. “Um,” he begins, his voice rising in pitch, “I don’t think I really know what I’m doing.”

“There you have it,” Wei Wuxian declares, patting Mo Xuanyu on the back to show his support. “No exploding talismans.”

And that’s that. Mo Xuanyu bows his head deeply for some reason, while A-Qing mumbles an apology for her fiery enthusiasm that weaves into her temper so easily.

Lan Wangji watches as Wei Wuxian tucks the exploding talismans into his sleeve. It’s amusing, really, how much he’s able to say even without speaking. It’s so, so strange how Wei Wuxian can read Lan Wangji so much better—which, to be fair, isn’t saying much at all—than before.
“Don’t worry,” Wei Wuxian says, as soothingly as possible. He grins, baring his teeth, as he flips a talisman up between his fingers. “It’s just a little ammunition for when we, ah, encounter someone who’s best dealt with with a few fireworks.”

“He’s lying,” A-Qing says without a beat of hesitation or shame. “We use them to break apart barriers and boundaries, spiritual or physical.”

Wei Wuxian huffs, slipping the talisman into his sleeve. “It’s boring when you put it like that.”

“You were just telling me not to use them on people!”

“I’m teasing, A-Qing! Won’t you give your master some face?”

“Give yourself some face first!”

Oh, the injustice! First Wen Qing, then A-Qing, and now both? Surely fate doesn’t think Wei Wuxian so incapable of taking care of himself as to throw two situational voice of reasons into his life. That can’t be it, can it? That would be sad. It would also be a blatant reference to Wei Wuxian’s lack of self-control, which is insulting in a very depressing way.

“Lan Zhan, you’ve got to teach me how your clan gets disciples to behave,” Wei Wuxian whines, tugging on Lan Wangji’s sleeve. He can’t quite suppress his smile fully, but seeing how much it takes for the noble Hanguang-Jun’s demeanor to crack is always an entertaining pastime. “Between A-Qing and Xue Yang, it’s an awful show here!”

Quietly, meekly, but with an underlying steel, Mo Xuanyu stutters out, “I—I respect you, Fuxing!”

Even though Wei Wuxian is just making a spectacle, it warms his heart to know that Mo Xuanyu is really just the kindest boy.

How on earth did the Mo family ever bring themselves to harm such a sweet child? How did the Lanling Jin Sect bring themselves to abuse him so horribly and abandon him?

“Between A-Qing, Xue Yang, and Mo Xuanyu, I only have one friend, and that’s Mo Xuanyu,” Wei Wuxian quickly amends, slinging an arm around the precious boy and hugging him close. The world itself can turn on this innocent child—it already has, which is where the tragedy lies—but Wei Wuxian would truly have to be an incorrigible villain not to reach out his hands and mend wounds where he can.

Mo Xuanyu makes a noise somewhere between a squeal and a scream, but it remains trapped in his throat, so it sounds very much like he’s been stabbed.

Strangely, Lan Wangji stiffens when he surveys the scene before him, and he turns his head away.

How curious! That’s a new reaction. Wei Wuxian can’t tell if it’s displeasure, or anger, or frustration, or any of the adjacent emotions that he so often encountered sitting on the edge of a blade.

Then, in a shocking display of yet another betrayal, with a voice so flat and even Wei Wuxian could lie down and take a comfortable nap on it, Lan Wangji says, “Restrain yourself before you restrain your disciples.”

For a moment, there’s silence.

Then A-Qing lets out a clap of righteous laughter, lifting her chin in a motion for too smug for something she can’t even take credit for. She continues to pack up her talismans, smugly, and throws
“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian gapes, releasing Mo Xuanyu in favour of bringing both hands over his heart. “You wound me! How could you be so cruel?”


“We all know your Gusu Lan Sect is the paragon of virtue, Lan Wangji, Lan Zhan, but please, spare this poor god some face, would you?”

Wei Wuxian folds his bottom lip outward, tilts his head gently to the side, and pouts as best he can, all while clutching onto Lan Wangji’s sleeve. It’s a trick he’s perfected over the years, honed by Jiang Chenyi’s careful tutelage and tested by tight-lipped people who know far more than they wish to reveal.

“Be kind, Lan Er-Gege,” Wei Wuxian says, voice as sweet and thick as honey.

If they were young, naive, and clinging desperately to pride as they had been years before, there would be nothing between them but the whims of a fate much grander than themselves. Wei Wuxian would shower Lan Wangji with flowers, not a second thought crossing his mind, and Lan Wangji would stare up at him with limpid gold that always seemed to carry the notes of a faraway song and the faint scent of sandalwood.

Now, with something much more indecipherable and unfathomable separating them, all Wei Wuxian can do is try to show Lan Wangji that not everything must be lost to time. Here they are, two friends turned strangers, and that distance leaves a deep ache in his stomach.

Lan Wangji is still. He doesn’t so much as flinch. In fact, he doesn’t even blink. All he does is stand as resolutely as he always has, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath.

“Oh, boo-hoo, our god’s sad again,” A-Qing snarks, dropping her final few talismans into her qiankun pouch. Despite the irritation colouring her every word, something curious stirs in her glassy eyes. “How rare. I’ve never seen it happen before.”

Having been thwarted from an otherwise beautiful moment of reminiscing upon brighter days, Wei Wuxian huffs. “Any more mean words, and I really will cry!”

“You’re a self-proclaimed pretty crier, so what does it matter?”

“Yes, but that’s when I want to look pretty,” Wei Wuxian tries to explain, to no avail.

A-Qing snorts, rights her robes, frowns when she studies Mo Xuanyu’s appearance, and moves to wipe the dirt and grime that dots his collar. Flushing, Mo Xuanyu wrings his hands, looking anywhere but at A-Qing as he’s cleaned up.

Well, if everything’s said and done, then it’s about time to move on, isn’t it?

Releasing his grip on Lan Wangji’s sleeve, Wei Wuxian sighs. It’s a shame that Lan Wangji’s grown such thick skin. His occasional surprise quips are of the highest quality of entertainment, but so much has changed even when nothing has.

“Time to get moving,” Wei Wuxian finally declares. He looks at A-Qing, who raises a single brow and snaps her fingers.

Some ways ahead of them, in the thick of the woods, a resounding ouch rings out, followed by a
string of profanities that would make any better man’s ears bleed. Then again, Lan Wangji simply frowns disapprovingly when the ear-grating words assault him, so perhaps Xue Yang really is more of a snappish puppy more than a murderous sword spirit. Or he could be both. The most likely answer is that he’s both.

“Jiangzai acquired,” A-Qing recites, something very sinister in her smile.

With one practiced motion, she unsheathes Jiangzai and hurls the ink-black blade well above the treeline. It spins, spins, and spins, before righting itself rigid and hurling itself into the forest.

Another surprised and very offended yelp follows, and a shout of, “I’m going to murder you, asshole!”

“I murdered you, dumbass!” is A-Qing’s brilliant reply.

“Yeah, and you did a real botch job!”

“Keep testing me, and maybe this time I’ll make sure you stay dead!”

Mo Xuanyu blinks vacantly. His lips part, but nothing comes out except for a small keening noise. His lashes quiver he shapes his anxieties into something that grips his lithe form with quiet determination. “You—you would—you killed him?”

A-Qing nurses the short silence for a moment too long. Trembles creep into Mo Xuanyu’s fingers, and he wrings them tightly, as if tying together them will ease his apprehension. Even Lan Wangji’s crystalline eyes ebb with unsettled judgement.

Perhaps it’s rude to find humor in such an appalling accusation, but Wei Wuxian can’t help but swallow the laughter that itches at his throat.

It’s quite obvious what their silly little minds must be thinking: A-Qing, Wei Chengfeng, the honorable Yufeng-Zhe—a murderer? The land’s bravest hero, who carries the winds of fortune in her hair, who dances amidst the most fearsome of storms, who ushers in reconciliation and change as a flame-licked sky does the glorious morning sun, would run someone through with their own blade and refuse them the finality of death?

To be fair, she only had a hand in the running through part, not what followed. That... was partly impulse, partly vengeance, mostly exhaustion from watching those who have committed great crimes find punishment and absolution in death.

“Kill him,” A-Qing repeats, the words rolling off her tongue contemplatively. She peers up to the sky, brows furrowed, and frowns. Then, having made up her mind, she waves her hand dismissively. “No, that’s already done. We’re over that kind of stuff.”

Mo Xuanyu looks faint. “Already done?”

A-Qing nods with all the confidence of someone who has seen death crawling after her, spit in its face, and instilled the fear of mortality in something that cannot, in fact, die. “The only person who’s allowed to kill Xue Yang is me,” she says, rather unhelpfully. She purses her lips and looks toward Wei Wuxian, as if seeking permission. “Maybe Fuxing, if things get weird. But we’re fine as it is.”

The next words are subtly directed toward Lan Wangji, accompanied by a shift of her weight and her gaze to one side, a nervous flutter of fingers over Jiangzai’s wings. “Think of it as penance if you want. It’s complicated.”

All those words that remain unspoken, yet none of them would ever lay out a story that others could
understand. Love, hatred, revenge, obligation, duty, freedom—all so unbearably similar, yet so impossibly different. The story will fade and fade until one day, it becomes a fable, and by then, whether or not the tale of Yufeng-Zhe and Jiangzai makes any sense won’t matter. Heroes don’t need to make sense to be brilliant.

Wei Wuxian sighs. How strange their small group must seem to outsiders. “I suppose it is.”

A talent A-Qing has—or, rather, that strength she carries within her—allows her to bear the burden of Lan Wangji’s gaze without fear. She lifts her head and stands her ground, and Lan Wangji stares back.

A moment passes, and then another.

Lan Wangji nods. A-Qing’s shoulders fall ever so slightly.

Mo Xuanyu looks incredibly confused and rightly concerned. “It... is?”

Poor boy. Lan Wangji is more or less immune to all these antics by now, but Mo Xuanyu has been dropped into a very confusing, very unfamiliar situation, all while carrying the hope of a better future on his back and in his hands. He’s taking the leap into a mysterious world full of dangers that he has yet to discover and burdens that he will one day have to bear, yet he does it so gracefully, so bravely, and Wei Wuxian is in awe of him that much more.

As gently as possible, Wei Wuxian rubs small circles on Mo Xuanyu’s back. He used to do it with A-Qing during bad nights, and all the children he’s come across during his travels had found it to be comforting. “It’s alright,” he says. “You don’t need to push yourself to keep up. You can just ask for us to slow down.”

Dropping his gaze to his hands, Mo Xuanyu gives a sharp jerk of a nod. His voice is thin, a weak trickle of something that still bleeds, but it aches of life, and that’s all that matters. “I... okay.”

Wei Wuxian nods back. “Okay,” he repeats, for them all.

A-Qing heads out first, sending back a single look in place of words. She finds Wei Wuxian’s eyes in a heartbeat, a reflex honed by trust in the most wretched of crises, and in a single leap, she throws herself into the trees. With a series of rustles followed by the sound of shoes scuffing on wood, she’s long gone.

Wei Wuxian sets his weimao straight, runs his fingers down his braids. He shapes his lips into a winning smile, licks them crimson and shiny, and turns to Mo Xuanyu and Lan Wangji.

“Let’s head off!” he finally declares, spreading his peony-dotted arms. Honey-thick divinity dresses his words ethereal; the bold afternoon sun dances across his diaphanous veil. “Mo Xuanyu, Lan Zhan, welcome aboard. We hope you’ll enjoy your stay with us. And, well, if you find things to your liking, maybe you could stay forever!”

He laughs at his own audacity: he’s always been somewhat of a fool, but in matters of love and hatred, there is nobody who has seen more yet understands less than Wei Wuxian. Stay forever, he says, to a boy who has nowhere else to go. Stay forever, he says, to a man who, inexplicably, even after all these years, is still willing to stand by his side.

What a strange fable they weave. Nothing ever makes sense, does it?

“Fuxing!” A-Qing’s call rings out from the trees like a hammer strike upon hot metal. “Are you coming or what?”
“Of course,” Wei Wuxian shouts back.

“Then hurry up or I’m tagging along with Daozhang!”

A sigh filters itself through his nose. When Wei Wuxian turns to beckon to Mo Xuanyu and Lan Wangji, he turns to see that they’ve already traced his footsteps, one shuffling skittishly, the other standing, waiting, for something Wei Wuxian can’t see.

With the last of his shadows clinging to his teeth, Wei Wuxian smiles. “Shall we be off?”

Mo Xuanyu is silent. Whatever words he has to offer catch in his throat, and he nods instead.

Lan Wangji—who is it he does? So many years have passed, yet the silence surrounding him protects him still. His gaze softens, or perhaps it’s simply a trick of the light. “Mn,” is all he voices, and Wei Wuxian finds himself aching for something more.

Ah, what a strange journey it’s been. What a strange journey it’ll be! A girl, a sword, and a god, now accompanied by a boy and a hero. A-Qing’s journals will surely appreciate the change. Wei Wuxian... will come to accept it, as he has with all things.

The small shadows of Mo Village are quick to disappear behind them. Somewhere ahead, the wind and her cutting gale wait eagerly; trailing a few steps behind, a gentle flame flickers with each swallowed word; beside him, the moon, too cold and lustrous of a jewel to ever fall from the skies and into his arms, moves on. Five beings, four lives.

Onward, onward, onward. They all move onward, forward, through the twisted knots of time and the merry dance of fate. Some of them will dance, some of them will take their careful steps, and some will refuse to bend. What will it be?

Things should be entertaining from now on.

(Things will not be the same from now on.)

There is too much to say about Wei Wuxian. There is not enough to say about Wei Wuxian.

It is unspeakably foolish to even attempt to find the words that could possibly bear the weight of every emotion that writes itself into Lan Wangji’s heart. There was too much he did not know, before, and each stroke of every word that he could not speak, that his cowardice burnt black, settled on his tongue, on his back; yet the air that he could not draw and the scars on his back meant nothing in the face of the aching emptiness that was left when the world collapsed around him.

There was too much he did not understand, before. Now, as his steps fall in line with the very world that shattered too far from his reach for anything to remain in his hands—now, as he watches Wei Wuxian’s smile fold into something that still holds the shadows of his past, all while embracing the brilliance of the present and the spells of the future, Lan Wangji has no words to say.

He has never trusted himself to fill silence as Wei Chengfeng so easily does, nor has he ever allowed himself to wash away the ashes on his tongue, even as the sweetness of hope and the bitterness of yearning wrote something impossibly confusing onto words he held for five years.
Wei Wuxian is alive. Wei Wuxian is at peace, he is burdened by duty yet unburdened in existence; all that he is, Lan Wangji years so desperately for, and yet—

I don’t want anything from you, Wei Wuxian says, and selfishly, foolishly, all Lan Wangji can hear is, Get lost.

It is foolish, because Lan Wangji knows that Wei Wuxian owes him nothing. Three years prior, atop a roof in a small town hiding a man-eating sun and a day-eating moon, underneath a sky that blossomed with stars he had not truly seen for five years, Wei Wuxian pushed him away and told him, Don’t touch me!

Lan Wangji is a selfish man. Parting was painful, slitting his belly open and trailing blood across the scars of the past, an ache he deluded himself into believing would settle with time. But the one who unsheathed the blade was none other than himself, and the one who dragged it through his flesh was the greedy being within him.

Yet Wei Chengfeng, a girl who was saved by Wei Wuxian, who saved him in turn, ushered Lan Wangji into a small room that smelled of tepid air and river water, beckoned him to sit and speak as equals, and spoke words that they both understood would not form from his lips.

Wei Wuxian turned away from Lan Wangji, yet Wei Chengfeng said that Wei Wuxian would never turn away again, that the past had burned for too long within him, that fate had damned him to an endless life of paying for sins that he had paid for a thousand times over: he was lost, and all Lan Wangji could do was leave.

He did not sleep that night. The touch of Wei Wuxian’s full cheeks, soft and flush with life that had always been worryingly vacant when resentful energy spilled from his robes, burned Lan Wangji’s fingertips with a yearning that only grew stronger with proximity. Seeing Wei Wuxian, eyes closed in rest, breaths finally even in peace, so ethereal in his gold-woven robes yet so unmistakably alive, put to rest a part of Lan Wangji’s heart and clutched another in its unflinching grasp.

Underneath the light of a kind moon, the ink-black hair that swept down Wei Wuxian’s shoulders and down his back shone silver; the loneliest locks glimmered a gentle white. Lan Wangji tucked those behind Wei Wuxian’s ears, following the curve with his fingers, as if tracing each and every part of him would uncover some paramount secret.

There was no secret to be found. All that echoed in Lan Wangji’s mind, his heart, was that Wei Wuxian was beautiful and good and worth far more than mere words could describe, and that Lan Wangji loved him. Loves him.

With the sun still hidden behind the silent mountains, Lan Wangji stepped out of Wei Wuxian’s life. His steps faltered, as did his breath, but for freedom, for a new life, Lan Wangji left, knowing that Wei Wuxian was alive, and that if they were ever to meet, that life would extinguish.

Again, and again, and again, Wei Chengfeng continued to write, and her short sentences and rigid strokes became near-nonsensical rambles and quick scrawls. She repeated the same message, no matter how letters delivered themselves onto his table.

Talk to you soon, concluded each letter. An address far too casual for a child to an adult, yet so utterly correct in that youthful handwriting passed down from master to disciple. We’re both okay turned to we’re all okay—a change that did not go unnoticed.

Fuxing says hello, Wei Chengfeng would sometimes write. I’ll say hello for Fuxing, she would write instead, when their journeys weighed of foreign grief, yet grief all the same.
Three years separated them. Three years of searching, of finding chaos and eliminating it, of righting thoughts and steadying steps.

Wei Wuxian owes the world nothing. Nobody has any right to ask him to give up even more than he has lost.

Yet it is bewildering in a terribly frightening way when Wei Wuxian rests his weight on Lan Wangji as if there is nowhere else to be, when Wei Wuxian tugs on his sleeve and looks up at him with half-lidded eyes, when Wei Wuxian turns his smile to him and it tastes of love, yearning, inevitability; all that which Lan Wangji knows, and all that which he does not.

But there is nothing confusing about how Lan Wangji’s heart stutters in his chest when Wei Wuxian spins, his arms thrown out to the world, laughter on his lips that chimes like a hundred silver bells.

“Lan Zhan,” he says so easily, eyes glimmering with freedom once lost to time, even behind stars and a veil of gold. “I hear you travel quite a bit, but you’ve never travelled with me before. Shall we go together?”

Lan Wangji cannot deny Wei Wuxian anything. “Let us go,” he says, because there is nothing else to say.

The smile that rises to Wei Wuxian’s lips bleeds of gold and kinder days. His head falls to one side, and his veil falls with it. No words leave him, but something bright and vibrant shines from beyond the stars, and he turns to step forward: always the first to set off, always the last to return.

It is all Lan Wangji can do to walk beside him. For now, and for always.

Wei Chengfeng and Mo Xuanyu quickly become acquainted.

Perhaps it is because they are so close in age. Perhaps it stems from their pasts and the pain they endured. Regardless of the reason, Wei Chengfeng eases herself to stand by Mo Xuanyu in what seems like an instant.

Shamefully, Lan Wangji feels a knot in his gut unravel. Watching Wei Wuxian press his weight against the younger man and place his weimao upon Mo Xuanyu’s head to give him comfort is a feeling that sinks into Lan Wangji’s stomach like a stone, settling upon the most disgusting parts of himself. Greedy, jealousy: all forbidden, all so achingly and repulsively real.

Those feelings are disgraceful in nature and even more so considering Lan Wangji can see with his own eyes the suffering inflicted on such an innocent individual. Mo Xuanyu is meek and shy, and every other word that flickers past his eyes is lost on his tongue; when he speaks, it is in stutters or measured with the utmost of care, as if the breath that fills his lungs is limited.

Yet he holds his head as high as he can and walks beside Wei Chengfeng, who in turn walks some paces ahead of them. His steps fall lightly, but they fall nonetheless. Distantly, Lan Wangji can hear their lively chatter about talismans and arrays.

All those who walk beside Wei Wuxian—all those who continue to walk with him, bearing the weight of crushing duty and obligation alongside him, are the strongest, bravest people Lan Wangji will ever meet.
“You must be a little confused,” Wei Wuxian suddenly says, half a sigh in his voice. “I’m not sure how much A-Qing told you, but if it was enough to send you running over, I fear she’s said too much.”

It hurts to know that Wei Wuxian still insists on keeping secrets, but to know that he trusts only those who walk closest to him is both relieving and heartbreaking. His burdens are not only his, yet he is not willing to share them with Lan Wangji.

Foolish. There is no longer anything to mourn. What remains now is the beginning of something new yet so achingly familiar, and Lan Wangji cannot help but reach out desperately for something that he cannot see.

In response to his silence, Wei Wuxian peers out of the corner of his eye, a glint of grinning gold flashing from underneath is weimao. “Hanguang-Jun, you mustn’t think that I’ve looked into your letters. A-Qing is notoriously protective of them. I’m woefully ignorant when it comes to your correspondence with her. So? What has she told you?”

For a moment, Lan Wangji’s heart skips a beat. Wei Chengfeng has spoken for another’s heart before; thus, he could never be sure how much she shared with Wei Wuxian. But in her own words: *I don’t like speaking for someone else unless I can’t see any other option.*

She is not one to betray her beliefs. Her own strength, combined with Wei Wuxian’s influence, has given her the title Wind-Rider. Even as she converses with Mo Xuanyu, her clouded eyes flicker back, and her features rise and settle with each short affirmation.

If Wei Wuxian truly knows nothing, then...

Wei Chengfeng has left what few words Lan Wangji can speak for himself, and he is infinitely grateful for it.

“Wei Chengfeng wrote of Lianfang-Zun,” Lan Wangji answers. “She wrote of corruption, murder, and betrayal.”

Wei Wuxian laughs. “How quaint! I’ll assume she wasn’t nearly as kind as you’re making it out to be.”

There is nothing kind about corruption, murder, or betrayal. What has Wei Wuxian seen in this life for him to believe otherwise?

“I can see your judgement,” Wei Wuxian says, one brow arched high. He continues before Lan Wangji can speak further. “Come on, now. What of the fine details? For example—” A short gesture toward Mo Xuanyu. “Do you know of Mo Xuanyu and all his suffering?”

Lan Wangji frowns. It is not difficult to see that Mo Xuanyu’s family has been anything but kind to him. The bruises and cuts that paint his skin as ink does his hands meet cold air with every small movement, yet Wei Wuxian’s voice carries a different connotation. So Lan Wangji simply says, “I do not.”

“You know of Jin Guangyao’s questionable methods of securing the position of Sect Leader for himself, don’t you?”

Wei Chengfeng made her feelings on such methods very clear in her letters. *The scum of the earth,* were her words. *You could kill him a thousand times over and he wouldn’t feel any remorse for what he’s done. There’s no saving him.*
And yet, in her most recent letters: *There’s no saving him, but we’re not letting him die.* With such resolve that the winds could carry all the sins of mankind to a kinder place, with such admirable resolve that Lan Wangji could not find breath as his eyes met her remarkably clean scrawl, Wei Chengfeng wrote, *Zewu-Jun doesn’t deserve that.*

“Wei Chengfeng wrote about,” Lan Wangji begins, an itch in his throat that will not subside, “the deaths of Chifeng-Zun, Jin Rusong, and many of Jin Guangshan’s illegitimate children.”

Wei Wuxian nods, a hum caught between his teeth. “Yes, that sounds about right. Mo Xuanyu is one of those children who still breathes to this day.”

*But at what cost,* he does not say.

“Let me tell you a story, Hanguang-Jun,” Wei Wuxian says abruptly, soft as silk. The air turns thick with the golden sheen of divinity as the god beside him chuckles, a sound turned song by the mere act of living. “Do you like stories?”

Lan Wangji does not understand where this is going. He does not need to.

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. There is a fondness in his features that Lan Wangji foolishly—shamefully—hopes to see again, always, for as long as he lives. “What a foolish question. I know you don’t like humoring me, but humor me this one time.”

Not once. Lan Wangji will never leave Wei Wuxian again. As long as he will have him, Lan Wangji will stand by him.

If his mind were to listen to his emotions, if his tongue was capable of all things great and loud that Wei Chengfeng finds as simple as standing straight, a single lifetime would not be nearly enough to capture the scope of all that he wishes to impart upon Wei Wuxian.

But Lan Wangji has known for many years now that words will not reach him the same way they do for others. So whatever he says, he will say because it cannot remain unspoken. Never again.

“Not once,” he says. When Wei Wuxian blinks blankly, he continues, “I will listen.”

Wei Wuxian holds his gaze. “Not once,” he repeats to himself. His eyes—do not widen, but they soften as he sheds a portion of his divinity. A clap of laughter escapes him, short and bitter, and he turns away. “Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, I’m just teasing. You don’t need to suffer the injustice of my nonsense.”

“I will listen,” Lan Wangji insists. Even if Wei Wuxian does not return his feelings, Lan Wangji will not allow him to be lost within his own mind.

There is a brief moment of silence as Wei Wuxian sighs. His robes fall with his shoulders, dragging peonies down his arms and into his hair. “You’re too kind to me,” he says, and something in his words tastes of ash.

Lan Wangji has not been kind enough. Starting now, into the forever that awaits them, he will show Wei Wuxian the kindness that he so often took for granted as a child. “Mn.”

“Yes,” says Wei Wuxian, a little surer of himself. His back straightens and he lifts his chin. “Hanguang-Jun, you’re very good to me. So let me be good to you too and fill in the holes that A-Qing might have glossed over.”

It is impossible to predict what Wei Wuxian will say or do; he is a force of nature, a being shaped of
freedom and will, honed by genius and kindness, hampered down by the fear and hatred that festered and spread like a plague among those who saw him as otherworldly.

Lan Wangji is a fool when it comes to matters of the heart. He, too, was once fearful of Wei Wuxian and everything he represented: goodness, kindness, open-heartedness, beckoning toward Lan Wangji with such ease that it pulled at the blood in his veins and the marrow in his bones.

When Wei Wuxian fills his lungs with stardust and parts his crimson lips to speak, Lan Wangji can do nothing but listen. He would rather do nothing else.

“Let’s start at the beginning—or the end, depending on how you’d like to look at it. Moving forward, I’d call it a beginning, but looking back, I’d call it the end. All those fine details aren’t of much consequence: this is a tale of a child who will find their home alongside me.

“Mo Xuanyu is a gentle boy, isn’t he? He was one of Jin Guangshan’s illegitimate children, born to a mother who was convinced of innate talent within him that his golden core simply couldn’t replicate. But he was invited to Koi Tower nonetheless, and there, he met his half-brother.

“Who could blame him for desiring affection and recognition from such a revered individual? Ah, and his kind brother showered him with such bountiful opportunities. He read the works of a certain Yiling Patriarch. He eased his way into his brother’s secrets—the fierce corpse in the dungeons, the severed head hidden in his quarters.

“I can only imagine how terrified he was. Alone, with nobody to stand by him, he was left with a decision: accept it all, or reject it all. It truly was as simple as that.

“Mo Xuanyu... is a gentle boy. He’s such a kind soul, isn’t he? He rejected his brother, and he forfeited his place in that little world with it.

“It was so easy to spin the rumours around, turn what bond they had into something unsavoury and disgraceful. And so Mo Xuanyu was thrown out, having lost what little he carried with him up those unkind stairs.

“I am of the belief that, if Mo Xuanyu hadn’t broken so horribly, that Jin Guangyao would have killed him without batting an eye. Life is cruel and kind that way. The world is very strange that way.

“But he lived, didn’t he? Here he is, walking beside A-Qing, diving headfirst into a story that he knows will not be easy.

“And here,” Wei Wuxian finishes, the deep thrum of the earth singing just beneath his gold-woven words, “is where the story ends, or perhaps where it begins. All we can do is look forward, walk onward, and give others kindness so they need not suffer the same as we did.”

A gentle sweep of his arms accompanies the last of his words. For a moment, there is silence between them, filled only by the distant chatter of the children that walk ahead of them.

The injustice that has befallen Mo Xuanyu is almost unspeakable. To place so much trust in family, only to be torn to pieces by them—any weaker person would have shattered into pieces long ago.

The similarities—the parallels—they wrench into Lan Wangji’s stomach with a knife, a pain he has felt a thousand times and never wishes to feel again. Nobody deserves the scorn of the entire world. Not again, not ever.

“I bet you’re curious as to how I know all this,” Wei Wuxian says, the lilt of his voice less measured
and more playful. “That’s who we’re travelling to see right now. Has the noble Hanguang-Jun heard of one Nie Huaisang?”

Lan Wangji frowns. Of all people to be involved in such dangerous matters, the Sect Leader of Qinghe Nie is not the first that comes to mind. The murder of Chifeng-Zun must have been the breaking point, even for someone as meek as Nie Huaisang. “Your benefactor is Nie Huaisang?”

“Certainly not. I’m his benefactor.”

It is well known that Yunmeng has the protection and blessings of a god. Lan Wangji has never heard of such tales in Qinghe.

“But that’s not important right now,” Wei Wuxian says, waving his hand dismissively. He turns his gaze to Lan Wangji, brows high with curiosity. “Why have you come with us? I don’t mean to drive you away, but Gusu Lan will certainly miss their Hanguang-Jun.”

A breath stutters in Lan Wangji’s throat.

I don’t mean to drive you away. It is not the same as I want you to stay, yet the rise and fall of Wei Wuxian’s voice, the gentle flutter of his eyelashes as he looks away, drags all those silent questions from the pit of Lan Wangji’s belly and sets them down at his heart.

“I am here because I wish to be,” is all Lan Wangji can say. It is all he means and all he wants. It is... all there is.

Wei Wuxian’s laugh is light, fey in nature yet profoundly human. In one easy movement, he leans his weight to the side, toward Lan Wangji. He does not press himself against him, but he—rather, he brushes against Lan Wangji’s side, as if believing that even if he were to fall, Lan Wangji would catch him.

“Lan Zhan, you really are a good person.” That is all Wei Wuxian says, his gaze pointed up toward the skies. The silence he leaves in his wake softens the molten gold within him, turning it to stardust, to aether, and his brilliant smile falls into tender reflex, gently curving his lips with peace. With contentment.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to continue onward without stuttering or stopping altogether.

Wei Wuxian has always been like this, so free with his love that it tore himself to pieces. There is nothing to be uncovered between them. All that they feel, all that they have ever felt, the other knows.

So why does Lan Wangji ache so strongly for it to be real?

He does not know how long they walk, brushing against each other with each step. All he knows is that Wei Wuxian sighs something serene, and the next moment, his head lolls into the crook of Lan Wangji’s neck.

A sharp breath catches in Lan Wangji’s throat. He cannot—is this one of Wei Wuxian’s passing fancies, a mere gesture of his love for the world, or is it—

Whichever it is, it does not matter. Lan Wangji will accept all Wei Wuxian has to give. He will never push him away.

Wei Wuxian peers up at him with a satisfied look. “You really are humoring me,” he says, almost wondrous in tone.
“Mn.”

“You’ve changed since before.” It is not difficult to see that Wei Wuxian does not mean their last encounter.

“As have you,” Lan Wangji replies.

Wei Wuxian’s ebony hair folds as they walk. They brush against Lan Wangji’s neck like tendrils, and he suppresses a shiver.

“I would like to know more about all the things you’ve done,” Wei Wuxian continues. His smile raises at one corner, shaping into an uneven grin. “I feel like you know so much about me, with all these wonderful tales and letters. You wouldn’t be so cruel as to leave me in ignorance, would you?”

Lan Wangji has only heard of Wei Wuxian’s great feats. Thanks to Wei Chengfeng, he knows far more than anyone else, yet the one thing he desires to know best is Wei Wuxian’s heart.

When Lan Wangji takes his next breath, it is longer, calmer. “What do you wish to know?”

“Your travels, of course!” The stars in Wei Wuxian’s eyes swirl endlessly. His words rise with awe-coloured interest, and he takes back his own weight. Lan Wangji spends a single moment mourning the less before Wei Wuxian loops their arms together. “You and I are very much alike, Hanguang-Jun, but there are so many places I’ve yet to see. What splendors have you come across? What incredible sights are there out there?”

The one splendor that Lan Wangji has spent years seeking is standing before him.

“There is a bridge in Caiyi Town,” he begins. “Do you remember?”

Wei Wuxian shakes his head. His eyes are wide. “I don’t, but I remember thoroughly enjoying the town. Is this bridge you speak of beautiful?”

How much does Wei Wuxian remember, and how much has he forgotten? In those days, he lived life as if each day was to be his last. Perhaps it is not what passes before him that he remembers; perhaps what he remembers best is what he felt in each heartbeat.

It does not matter. Between then and now, now and forever, there is life, and for as long as Wei Wuxian will have him, Lan Wangji will walk beside him.

“At sunset,” Lan Wangji says, “the sun falls into the arc of the bridge. The reflection of the water completes it.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes flicker, searching through memories of two lives. He does not seem to find whatever he is searching for, but the smile that paints itself onto his features is bold and brilliant. “That sounds wonderful! Once we’re done in Qinghe, you must show me this bridge.”

Every one of his words strikes Lan Wangji to his very bones. He barely swallows the tremble in his throat. “You will come to Gusu?”

“Why—we’re in Gusu right now,” Wei Wuxian says curtly, looking away. “But... yes. This is a pilgrimage, and I wouldn’t be so rude as to ignore Gusu Lan.”

After this, Wei Wuxian will come to Gusu. He will not come back to Gusu. He does not belong to Gusu; he belongs to the world. But no matter where he goes, Lan Wangji will follow.
Wei Wuxian is quick to move on. “What else have you seen? Surely it isn’t just Caiyi Town.”

There is a shard of bone caught in Lan Wangji’s throat. It dissolves to marrow, coating his tongue in Wei Wuxian’s unyielding pull. “If you wish to know,” he says, his voice hoarse, “then I will show you when we return.”

It is so easy to fall for someone simply by watching their lashes flutter in surprise and their eyes widen in awe.

“Lan Zhan, you can’t just tease me like that,” Wei Wuxian whines.

It is so easy for Wei Wuxian to make Lan Wangji’s heart stutter, stop, and start again. The weight is back against him, and Lan Wangji holds Wei Wuxian’s teasing gaze with all the resolve he can muster.

His silence is enough to coax a huff out of the man-turned-god against him. “Fine, then. If you won’t tell me, then I’ll tell you what I’ve seen!” Wei Wuxian’s pout molds into that same beautiful smile he always wears. “Where should I even begin?”

“At the start,” Lan Wangji answers.

“The start?” Wei Wuxian hums contemplatively. “It’s a very long story.”

They have time. They have all the time in the world. “I will listen.”

Wei Wuxian meets his eyes. With an emotion so quiet and subtle that Lan Wangji could not hope to decipher it, he says, “You will, won’t you? You’re so awfully good, Lan Zhan.”

In a single breath, Wei Wuxian bears his own weight once more. He brushes his hair behind his ear, and his nails draw small chimes from the flowers, the bells in his hair. With his hands folded over each other, blooming of moon-sunken peonies, he truly does seem godlike.

“Alright,” Wei Wuxian begins. “I suppose the beginning would have to be the end. It was an awful beginning in that sense.”

The story that weaves itself into existence from Wei Wuxian’s tongue and fingertips is one that Lan Wangji cannot fully comprehend. It is shattered and incomplete where the relentless flow of memory and time has touched; it is whole and vibrant in the quiet moments that nobody but himself will remember, come ten, one hundred, one thousand years.

“The beginning,” says Wei Wuxian, “would have to be when I died. Eight years ago, having lost everyone I swore to protect. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that it was seven years ago, when I first woke up.”

The tale that follows is one of a god who falls in love with the world. There is no fault to be found with him. With no memories, no hatred, only curiosity and wonder, everything that lives and dies and does nothing at all is a marvel. For a year, there is peace.

A stutter crawls into Wei Wuxian’s voice. He bites down on it with his teeth, then takes a deep breath. “But home is never far away.”

There is a god in Yunmeng—in Lotus Pier—and he feels as if he has come home. His heart aches, it is fulfilled, it is empty and full all at once.

There is a storm in Lotus Pier, and it tastes of bitter regrets and sweet lightning.
Wei Wuxian does not speak much of his time in Lotus Pier. Those memories, both precious and painful, are his own. He simply says, “One day, I remembered. And I knew it was time to move on.”

Whatever it is that Wei Wuxian finds in the vast world before him, it leaves his questions unanswered. There is a pool of betrayal that fills within him as the world honors him, reveres him, all for power that could so easily be used to weave chaos in place of miracles, all for the simple phrase of *I’m a god.*

Yet it subsides with time and duty. Humans will never change. All that can be done is to make the impossible possible, to give kindness to those who have never received it, and perhaps one day, there will be enough kindness for every person to feel full.

“I didn’t want to go back,” Wei Wuxian admits. “I couldn’t move on because I was so confused, then when I did move on, I didn’t want to be Wei Wuxian. I wanted to be Fuxing.” His stars in his eyes slow, then dwindle, and darken. “I couldn’t reconcile the two halves, so I tried to pretend that I was only one. But then...”

One day, there is a girl with wind in her hair and a boy with manic yearning in his eyes. They begin to walk alongside him, and from there, the story no longer follows one road.

There is mystery, grief, and peace. They are three strangers, for a brief time, enemies, but as their steps fall in beat with one another, they become allies, friends, perhaps even family. Their adventures are great, and their misadventures even greater; they travel the land and become divine beings through rumours and fables, when in reality they are nothing but a shoulder to lean on at the end of all worlds.

There is duty, yet there is freedom. Time does not heal all wounds, but it heals many. Old friends return, and new friends walk close.

Finally, inevitably, inexplicably, Wei Wuxian allows others to hold pieces of his heart while he holds theirs. That, perhaps, is where he finds himself.

“That’s all there is, really,” Wei Wuxian says, without any indication of the end. He cannot bring himself to meet Lan Wangji’s eyes. “My memory is really quite awful, so if you’d like to know the fine details, I’d recommend you read A-Qing’s journals. They’re very thorough and far more detailed than what I can keep in this twice-born head of mine.”

Wei Wuxian laughs. It does not sound fake, yet the breath that drives it is empty. He leaves a deliberate silence for Lan Wangji to fill.

Lan Wangji cannot think of what to say.

In all those years Wei Wuxian has traveled through, he has grown into his own person. It is as he said: he is no longer Wei Wuxian, and he is no longer Fuxing. He is someone new, born of his own struggles and triumphs, and Lan Wangji could not see it through.

Wei Wuxian did not want him by his side.

There is a terrible ache in his chest and in his stomach. Lan Wangji has known for years that Wei Chengfeng’s words that night were nothing but the truth. To find others, one must first find oneself.

It hurts. There is no denying it. But Lan Wangji cannot be anything but—proud, awestruck, some strange emotion that hammers into his spine.

Wei Wuxian has borne the weight of two lives, and his smile still reaches his eyes when he looks at
Lan Wangji.

Finally, not only to fill the silence in this one moment, but to put to rest all those years they have walked apart from one another, Lan Wangji says, “I understand.”

Startled, Wei Wuxian looks at Lan Wangji with wide eyes and parted lips. “You do?” he asks, the hesitance in his voice obvious. He runs his fingers down his braids, searches for strands of hair to fold behind his ears: all nervous movements that he never had in his past life. “It’s an awful story. There’s no sense in it at all, and my memory is truly abysmal.”

Now he is repeating words in order to fill a silence he did not expect.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian expected questions. In truth, there is so much more Lan Wangji burns to know about his journey, his growth, his heart.

But simply receiving answers through spoken word is not—does not mean much. Three years of exchanging letters with Wei Chengfeng have taught him that there is only so much mere words can do.

Whatever Lan Wangji desires to understand, he will see for himself.

“Listen,” Wei Wuxian blurts out, hurried and stumbling and so unlike himself. “I don’t mean to—I suppose I should—you probably want—”

Three times Wei Wuxian tries to speak, and three times he fails.

The breath he draws into himself is not meant to be hidden. His closes his eyes, and with a slow exhale, the tenseness in his shoulders seeps away, and he finally speaks.

“That night in Yinhe,” Wei Wuxian begins, striking Lan Wangji rigid with only a few words. “I’m sure A-Qing said a lot. She... knows my heart very well, and I trust that she was able to make things better.”

Lan Wangji’s heart pounds against his chest. He, too, releases a long breath. “She did.”

Wei Wuxian nods, slowly at first, then vigorously. “That’s good,” he says quietly. “That’s very good.”

The last of his words trail off, dripping like molten gold with his every step. Once again, there is silence that neither of them know how to fill. Rather, the words linger on the very tips of their tongues: it is simply a matter of who speaks first.

“I was unfair to you,” Wei Wuxian says.

“You were not,” Lan Wangji replies.

“I was foolish,” Wei Wuxian continues, as if he has not heard anything at all. “I shouldn’t have pushed you away when you were just—”

The words crack, shatter, and are lost. All Wei Wuxian can do is press his lips together and look downward, as if he has something to be ashamed of.

All the breath in Lan Wangji escapes him. “Wei Ying,” he speaks, and nothing more.

It cannot be—does Wei Wuxian truly—does he mean to—
Even still, Wei Wuxian cannot meet his eyes. “I don’t understand,” he says, something desperate and so utterly lost in his every word. “Back then, after the Nightless City. After I—after everything.”

(At the end of the world,)

“What you told me then. I don’t understand.”

(There is only you.)

“What could you have ever seen in me, Lan Zhan?”

The light in Wei Wuxian’s eyes is a heartbreaking tapestry of confusion, shining so beautifully among the darkness that rests behind him. If he could, Lan Wangji would take hold of each and every one of those stars that cannot see its own brilliance and kiss away its fears, its self-loathing.

Wei Wuxian looks into him, searching for answers that he would not recognize even if he were to find them.

Always, forever, Wei Wuxian is perfect, yet he cannot see it within himself. He has so much love to give that his kindness is blinding, yet the one person he refuses to see worth in is himself.

Lan Wangji’s heart twists. So much has changed, yet nothing has.

There is a hesitation, a silent spark, and Wei Wuxian moves to speak again.

“Fuxing! There’s a town up ahead! Should we go check it out?”

Wei Chengfeng’s call cuts through the moment, and with one question, destroys the wondrous yearning in Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

Wei Chengfeng’s call cuts through the moment, and with one question, destroys the wondrous yearning in Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

The god huffs, a genuine smile pulling at his lips, and his steps fall faster. “We’ll pass through for now,” he answers, waving at Wei Chengfeng as she retraces her path to meet her master. “You know what to do, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Wei Chengfeng says. She looks between Wei Wuxian, then Lan Wangji, and her brows furrow. “So Mo Xuanyu and Hanguang-Jun are just going to watch?”

“There’s nothing much they can do for now.”

“Oh-huh. So what about later?”

“If it’s for later, they can make the decision for later.”

“Oh-huh,” Wei Chengfeng repeats, blandly. Satisfaction rises to her features, easily and fluidly, as if it is an expression she wears often.

There is a story here that Lan Wangji does not yet know. It matters not; he will know soon enough.

Wei Wuxian shrugs helplessly, greeting Mo Xuanyu with a short clap of laughter as he appears from the trees. “Ah, Mo Xuanyu! How would you like to be formally initiated into our little group?”

Mo Xuanyu flinches, observing the lines on his palms with unnatural fervor. “What... what do you mean?”

“It isn’t anything scary,” Wei Wuxian assures gently. “All you need to do is follow along, sing if you’d like, dance if you want.”
“It’s fun,” Wei Chengfeng adds, her expression brightening. “I’ll teach you! Or you can make up your own steps.” To demonstrate, Wei Chengfeng raises her hands and takes a stance: not entirely for dancing, not entirely for combat. She takes a few measured steps and her hands follow in motions that feel as if they are lacking something to be held. “It’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

“I think I’ll just watch for now,” is Mo Xuanyu’s faint answer.

His gaze flickers to Wei Wuxian, searching for any trance of anger. There is none to be found. Wei Wuxian holds his smile even and level, and Mo Xuanyu flushes at the sight of it.

“As long as you’re comfortable, it’s fine.” Turning to Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian dons a lopsided grin. “And I imagine the people here in Gusu will be quite surprised to see the revered Hanguang-Jun travelling with our merry little band. Don’t you worry too much. All you need to do is look as perfect as you always do, and you’ll be fine.”

Lan Wangji breathes and is still. He holds Wei Wuxian’s gaze because it is all he could ask for.

Does Wei Wuxian understand the weight of his words?

“Don’t tease him,” Wei Chengfeng snaps, elbowing her master in the waist without any real malice. While Wei Wuxian makes a spectacle of being struck, Wei Chengfeng bows her head. “You don’t have to do anything, Hanguang-Jun. We probably won’t be stopping at any towns until nightfall, anyway.”

“Yes, but you didn’t need to hit me!”

“Would you have shut up any other way?”

There is something strange about the way Wei Wuxian treats his disciples. It has been obvious since that night in Yinhe, when Wei Chengfeng, still so young yet wise beyond her years, spoke of her master’s heart with such unfaltering conviction it seemed that she understood every facet of his heart.

Wei Wuxian treats his disciples like family.

There is—a pulsing of sorts in Lan Wangji’s throat. His heart warms and aches when he watches Wei Wuxian love and be loved.

“Will you have me?”

Even though the words belong to himself, Lan Wangji can hear the hesitation, the uncertainty.

No matter what Wei Chengfeng said, no matter how much she insists that Wei Wuxian has all the love in the world to give, in the end, there is only one person who can make the choice.

Wei Wuxian’s entire being stutters. He stops, a brilliant universe caught in time, and the stars in his eyes erupt into light. “Have you,” he repeats slowly. He blinks, once, twice, sunlight dancing on his lashes. Then, like the peonies that make their home upon his robes, Wei Wuxian’s smile blooms into something that smells of spring and inevitability. “Why, Lan Zhan, we know each other so well, yet you still need to ask such a question?”

Something unravels.

There is nothing Lan Wangji can do but stare at the man-turned-god before him, bearing the hopes and miracles of mortals upon his shoulders. There is nothing he can do but hear the quiet yes that lies beneath those words and hope that it means something more.
“Alright then,” Wei Chengfeng says loudly, having wandered off to tie half her flowers in Mo Xuanyu’s hair. Her clouded eyes shift from Lan Wangji to Wei Wuxian, and they finally settle somewhere in between. “If we’re all set, then we should just get it done.”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Wuxian sighs.

Once again, the moment is lost. But as Lan Wangji watches Wei Wuxian take his weimao back from Mo Xuanyu, he thinks to himself that it is better this way.

One day, if Wei Wuxian ever speaks those words, then—

Once an impossible dream, reborn as a dream in living—

As long as Lan Wangji is by his side—

Life is meant to be lived. Not contemplated.

Mo Xuanyu shrinks away under Wei Wuxian’s touch, pink colouring his cheeks, his ears, his nose. Wei Chengfeng speaks firm words of encouragement, and the young man straightens somewhat. He stutters helplessly when Wei Wuxian makes flattering comments on his appearance.

They are not whole; they have been broken, have been battered and beaten, yet their pieces fit together seamlessly.

When Wei Wuxian hurries forward, gold spilling over his shoulders and from his eyes, Lan Wangji calls, “Wei Ying.”

And Wei Wuxian looks back, his smile given freely, in its entirety, and Lan Wangji has long since lost himself in it. “Lan Zhan? Come on, now. We wouldn’t want you to be left behind!”

Wei Wuxian lives this moment for the town ahead. Lan Wangji has been living for everything that lies in the distant future. Now, the future is beckoning him forward with miracles dancing on every note of his laughter.

There is nothing more Lan Wangji can ask for.

There is a god of sorts who travels the land.  
Listen to the whispers: you will hear all sorts of wonderful tales.  
He is a dragon, born from molten gold and spilt blood;  
he is a spirit, who mourns for you as it does the world;  
he is a human, drowned in the gold that the gods could not bear;  
he is a god, born twice to a world that is not yet kind.  
Not enough.

But then he is the song of the sun, ascending the skies to ward away the night,  
his swords raised high for the children of the world,  
who do not yet know how to walk,  
to breathe, to sing,  
to dance, to live,  
to see, to die,
to be born again.

You will know who he is, not when you see him, but when he sees you. For when you see him, all that you will know is that he is beautiful.

If you are so lucky as to meet him on the road, bow your head. He will laugh and tell you to raise it. Do so, for there is no harm that can befall you. Ask his name if you do not already know it, ask who he is, what he is: he will not refuse you. Perhaps he will ask yours. Answer if you wish. He will not ask further.

There is no such thing as a mortal without a wish. He knows this, and he will ask you only one question which you must answer.

(The day that he finally meets someone who cannot answer him will be his last.)

Wounds that will not close, love that will not bloom, justice that will not show, hatred that will not cease. All these and many more are all words and wishes that fall ceaselessly.

He will shape the world for you so that it is a little more bearable. Not everything can be made well even by miracles. This, you must know. This, he knows.

If you are so lucky as to meet him at the gates of town, bow your head. Others will follow. But do not speak to him, for he will not answer. A song will spill from his lips, honey-sweet and silken soft, and you will be lost in it. You may sing with him if you wish. Only those who know his heart will understand his wordless song.

Two vassals walk beside him: his children, who are not alike in blood or in mind but bear the weight of the world much prouder than you
and I.

From the streets you will be able to see the spectacle in full.
They do not need your flowers; they have flowers.
They do not need your gold; they bleed gold.
All that they need is your attention.
Spare it. You will not regret it.

The wind-swept maiden, the young goddess born of flowers and lanterns,
will greet you.
Her eyes are not old, and she is not old, but she has lived far more than you and I.
Speak to her if you wish. She will turn to you for a moment.
Let her see your eyes, your resolve and your grief,
and she will acknowledge you.

The blood-bathed sword, a spirit born of regrets and reconciliation,
will see you.
He will not stop to hold you, and he will not be gentle with hands or words but he will ask you if there is any place better you should be.
Speak to him if you wish. He will turn to you for a moment.
Let him see the blood on your hands, the regrets you hold,
and know that death is only an escape.

Those who walk behind him, who do not sing or dance, are not so different from you.

Trust the healer (for that is who he is, and that is who has always been) to heal your wounds.
He knows your pain and your anger.
But know that diamonds and roses are as uncomfortable when they tumble from one’s lips as toads and frogs:
colder, too, and sharper,
and they cut.
He will tell you to remember your name,
to not lose hope,
and then he will leave you with the strength in your own legs to bring you to tomorrow.

Know the light-bearer; or perhaps that is foolish, for you will have already known him when you see him.
It will surprise you, or perhaps it will not, if you have sharp eyes.
Look closely, and you will understand.
There is no song on his lips. Do not ask him to sing.
The only song that will leave him
is not for you.

Matters of the heart make mortals foolish; they do stupid things, like you and I.
Push a lover away,
let them bloom in their own time,
yearn for the scent of their sweet love,
that tastes of moonlight and inevitability,
and wonder if you will ever see the shadow of their back ever again.
Wonder, and when the spring comes, you will walk by their side.

There is a god of sorts who travels the land.
Listen to the whispers: you will hear all sorts of wonderful tales.
But perhaps the most fascinating of stories lies not within the divine, but rather in your own heart.

Hey Fuxing,

I mean, I’m happy that you and Hanguang-Jun seem to having a grand time touring wherever you are in the world right now, but know that your public displays of affection have officially made it into ACTUAL HISTORY. Look at this poem. LOOK AT IT. I put just as much of your romance into the chronicles as I needed to, and even that was sickeningly affectionate toward the end. I don’t know who wrote the poem, and it’s not like I’m going to ask the Jiang family historians, so if I have to suffer, you do too.

Xue Yang says hi, though his exact words were, “Your romantic dumbassery is going to make all of us look like the cheesiest legends ever, and if Mie Yinyu finds out about this in whatever history degree she’s doing, I’ll replace every mention of your name in every museum with Su She’s name instead,” which is fair if you ask me. Now you have to live knowing that XUE YANG is being more sensible than you. Dumbass.

I feel like you go on honeymoons every week but what do I know. If you stop by Kirishima, tell Sakuya that she should just curse everyone who hangs shit from her trees. It’s not that hard. Humans are better at breaking stuff than ever, but of course I’d know that. They’re trees. They’re flowers. THEY CAN DIE. Has anybody taken a biology class in the last two thousand years? If they have, they sure don’t act like it.

Anyway, come back soon. Jiang Qing’s due in a few weeks, and it’s the eighth cycle. There’s no way I’m dealing with Jiang Cheng’s wailing baby phase by myself ever again, so put those child-rearing skills to use. And don’t even think of making any excuses: you raised ME, so you can raise anyone.

See you sometime,
A-Qing
“Alright.” A-Qing rolls her sleeves up high, tucking the loose fabric under her arms. It’ll all get soaked no matter what she does, but wet is certainly better than torn. “Do you want to go first, Mo Xuanyu?”

It’s a pretty nice day today. Gusu’s great like that: everything’s pretty, even though it’s uncomfortably humid at times. Nothing can get as horribly hot as Yinhe or Lotus Pier though, so it’s all fair in the end.

Two suns peer out from the cotton-brush skies. One is a splotch of red paint, its edges fading into the violet hues of the rolling clouds around it, and the other is a violent hole in the sky, with tendrils of shadow tearing apart the very spacetime of the sector it inhabits.

“Go first,” Mo Xuanyu repeats, so vacantly that A-Qing has to grab his arm before he passes out and lets his body make the decision his mind can’t. “Go where?”

Well, there’s only one way to go, and that’s down, right?

A-Qing shifts her balance a little to peer over the edge of the cliffside. Beside her, Mo Xuanyu makes that sound he’s so fond of: a squeal that’s been muffled under half a scream and a gaping breath sucked in through the mouth that isn’t quite a gasp. The reason she can give such an accurate description is because Mo Xuanyu has, incredibly enough, made all those sounds individually before. It’s actually pretty impressive, given the fact that A-Qing has seen hundreds of thousands of weird creatures, and none of them come close to the vocal range Mo Xuanyu has. Pretty crazy, right?

Anyway. It’s not that long of a fall—definitely not even in the top ten tallest borders A-Qing has seen, the shortest of them being a tumble from a mountain, the tallest being an unwelcome trip out of the sky. A count to five will probably be all it takes to hit the water, then the boundary, then pop out of the Other Side.

Before them is a sheer drop into said boundary. From afar, it’d be difficult to tell that it’s a spiritual gateway at all: the surface of the water is simply a sheet of cracked crystal, of glass so clear and thin that it could be mistaken for a mirror if only what sang from underneath wasn’t so dark and ancient and hungry.

Then there’s also the marker, which, admittedly, is probably a bit more terrifying. A great big pillar of light, dragging up broken and lost lands through the gaping void of an entryway, throwing it up high into the skies, where earth and flowers and trees will eventually become part of the clouds and then a fraction of the black sun’s appetite.

A-Qing was pretty freaked out the first time Fuxing dragged her to the edge of those deathly still waters, and she was very angry when Fuxing tripped her in. But all’s fair in love and war, and she made that explicitly clear but pushing him out of the sky on the return trip.

“It’s,” A-Qing begins simply, not quite sure how to make this out not to be the death sentence it kind of looks like, “not that bad.”

Mo Xuanyu doesn’t look convinced, which is fair, but also kind of unfortunate, because fear doesn’t go so well in the Other Side.

“You’re awful at this,” Xue Yang snarks from within Jiangzai.
“Oh, because you have comforting words to offer,” A-Qing snaps.

“Sure I do,” Xue Yang continues, voice silky smooth in that itching, annoying, metallic way. “Mo Xuanyu, don’t overthink things. All you need to do is close your eyes and fall. When you open them, it’ll be like you just blanked out for a bit.”

That... is suspiciously helpful, which can only mean—

“Besides, this is nothing compared to other falls you’ll have to push yourself into eventually,” the stupid ghost-sword-spirit-asshole warbles on. He’s lucky he doesn’t have a mouth right now, because A-Qing would have pinched his lips to his goddam ears. “First, there’s the fall from Yinhe Ridge—loads of fun, lots of screaming, though half of it’s from the tortured souls caught in between this reality and the Other; then there’s the descent into madness, which is more mental than physical, but if you travel with this much unbridled crazy, it’s sure to happen one way or another. And if we’re counting the Burial Mounds—"

A-Qing swings Jiangzai over her shoulder, pulls the sword out of her sash, and hurls it off the cliff.

Hearing Xue Yang’s tasteless curses fade into the distant void below and end with a loud splorsh—a splorsh specifically, that’s important, it’s halfway between a splash and a swallow—is incredibly satisfying.

Serves him right for trying to terrify Mo Xuanyu! Where’d that heart he so reluctantly admitted he might’ve grown over the course of their journey go? Idiot.

“There he goes,” Fuxing half-says, half-sighs, as if he expected all this to happen.

“There he fucking goes,” A-Qing repeating each word with none of the lightness and all the bite she can muster. She swings her withering gaze over to Fuxing, who looks away like a coward and smiles at a frowning Hanguang-Jun.

There he goes indeed, except A-Qing’s not talking about Xue Yang. There he goes, Fuxing, Wei Wuxian, that lovestruck, twice-born idiot who wouldn’t be able to tell unrequited love from mutual pining if it fell out of the sky and proclaimed its undying affection for him, which it did.

A-Qing would’ve put her fist through a wall already if it wasn’t for the company of Mo Xuanyu and Hanguang-Jun.

Speaking of Hanguang-Jun, he’s been pretty quiet since all throughout the trip so far. To be fair, he was pretty quiet when A-Qing spoke to him last, but he always seemed to have a lot more to say in his letters.

Then again, half of what he had to say was about Fuxing, and the other half was a mix of warnings, advice, and thinly-veiled concern for every mention of stabbing A-Qing sent his way, and no matter what Fuxing says, it wasn’t that much at all, just once or twice every five letters or so, which is normal if you live normally and stab back when people try to stab you instead of bleeding out the mouth and smiling like some deranged lunatic, you absolute maniac.

Mo Xuanyu peers downward with a new sort of anxiety in his eyes. It’s really endearing and makes A-Qing want to fluff his hair, and she’s not ashamed in the slightest to admit it. “Should we go after him?”

“He’ll be fine,” A-Qing says, waving her hand dismissively. “He’ll just clear the path for us. If anything, we should catch up to him.”
“Okay,” is Mo Xuanyu’s soft reply. It’s obvious he doesn’t fully understand, but he’s willing to trust them anyway, and that’s something incredibly precious. He swallows, steadies his breathing, and brings his hands together, first from the fingertips and then the palms. Like a clap or a prayer. “I—so I just jump.”

A-Qing shakes her head. “Not so much jump as fall.”

“I can do that.” There’s a bitterness in Mo Xuanyu’s voice that’s unlikely to leave for some time. But he turns to A-Qing with his head held high, and no matter how much his voice shakes, if it’s still there, that’s all that matters. “I can do this.”

And just like that, Mo Xuanyu faces toward the cliff edge, closes his eyes, and lets himself fall.

Silence. The spiralling clouds roll onward, and then another splorsh fills the still air. It’s fitting. After everything he’s been through, how could he be scared of a fall when someone will be waiting on the other side for him?

With that said and done, A-Qing turns to Fuxing. To Hanguang-Jun. “Well,” she says, fixing them both with a stare and channeling as much of the just talk, you idiots that’s always sitting beneath her tongue into her voice, “see you on the other side.”

At the exact same time, Fuxing says, “See you soon,” and Hanguang-Jun voices a simple, “Mn.”

Then they turn and look at each other, but only for a moment.

He doesn’t love me.

Just who do you think you’re kidding?

Wei Wuxian,

Hanguang-Jun,

You both really are so stupid.

A-Qing lets her gaze rest on the star-crossed turned starstruck fools before her, but only for a moment.

Then she turns, lets the weight of her body and the song of the void drag her downward, and closes her eyes.

(One,)

It’s been incredibly difficult tying together the strings of what death and duty severed. Words can only do so much, and actions are meaningless if the hands that are executing them don’t carry the heart of the one they’re meant for.

(Two,)

But this is good, right? Even though it’s obvious Fuxing thinks he has something to earn back and Hanguang-Jun doesn’t know if Fuxing truly returns his feelings, they’re together.

(Three,)

There’s no way they’ll let this chance go. It takes death to know death, and that’s something awful about the way this world turns, spins, breaks, stops, and starts again.
Oh, whatever.

What’s the use in worrying about it now? All A-Qing can do is try her best to guide everything along its path, no matter how bumpy or crazy the ride gets. She’s gotten this far, and so have Mo Xuanyu, Xue Yang, Hanguang-Jun, and Fuxing.

This is the path they’ve chosen. The least they could do is see it through to the end.

A-Qing would like to say that nobody falls alone, but she knows that isn’t true. She fell alone, once, and it hurt so terribly she thought that she’d never piece herself together again.

Since then, she’s fallen countless times, and she hasn’t been caught every time. But she has gotten back up every time.

It’s what you carry inside when you fall that matters, probably. Yeah. That sounds right. It sounds good.

Some ways above her, below her, whichever way matters and doesn’t matter at all, Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun are falling together. Or maybe they’ve already fallen, and this time, they’ve caught each other.

It’s the heart that matters, but sometimes, it’s nice to have the one who holds your heart closest with you as you fall.

(Welcome back, Wind-Swept Maiden.)
Ash blossoms fall amidst a desolate spring,
A stole-cold soul catches fallen stars.
The fools weeping crimson and laughing gold,
Have nothing but bleeding fingers and broken souls.

THE SONG OF THREE STARS

THE CHRONICLES OF YUFENG-ZHE: TRAVELS IN THE OTHER SIDE
SPECIFICALLY PERTAINING TO TAKING DOWN A ROYAL ASSHOLE

FOREWORD

I find it interesting that you, dear reader, have come across this book.

I call it a book, for that is what it is: I will not call it a novel, or a story, or anything of the sort. What you hold in your hands is simply a collection of papers with words on them.

It is only after your eyes have touched every word within—only after you, a spectator, will decide what it is. Is it a story? Is it a fable? Is it myth? Is it legend? I will never know what it is you choose. I do not particularly care.

There are legends, and there are fables. Such as there are myths that detail nonsensical events that seem all too fey, too supernatural to be among the everyday thoughts of what those like us and those unlike us consider everyday life, there are authors who explore how far the human imagination can go, what it can reach, what it cannot; what will be seen as masterful, and what will be seen as tasteless.

Now, what does this all have to do with studies such as mine?

Many stories have been lost to time. Word of mouth can only do so much, and scripts can only battle against the natural elements for so long. The tales that have survived are difficult to unravel, for they are so often tangled in a web of confusion of sorts—not lies, for there is no such thing as a false perspective.
Thus, it is important to note that while reading over these spectacular adventures, any echoes you hear or vision you may see are not simply creations of the mind. They are, in their truest form, a calling from the deepest recesses of your soul. Take from that statement what you wish: I will not elaborate further, for I believe if you truly wish to see everything as it is, you will know what to do when the time comes.

I am not a particularly spiritual person. I have no desire to prostrate myself myself for higher beings, and I certainly do not owe my life to anyone but myself. However, I believe that gods exist, and I believe that they wander among us, in and out of our lives with such careless speed and haste that it is a miracle they have not been spotted yet. As such, I have never understood why humans revere gods to be such incredible beings when, in reality, there is nothing to be had with an immortal life but the everyday struggles of those not unlike you.

Translating this collection of fables is not what I would call a life’s work, for there is much more to be had from life than the scattered stories of a figure so utterly lost to time that she could be considered a god herself. With that said, I believe that you will not find this particularly life-changing either.

In the very rare occasion that you do, in fact, find something worth discussing, first tell your colleagues, your friends, your family. If your memory still serves you well after the words have left you, find me. By then, you should know how.

This is one book of many. The travels you see recorded within these pages are merely a fraction of the journey, which lasted many years and many lifetimes. If you should be so inclined to uncover the so-called truth, seek out the others, let your mind open and your heart free, and ask yourself: what is justice? What is peace? What is death, and the void that waits beyond?

And then stop asking yourself those questions. The answers will elude you, as they have eluded me for many years. As long as you are alive, you will believe you understand to some extent. I have nothing more to say on the matter. Settle or wander: both are just as good as the other.

Now I really must ask: what brought you to this book, of all things? What is it that drives you? Boredom, curiosity, something else entirely?

Forget those questions too. As long as someone knows the answers—that person being you—it is good enough for me. My education consisted of knowing the unknown simply by doing, and while it was a valuable experience, I would never be so cruel as to wish it upon somebody else. The man who taught me has long since moved on, but if any of you are unfortunate enough to meet him, feel free to harass him on my behalf.

You will find that the author of these stories never did stop writing. Perhaps she still writes to this day. But that, my reader, is merely speculation. Anything beyond that is a little too personal than I am comfortable revealing. But everything in between? That is what you can call fair game.

Dream, wonder, and feel. The hand that wrote these words did.

See you soon, or never, or sometime in that great in between. Enjoy what follows.

I know I did.
There was a girl in the dark, and she wore a sash.

The sash had a spectral air about it, for it was not truly silk and fabric at all; one could call it magic, or perhaps witchcraft, or some fanciful technique foreign to cultivation. We will leave it there, for no amount of explaining will be of any use.

There was a girl, and a sash, and a ghost chasing her. There was moonlight, though it could not truly be called moonlight, for the giant pearl that dangled from the skyward abyss held no light of its own: it had swallowed too many into its smiling, ebony stains to be any sort of beautiful.

Any lesser beings would have long since found shelter, no matter how unwelcoming or uncomfortable the shadows were. Here, in the inky blackness of the erroneously named Shadow Plains (which were not very plain at all), spirits were as plenty as short breaths in their prey, and light heralded the coming of a being far more terrifying than the souls of the dead and damned.

The girl had been running for a long while, and she was tired but not exhausted. That was good: she was always tired in some way, but she was stronger than most. It would be difficult for the ghost to catch her. She had not been caught yet, and she had no plans to be caught anytime or anywhere soon.

The girl was the first to break the treeline for a rare patch of empty ground upon which no trees nor souls grew. She hesitated, but after a mere moment of contemplation, she stepped beneath the milky embrace of the moon.

In this strange realm, where fantastical was not so much fantastic as lethal and wonderful did not instill as much wonder as it did terror, it would have been so easy for the laughter and wails to raise the hair on your arms and neck, widen your childlike eyes, capture your attention and fear forever and ever.

It would have been so easy for you to forget the girl was a girl at all, and I would not have blamed you, for she did not seem much like a girl in the slightest.

The figure was yet another shadow among endless shadows: she was short but not small, with just enough height to match her status but not quite enough to even her line of sight with her friends. Thus, the tar-like substance that dripped from her lips did not have to travel far to reach the flattened ground.

The girl paced briskly underneath the grinning moon. Her hair, knotted so horribly and stretched so jaggedly behind her that it may very well have been briars, dragged quietly behind her. She dabbed at her eyes, or where her eyes would have been if they had not been plucked out by a life she was fortunate not to have lived. She hugged the sash closer to herself.

“Fuxing,” called the girl, continuing to wipe her bleeding eyes. The fabric of her sleeve tore across the briars creeping up her arms, and she cursed. Then there was silence, which only worsened her
mood. “Hurry up, Fuxing!” she called again, heatedly.

There was a shuffle that may have been a creature, a soul, or a spirit. The girl did not allow her anxiety to get the better of her.

She swept her arm up in an arc, and the earth beneath her bare feet trembled for a fraction of a second before bursting violently open in a nebulous mass of shadow. Thorns sharper than any blade but not nearly as sharp as the girl’s wits adorned every inch of the vines they sprouted from, and the entirety of the attack stopped immediately before the new arrival.

He could be called a god, yet those who knew him best would know he was far more human than even the boldest of mortals. If you saw him now, you would not be quick to agree: the robes that covered his pale skin shone black-and-red one moment, black-and-gold the next. The red of flames and gold of peonies could not seem to make up their mind, and grudgingly settled on an unstable cohabitation. His eyes did the same, pooling with crimson blood on the left and swirling with sparkling stars on the right.

“Why, A-Qing,” the god said, his words only half-filled with gold and honey, “It’s awfully rude of you to call for me one moment and skewer me the next.”

The girl had no hackles to raise, but it was easy to see her annoyance as she commanded the briars back under. “Don’t try to be smart,” she snapped. “Let’s hurry up and get out of these stupid plains so that woman stops chasing us.”

The word woman was said with a bitterness that surpassed the girl’s own experiences. The god understood this, and simply nodded. “Let’s wait for the others.”

The third to break into the clearing was not anyone that would have instilled much fear into you: he was simply another street rat, a delinquent dressed in short and torn robes with a sharp-toothed grin and lips raised in a sly smile. Behind him followed the fourth, an average boy with average robes, a golden ribbon tied in his hair, and a kindness on his face so often mistaken for meekness.

The fifth followed, and the brightness of the clearing did not seem so bright after all.

He was a man—a luminary—of obvious status. If light was the herald of destruction, he was the apocalypse. It goes without saying that the man’s robes were as white as early winter snow upon his blade, and there was a ribbon tied around his forehead, which was only a mystery if the heart allowed it to be; his golden eyes held more of the puzzle, which, again, was only a puzzle if you did not look closely enough.

The girl nodded at the sharp-toothed scoundrel, who shall from now on be called the sword. She then turned to the boy and nodded at him also. Her eyes met the luminary’s, and a hum of acknowledgement rumbled in her throat. “We’re all here, then.”

“You look,” the boy began, shuffling in place, “a little... strange.”

He flushed in shame, but the girl understood his fear and only sighed. “I can’t help it,” she said. “The stronger I get in back home, the creepier I look here.”

“It’s only right,” the god added. “It means you’ve become someone incredibly special.”

The girl did not believe the god all the other times he had spoken that phrase, and she did not plan to start any time soon. She simply brushed her briar-hair over her shoulder with careless ease. “The woman won’t stop until we’re completely free from her domain.”
“I’ve already told the Lady of Spring that we’re coming.”

“She won’t be happy to see us back so soon.”

“Nonsense,” said the god, and that was the end of that argument. “She’ll be happy to meet all the curious strangers we’ve brought along this time.”

They did not stop to rest for long. It was safer here, under the false light of a false moon, with the smells of fresh snow and honey and candied fruit and magnolia intertwining to mask firescent. The ghost who was hunting them could see as well in light as in darkness, and it would have made no difference if the girl had been as brilliant as the luminary.

The sash, which did not fully touch her ashen skin, was the source of all their pains, yet the girl would not abandon it. It had been stolen once from the goddess who died on her own terms without it; it would not happen again, and the girl was going to live forever if only to prove fate wrong.

“You’re pretty brave, to draw sigils even when you’re being chased,” the girl said to the boy, who wore a frown.

“I don’t feel like there’s anything I should be afraid of,” the boy retorted, slipping blank papers into his sleeve. The rest, which he held between his fingers, were drawn upon methodically and with a steady hand. “I think... the Spectral Lady’s avoiding me, for some reason. And they’re more like arrays, not sigils.”

It was not an unreasonable conjecture to make. The girl stepped closer to peer at the unfamiliar arrays. “Because you smell like resentment?”

“It’s more than smell,” the sword said, his nose wrinkling as he stepped around the boy to stand beside and behind the girl. “You feel like a giant wad of resentful energy, prickly and pressing in all the wrong places. Your life must’ve been a living hell in another life.”

The girl would have pinched the sword’s cheeks until they popped if the boy had not let out a gentle hum. She let her anger die, as she had trained herself to do time and time again over the years.

“It could’ve been.” The boy’s voice was soft like the palms of his hands and held just as much of the milky moonlight. “I could’ve chosen to die.”

“But you didn’t,” the girl said, pertly.

“But I didn’t,” the boy agreed. When he blinked next, his eyes shut for a moment too long, and then he said, “the Spectral Lady holds an incredible grudge against you.”

The girl found it strange and a tad grating how the boy spoke the ghost’s name so easily, and she made this clear by tapping her foot and allowing her hair to dig unintelligible criss-crosses into the cold ground. “You don’t need to call her by her name,” she muttered.

The boy contemplated this for a moment, then shook his head. “I think I will.” Then, after another pause: “I don’t mind being the only one to speak her name, because someone must.”

The Spectral Lady had been a fair maiden when she was alive, with a fine face and a kind heart. If the legends had it right, she had been a tamer of sorts, bringing wild dogs into her home when they had none, raising them into loving members of her strange but proud family. She married, and although there were whispers, nobody cared enough to speak any louder when her dogs started
showing up dead on her doorstep, nor when her three children were carried off by an unnamed illness that showed no symptoms and smelled of sweet poison, nor when her laughter carried notes of loud mania. They did, however, care when her husband was torn to shreds by her dogs, who eagerly ate the meat off his bones as he screamed through the night.

“You shan’t apologize any longer,” were the words she was rumoured to have said, though it was impossible to know if she sounded scared, excited, or woeful. “Shall you raise your hand against me, or shall I give myself to you? Let us go together. Just as I will never be free of you, you shan’t ever be free of me!”

And she was eaten by her dogs too, and that would have been the end of the story. Her soul, however, found its way into the Other Side, and slowly but surely, she began seeking out new dogs. She found them in the form of little moons, souls of the corrupted and cruel that could only find light in a realm whose very existence turned them into the exact opposite of what they were, and suddenly, she became the Lord of the Shadow Plains, the Winter Witch, the Mother of Slayers, the patron goddess of sinners and villains.

But the girl cared not for all the twists and turns of the woman’s story. That wretched woman had fallen too far and too deep. There was no saving her now, and there was no saving her when the god commanded his own gems to tear her apart.

The woman even had the audacity to scream and throw a temper tantrum over a sash that never belonged to her. She stole it from the lanterns and the flowers, and she would never have it back for as long as the girl lived.

There were four rulers in the Other Side, and the Spectral Lady was by far the worst of them. The girl hated her, and so did the sword. The god was not fond of her, and it was clear that the luminary shared his opinion.

The boy was different from them. He was too kind, which was a very dangerous game to play. He had been cut on the sharpness of his own kindness before, yet he was still willing to reach out his bleeding hands.

It was admirable, yet the girl could not find it within herself to feel shame, and neither could the sword. They sat mostly in silence as their tension-locked limbs loosened and their breaths evened.

Some ways away from them, the god and the luminary stood close together, their voices too quiet for anyone else to find themselves caught in their conversation. The god’s words were light and muted, and his lips moved too thinly to be seen making out any names or things in particular. The luminary was silent as he always was, but he had a way of silencing even the quietest of nights if he wished to keep words only between him and the one beside him.

The god did not look at the luminary very often, for half the meaning in his words was held in his gaze. The luminary did not seem to look away from the god.

They were hopelessly in love, and anyone could see it. It was a shame they were so stupid.

With nothing much to do and their energy recovered, the group shuffled into position to begin moving again. The god went around to each of those shorter than him, cupping their cheeks with his hands and resting his forehead against theirs. A short blessing left his lips, each one a little different than the last, and then they were set to run once more.

“I’ll go first,” the girl declared, tying the sash around her waist tightly. “You’ll lose sight of me anyway, but at least you’ll see the woman that way.”
“Don’t go and get caught now,” the god called after her.

“Who do you think I am?” was all the girl asked, even though she herself did not know the answer very well.

She hurried out of the clearing and into the darkness once more. Her bare feet slapped noisily against the cold, white ground, but quieted with haste as inky darkness washed over her like a breath of dead air.

Almost immediately, the wails began to whip around the girl. Violent gales battered at her small form, trying with a desperate vigor to tear the sash from her body, but the girl was stubborn, and she ran faster.

“Give it back,” a voice crooned from the darkness in every direction at once. “You must give it back!”

“I mustn't do anything,” the girl shouted back. “It was never yours to begin with!”

Her words angered the woman, who had spent the better part of the last five or six years boiling in rage over the loss of her greatest treasure. A terrible shriek rang throughout the forest, shaking the trees and the earth and the skies above, and the wind howled louder. Even her own children were scared of her now.

The girl was brave, but she was not foolish. Though she could not see behind her, she could feel the looming presence of something that was already ancient before the first of humans began harnessing magic, or cultivation, or spiritualism, and it was gaining on her.

In an instant, the girl leapt high into the trees, impressive by the standards of any normal person but not nearly high enough to break the canopy above. And it was good she did so: a deafening roar accompanied a sweep of blush-pink below her, and the dying whispers of the betrayed souls sang a short-lived song.

The girl leapt from tree to tree with equal parts caution and recklessness. Too much of the former, and she would be sliced into a dish for the ghouls; too much of the latter, and she would meet the very same fate. So she feared neither the gods nor death, but she certainly was not looking forward to being cut up and served like raw fish. She threw her entire body and heart into every leap.

“Where’s that pesky god?” the woman suddenly asked, though it was more accurate to say she spat it out in a fan of spinning pink. There was nothing but fury in her words and her attack.

As the girl grappled onto a shadowy, wooden arm with her thorns, she felt a tinge of surprise. The woman never bothered to go out of her way to harass anyone without the sash. “Why do you care about him?” the girl asked back.

There was a hiss that rippled through the stagnant air. “That horrible god,” the ghost screeched, her voice passing by just above the girl’s head, “has brought something blinding into my home! How can we ever rest knowing that his beauty will forever be out of our reach?”

The girl was confused for another moment, then said, “What—you mean Hanguang-Jun?”

“That awful name,” cried the ghost in wind-speak. Her children echoed her words with half a mind to spare. “I want it! But I will never have it!”

“Of course not,” the girl said, rather petulantly. The moonbeams wavered from where the ghost had punched a hole into the blanket of shadow above. “They belong to each other, and everyone else.
Maybe even to you, if you’re nice, but they’ll never be only yours!”

Another rattling scream and wailing sob, and the ghost began to lash out once again. No more words were woven into the wind, and that was good, for the girl would rather not have heard them.

Beside her, there was a flash of light. It was gold, and it was red, and it was near.

“Hello,” greeted the god, his flowing robes just barely visible in the impenetrable darkness. “Does the lady of the hour have more entertaining things to impart unto you?” There was humour in his voice, half a laugh, and half a question.

The girl huffed, not from exertion, but out of annoyance. “Nothing worth discussing.” she answered, and it was true.

“There you have it,” the god spoke again, but his mismatched gems of eyes were turned the other way. “If A-Qing says there’s nothing to worry about, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

It was very cold and very quiet all of a sudden, not unlike waking up one morning to find the first snow had come, and brought with it heavy blankets of white. Hesitantly, the girl called out, “Hanguang-Jun?”

Like frost on crystal, the canopy above parted for only a moment. The moon shone down upon a being far brighter than itself, and the luminary responded with a curt, “Mn.”

Darkness sank over them like a thick fog, and they were running blindly once more.

The girl was a little nervous. The matter of the ghost who was chasing them was no longer at the forefront of her mind. “Did you hear her speak?” she asked.

“For a moment,” the luminary responded. “I could not understand much.”

“It’s wind-speak. You shouldn’t be able to understand it unless you have—the blood or the blessing of the winds.”

“That night three years ago.” A pause, not quite a hesitation, stood in the vast emptiness between the girl and the luminary. “You gave me yours.”

It was like being slapped in the face, but that was a horrible comparison, for the luminary would never do something so rude, and the girl would never allow herself to be hit unjustly.

“I guess I,” the girl began, then stopped. Her tongue felt like cotton, and she had not been taught how to spin thread. “I guess I might have done something of the sort.”

“This is news to me,” the god said, his surprise lesser than the girl’s but still present all the same.

“Mn,” was the luminary’s only answer, and with that one sound, the three were separated by the shifting trees.

Everything creaked with groans and aches so violent it seemed as if the entire forest would collapse on itself. It had seen greater struggles than the meager chaos that five unwelcome guests could manage, but it hated them all the same and wanted them out as quickly as possible. So the ghost wanted them to stay, but the forest wanted them to leave, and both parties were angry at the other for what they perceived as foolishness.

“I must have them,” the ghost roared. “Keep them, love them, and have them forever!”
They must leave, said the forest, in rumbling notes that might have been frustration. Leave, and never come back.

“You fool! Do you understand nothing of love?”

Not yours. Never yours.

The girl forced herself to run as swiftly as she possibly could. The winds she was familiar with could only reach so far; it was up to the strength and speed of her briars to latch onto the path ahead, and it was up to the girl to throw as much of herself into her escape as she possible could.

There were tiny hands in the darkness, and they reached out for the sash. The girl was tired now, and this time, she knew that she was also exhausted. Her breath came in a short rhythm of in-in-out, but each one that followed was more ragged and wheezing. It itched at her throat, and she wanted to cough, but she had not the time for it.

The ghost grabbed while the forest pushed. The girl was somewhere in between, bouncing from deathly cold hands to touches that smelled of fresh rain. One was trying to trap her, and the other was trying to help her, yet she wanted none of it.

With her own two legs and her own two arms, her own two eyes and own two lungs, she launched herself up, up, and over, vaulting high into the horizon with a piercing cry.

She could feel the surprise of both the ghost and the forest, but what gripped her most was the she saw before her.

Just before the horizon, the endless black canvas was not so endless after all. The edges of the forest were unclear, wavering and shaking like it a heat haze, but beyond that, the deepening dusk burned from dark violets to soft yellows. The night made way for scattered clouds that looked like puffed-up candies, flowers, maybe, if they had been dropped in hot oil: soft and wispy and dancing gently with the wind and on the girl’s tongue.

The end was a tangible thing now. As she rose, then flew, then fell, the girl took a deep, gulping breath. With a shout that shook her own bones, she called, “Mo Xuanyu! Can you hear me?”

Just before she sank back into the trees, a streak of light crawled up into the sky. It exploded like a firework, and the girl could feel the residual heat tingling on her skin.

“I’m here!” a familiar voice shouted back, louder than she had ever heard it. “What do you need me to do?”

The girl thought fast and swift like the wind she was so fond of, then answered, “Come to me first!”

“But I can’t see you!”

“I’ve got him,” another voice shouted. It carried sharp laughter in its notes. “And don’t worry, you silly children: I can smell both of you perfectly.”

Distantly, so far it might as well have been an echo, there was another response: “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes,” the girl answered.

“Then we’ll be there,” the faraway voice said. It fell quiet as the trees beside the girl rustled violently.
They were there, then, the boy and the sword. The boy’s talismans were plastered against his robes as if they were stitched to them, and he looked sheepish as the sword kept good speed alongside the girl, for he was riding atop the sword’s back.

He opened his mouth to speak, and the light of his charms brightened his teeth with a ghastly red. A blade of pink swept over their heads, and the sword dropped down to avoid it. The boy’s words were lost to a yelp instead.

“Mo Xuanyu,” the girl said. The boy caught her gaze and held it. “I need you to make a great big array that’ll blast us all well over where the trees end.”

The boy’s expression took on one of panic. “But I don’t—that would require so much resentful energy, and it would be so dangerous!”

“No,’ the girl said simply, which was an answer by itself.

The wind howled around them, crying out to be held and to hold. It was loud and cut at their ears with twice-dead leaves, shedding real blood from real wounds.

With his lips pressed tightly together, the boy nodded. “I’ll make it work,” he declared.

It was more than difficult to keep them all together, especially when the ghost was so intent on tearing them apart. The girl warded off the attacks as best she could when the boy asked to be held stable, then guided them furiously forward when his hand vanished into his robes to grab more papers.

The trees on the girl’s right side broke, and the god and the luminary ran with her.

“Hello again,” the god said, in a tone that was light enough to show that he was not worried but serious enough to show that he had no intention of being trapped here. The luminary said nothing, but his gaze held enough of a greeting for everyone to understand.

“Hello,” said the boy, though it was more of a mutter. He kept his eyes on his work, drawing out smooth circles with a stick of cinnabar.

“What’s your plan, A-Qing?” the god asked.

“Resentful energy,” the girl began. “And your blessings. Together.” Her words were choppy and unintelligible, but the god’s eyes widened in understanding. “Polar opposites that won’t stand together. It stays here, we blast off.”

“Like a catapult.”

“It’ll work.”

“It most certainly will,” the god said, contemplative. A hum buzzed off his lips. “Should I cast it, then?”

Before any of them could answer, the luminary’s eyes flashed a blinding gold, so bright and pure that it could very well have been the sheen of his sword and nobody would have said otherwise. He, however, spoke a single word: “No.”

The god frowned, his displeasure obvious. “I thought we put all this behind us.”

“No,” the luminary repeated, and it was clear to everyone there that he would not be backing down.
Another sweep of blush-pink came down on them, and the god, the luminary, and the girl all acted in tandem. Twenty golden strings, a strum of song, and a mass of briars came to face the attack, which shattered into soft grains of sand.

“Mo Xuanyu’s casting it because he’s the smartest here,” the girl said impatiently, having had enough of their pointless bickering.

That was the end of the argument, for they all knew that the more prey there was, the hungrier the ghost was, and the hungrier the ghost was, the angrier she would be.

In the time it took the girl to throw a withering glare at the god, the boy shouted victoriously, “It’s good! I did it!”

He held the talismans in the air, which were square in shape and burned like fine spice. They were quickly snatched up by the sword.

“Hang on,” the boy said, elation turning quickly to panic, “it’s an immediate—”

With a single canine jutting out from his smirking lips, the sword darted between each member of the group with a sly kind of speed years of survival had taught him. The girl herself barely felt his touch on her back, where he had plastered the talisman.

It felt like a tingling that was entirely different from the soul-shattering grip of resentful energy. It was a curious thing, and the girl would have contemplated it longer if the ground had not erupted beneath her and thrown her high, high, higher than she could have ever imagined possible and faster than her eyes could make out.

She screamed at first. Then the wind, which was not as much wind as everything passing beneath her too rapidly for anything to be but a blur, swept into her shadow-logged robes and filled her briar-twined hair.

She laughed, loud and bright, and she laughed even louder when she could just barely make out the others, flinging themselves through the sky with varying volumes of voice.

“You’re the best, Mo Xuanyu!” the girl shouted, though her words were stolen by the wind.

Whether or not anyone heard her, the girl laughed and whooped anyway. The moons in the sky were falling, and the sun before them was falling, but the dark had never felt so bright.

“You mean to tell me,” said the Maiden of Flowers, dancing her thin fingers over a whitewood bow, “that you brought along someone so bright the Winter Witch tried to keep him for herself?”

“I didn’t know,” said the girl. Black dribbled from her lips, and she wiped at it petulantly.

The Maiden of Flowers heaved a great sigh. “You never fail to astound me,” she said, sliding a dainty square of fabric over to the girl.

The girl dropped her sleeve, snatching up the kerchief and using it to clean both her mouth and her eyes. “It’s not like I could’ve left him behind,” she harrumphed, gesturing to where the god and the luminary were speaking in soft tones to the Lady of Spring. “Do you really think they would
They had been talking for a while now underneath the shade of a water-borne gazebo, their tea untouched and their expressions blank for the most part. On one side of the gilded table, the Lady of Spring sighed, and the horns that sat on either side of her head shed pink blossoms. The god stiffened, then moved his lips to no doubt assert his unwelcome opinion, and they went back and forth like that. The girl found it amusing how it was so much easier for her to see them than the other way around.

The rows of wisteria, which hung from their branches in clusters so rich and fine that the night air and the narrow path shone with the same ghostly, otherworldly hue, stretched from the beginning of time to the end. Where it parted, it only did so for ponds with waters deep and clear.

“Tell your master that we are not fond of surprise visits,” the Maiden of Flowers said. “We take boundaries very seriously here.”

“I know, and I told him, but he didn’t listen. You know how he is.”

“Just a reminder,” said the Maiden, rising to her feet. Her hair brushed the low-hanging wisteria, but she did not seem to mind. “Come with me, young successor. Let us go find those friends of yours.”

The girl rose as well, pushing the strange metal-woven chair back with a short screech. She followed the Maiden, who left down the path and away from the pond.

“Walk beside me,” the Maiden said, turning her head over her shoulder. “The flowers see all, and they have found your friends. We shall take a shortcut.”

Knowing better than to ignore any kindly given advice, the girl took three large steps to settle beside the Maiden. They continued down the well-beaten road, and whatever shortcut the Maiden spoke of was lost on the girl, for there was nowhere to go but forward, and not once did either of them step into the violet trees.

“Here we are,” the Maiden finally said after what seemed like too long and no time at all.

The girl looked forward, around, up and down, and saw nothing out of the ordinary. “Here?” she asked, confused.

“Aye,” spoke the Maiden, in a dialect foreign.

There was nothing more to see, but the girl knew that things were rarely as they seemed in the Other Side. She was in no particular hurry to go anywhere, but she did want to make their group whole again as quickly as possible, so she opted for standing beside the Maiden, scuffing her bare feet against the firm earth.

“Maiden,” the girl said, mostly to break the silence, “where do you come from?”

The Maiden’s brows raised in surprise. “Why do you ask?”

“Your clothes and your accent. I don’t recognize them. It looks very fey to me.”

“Everything on this side is a little fey,” the Maiden pointed out.

“Yes, but,” the girl began, then stopped, then looked the Maiden up and down. “Everything is a reflection, but you don’t seem much like a reflection at all.”
It was difficult to explain. While the Lady of Spring dressed herself in long, flowing robes that danced with flowers and smelled so sweetly that the taste was almost tangible, the Maiden of Flowers carried herself with a delicate sort of air, wearing strange robes that were cut short at her thighs and puffed up like an upside-down blossom. She wore flowers in her hair, but they, too, were unfamiliar.

“You ask strange questions, but I understand what you mean.” The Maiden brushed her shoulder-length hair over her shoulder. “You have sharp wits and a sharper tongue. Aye, lass. I am not from your lands.”

“Then what lands are you from?” asked the girl, now deathly curious.

“Far away,” the Maiden said simply. “O’er great fields of nothing and everything. If you walked on foot, perhaps you would get there one day.” After a moment of silence, she added on, “Best not. It is nicer here, and not as wet.”

There were many questions the girl wanted to ask. What was the world like? Where things truly so different in other places? Was it cold, and did she need to bring extra layers?

She kept all those questions, for the Maiden abruptly declared, “Here they are. I shall advise you to stay together next time. Luck will not be on your side forever.”

The Maiden turned around, and the girl followed suit. Only one of them was surprised to see the boy and the sword strolling down the path toward them as if they had been walking it for a while now.

“There you are,” the sword said, sounding immensely irritated. “Did you have fun getting lost again?”

“You’re the one who got lost,” the girl snapped. They would have argued for longer, but they were all tired and desperately in need of a hot meal and a good night’s sleep. When the Maiden beckoned them to follow, they trudged after her without complaint.

The gazebo was still there upon their return, though it was much more splendid than before. The pond was no longer a small vessel that held crystalline waters; it was a vast ocean upon which wisteria trees floated, drifting outward and illuminating the darkened seas with that same purple hue.

It was splendid, it was truly magnificent, and most importantly, it smelled of food. The three quickly sped past the Maiden and swept inside.

“A-Qing,” the god said, blinking his eyes in faint surprise. He stood beside the luminary, and together, they faced the Lady of Spring.

“We’re back,” was all the girl said, followed by a “Hello” from the boy and a “Eat first, talk later” from the sword.

They all bowed in one form or another to the Lady of Spring. None of them were foolish enough to treat her presence flippantly, but at the same time, none of them cared enough to show her their normal courtesy.

Neither the Lady nor the Maiden were offended. They found the children to be amusing, and so they settled into their seats at the far end of the needlessly long table.

The girl, the boy, and the sword all sat in a line. The god and the luminary sat across from them. There were plates and utensils before them, some of them strange-looking, but a stick can pick up food no matter how many there are or how many prongs it has.
Much of the food was also foreign, but a helpful portion of it was familiar. They dug in eagerly, slicing at tender meats and crispy skin, crunching through fresh herbs and vegetables (though they subtly pushed many of those dishes toward the luminary), cutting through large pies stuffed with sweet and savory things, plucking the stems off fat peaches and firm cherries.

The sword in particular ate with a fervor that resembled mania. “I don’t recognize these,” he would say with every other breath he took. “What is it?”

The Maiden answered him as best she could, and when the answer was lost even on her, the Lady of Spring would smile and speak. Her voice was like a thousand silver bells, all chiming and resonating at once. Even when she was done and her lips met, the distant warbling never stopped.

Once their bellies were mostly full, the Lady of Spring tapped her nail against a crystal cup. It was not a deliberate sound, but it caught the girl’s attention anyway. Their eyes met, and they both blinked.

“Thank you for taking us in,” the girl said, bowing her head.

“Nonsense,” the Lady cooed, her cool gaze softening when it met the girl’s. “Your company was sudden, yes, but far from unwelcome.”

The girl was the one who sat closest to both the Lady and the Maiden. It did not seem like the others heard their short exchange—the sword and the boy were discussing the morsels upon their plates heatedly, and the god and the luminary spoke of even stranger things.

“I spoke with your master,” the Lady said. She dragged a fingertip over the rim of the cup. “He spoke of a pilgrimage of sorts. Is that right?”

“In a way, but it’s mostly to cover up our tracks.”

“For your rising against that human,” the Lady finished. “What was his name? Jin Guangyao? Ah, yes. Meng Yao.” There was a smile on her crimson lips that was not all there. “That sly fox. He’s an ambitious one.”

“That’s kind of you to stop there. I have a lot more words to describe him with.”

“Such as?”

“Ruthless,” the girl said, and since she had started, she would not turn back. “Cowardly. Proud. Greedy. Blind. Can’t see the forest for the trees. Manipulative, high-and-mighty, thinks that just because he hasn’t buried anyone recently means that he’s done serving his sentence, can’t confront his sins and isn’t even willing to admit them when someone serves it to him on a platter, keeps the severed head of his sworn brother in his hidey-hole, thinks incest is perfectly fine, smiles at you then plunges a dagger in your gut the next second.”

The girl was surprised at how easily the words came. It was like dancing, or fighting, when an unfamiliar tune rises up and you have to make the moves up as you go, warding off sharp metal and stepping with a hey! every other measure.

“That’s a lot you have to say,” the Lady finally said, her smile creeping into her yolk-yellow eyes.

“He’s done a lot,” the girl sneered.

“You’ll kill him, then?”
The question seemed to come out of nowhere, and it certainly stunned the girl, but it was only right. Such hatred could only end in death.

“Will you shame him before the world? Or you could dismember him like he did his brother.” There was a lightness to the Lady’s words that did not accompany the subject matter. “He would be very resentful once he died,” the Lady continued, thinking herself helpful. “Perhaps you could throw his body in the sea and let the beasts eat it. If not, the Winter Witch would appreciate a new chewing toy for her dogs. The possibilities are endless, my dear girl.”

Now that the Lady had gone out of her way to say all that, it was impossible for the girl to say that they had no plans to kill Jin Guangyao, and they certainly were not planning to cut him up and throw him to the dogs. But death was even more common here than it was back home, and ruthless, merciless murders were passed as unnoticed as a fresh breeze.

“Your advice is appreciated,” the girl managed to say, trying not to squirm.

“All for you,” the Lady assured, proud of both herself and the young successor before her.

The girl did not feel too hungry after that, although she accepted a bowl of red bean soup and downed it with remarkable speed.

They were full and satisfied, and now they were tired. The boy fell victim to a wide, watery-eyed yawn, and the sword followed suit. The Maiden showed them to their rooms, pointing out where the baths were along the way (an enormous room with a hot spring on one side and a cold spring a few paces away) and telling them that they would find a change of robes in their rooms if they felt so inclined to take them.

“We do not see many guests,” the Maiden said. “So we have many empty rooms.”

The connotation of the sentence was not lost on the girl. Before anyone could speak, she declared, “One room for the three of us, and another for them.”

“Very well,” said the Maiden.

The girl marched off with the sword and the boy, and together, they fled from the god and the luminary. It was up to them to figure out their own problems, and it was much too late for anything else but cleaning up and sleeping.

So they washed themselves, folded their outer robes, leapt into bed, and were unconscious and walking the land of dreams in mere moments. When sunlight flooded the room, they were stretching and blinking the sleep from their eyes but in much higher spirits than the day before. They ate breakfast while discussing arrays and sigils and had already finished before the god and the luminary arrived.

“Sorry we’re late,” the god laughed, though it was strained and half an octave higher than usual. “It was my fault. I had a lot to say.”

The sword made a gesture with his hands, and the girl smacked them down before the luminary could catch sight of it. “We’ll just get ready to go,” the girl said, dragging her two companions back to their room to collect their belongings.

“Smells like sex,” the sword sang, in the bold notes of an ode not meant for younger ears.

“That’s what you said when the Ten-Fold Murderess walked out of her house after killing a man,” the girl spat back.
“They shared the bed, and then she gutted him,” said the sword. “Your lack of imagination never fails to disappoint me.”

“With that kind of personality, you’d have to sit on your sword to get off any time soon.”

“Me?” the sword said, grinning slyly. “Please. I have better taste than that. It’s Fuxing you need to worry about. He shovels that awful red sludge down his throat so often I’m convinced he’s deepthroating a demon when we’re not looking. Besides, the stuff that comes out of his mouth might as well come out the other end, and it would all sound the same.”

“That,” the girl began, only to find a rare sort of sense in his words, “is not actually that wrong.”

The boy flushed all the way to his ears, then tucked his head down into his neck.

While they waited, they continued to discuss the boy’s talismans. He stated that they were more accurately called arrays, as he did the night prior, and went so far as to proclaim that as long as they were drawn upon a conduit vessel, the effect of the array would last for as long as the circle remained intact.

The sword found it to be ridiculous and demanded a demonstration. The boy, who was equal parts a gentle soul and a brilliant researcher, drew out a simple array adorned with triangles and the silhouette of a lizard. He slapped the paper onto the sword’s wrist, then ordered the sword to rub his hands together, shuffle across the floor, do whatever he could to create a spark.

The sword tried many things, most of them looking very foolish. After several attempts, he changed two fingers into ebony blades.

Then he snapped.

It was only by luck that they had finished the boy’s water-folding array last night, because the blast of fire that roared through their room and singed all their robes and bedsheets ashen grey also happened to jettison out into the hall, where a few unfortunate attendants were caught unawares.

There was a fair share of screaming and panic, but the three disciples were competent and used to cleaning up their own mistakes. When the fire was finally put out and the last of the water had been returned to the baths, the three bowed their heads low to the attendants, who were amused more than anything else, then to the Maiden and the Lady, who were even more amused, and one last time to the lovely company of the spring realm as a whole.

The sword quietly returned the flame array, and the boy folded it up into a small slip and tucked it into his sleeve.

“We’ll figure out the details later,” said the sword.

“Later,” the boy agreed.

Moving forward, the path became more and more barren. Weeds pushed through cracks in the dry earth, and the wisteria wilted in the blink of an eye. The wind that whispered into their ears was dead and sour. The sunlight that greeted them not so long ago just barely touched the knotted roots of the looming trees. The rest dissipated into a rolling fog.

“Fuxing,” the girl called. She knew what this meant, and she was not eager to face it. “Light, please.”

The god turned to the luminary, who still carried the same silver hue about him. “You heard her,” he
chirped. “Light, please.”

Cold blue light cut through the haze. The luminary’s blade was unsheathed only an inch or two, but its blinding glory was sufficient to ward away the unseen spirits that lurked here.

It came in fours.

From the distance, four beastly howls ripped through the silence. There were four taps, like a rod against hollow wood.

“Stop,” someone spoke, in a voice that sounded like a blade against a grindstone. “Four steps. One, two, three, four. Toward me. No more, no less, or you will lose your head.”

The girl looked sharply at the boy, who was pale and carried a tremble in his fingers. She nodded, squeezed his hand, and together they all walked. One, two, three, four steps.

There they stood, in complete silence, as the echo of their fourth and final step was lost to the muffling fog.

“Good,” the same voice said, pleased and much closer than before. It sounded as if it was spoken right over the girl’s left shoulder, and a rasping breath danced over upon her neck. “Very good. The god’s troupe, with new flesh and bone. Where are you headed, god-child?”

There were many answers that the god could give, but the one he chose was, “To strip the king of his crown.”

A single black hound strode out from the fog. Its crimson eyes shone intelligently, and it smiled when the god took a sharp breath and reached out to grab the luminary’s sleeve.

“Brave god-child,” it said, lyrical and rolling like the mist coiling around its fur, “you are very small. You smell of honey, sweet and sticky, like a babbling infant.”

“How quaint,” the god answered, and he could not stop his voice from shaking.

“I can smell your fear,” the hound chuckled. “No matter. Follow me, god-child and the others, and know that you will be safe in this lost place.”

There was nothing any of them could do but follow. One hound become two, then three, then four. They all walked the same soundless stride.

The god held tighter to the luminary’s sleeve. They brushed against each other as they walked, but it was impossible to see into their eyes: the god was too afraid, the the luminary was too wary.

“Wind-girl,” the hound suddenly said, without turning its head. “Tell me. Have you been well?”

“I have, thank you,” the girl answered.

“Good, good. You have much growing to do, many lands to see. Keep travelling, keep dancing, and keep fighting. Your potential is a dazzling thing.”

“I’ll keep that it mind.”

There was nothing else to say, and nobody spoke. They walked among the dead trees, the dead earth, and the dead weeds for what seemed like an eternity, all while the fog sunk into their robes and ran between their fingers.
But the passageway between one land and the next could only be so long, and soon enough, there were birds singing in their trees and flowers blooming on the side of the road. The earth below no longer felt like a solid plane of rock; it was firm but soft, and if you stepped heavily enough, you would leave a footprint.

“We have arrived,” the hounds declared in four-voice speak. “This is as far as I will take you. The rest is in your hands.”

The fog rolled over once more, and with a slow gust of wind that barely raised the briars off the girl’s shoulders, the hounds were gone.

Softly, like a wisp of flame in the dead of night, the girl thought a voice said, “I look forward to meeting you again, Wind-Swept Maiden,” but it might have been her imagination.

Even as the warm sunlight filtered through the trees and warmed the strange group that stood beneath it, nobody could find words to speak, for they had been stolen off their tongues.

The silence was finally broken when the god let out a deep sigh. It sounded more like a heave, like he was eager to force out all the bad air he had breathed. The boy did something similar, but his exhalation was much less dramatic.

“Let’s keep moving,” said the sword.

And so they walked on, with the sword and the girl leading the way through the trees and undergrowth that smelled of fresh morning dew. It was wet and dense but a welcome change. There were sounds all around them, some of them familiar, some of them notably fey, and none of them were human except for what left their lips.

“What was that?” the boy asked, once he had calmed down.

The god hesitated, his hand slipping off wet bark. He caught himself quickly, then cleared his throat once. “It’s a boundary guardian of sorts,” he said, peering at the girl, who nodded back. “It protects the passage between places, or so it says.”

“It’s a predator,” the girl finished simply. “It hunts in the border between things, and it feasts on stupid people who think they’re above the things that live in this side.”

The boy looked nervous, and he wrung his hands together. “And... and what sort of things live here?”

“All sorts of things,” said the girl and the god in unison.

The topic grew cold and tasteless very quickly. The group quickly moved on from those memories, instead pointing out how strange this forest they had wandered into was, and how nonsensically the fauna here grew.

“That’s the biggest magnolia I’ve ever seen,” the girl said, poking at the petals, which were the size of her head, with her briars. “They don’t grow to that size, do they, Hanguang-Jun?”

“No,” said the luminary. Even his brows were furrowed. He had never seen such a mysterious forest filled with such mysterious things. He had never been to the Other Side, and though he was strong and righteous, he was also confused, as most are upon their first, tenth, fiftieth, hundredth visit. And that was good: only those who will forever be lost are no longer confused.

They pushed through the forest, and the forest pushed back. The trees hung low, then stretched high,
then went bare, and then bloomed full. There was snow on the ground for a moment, and then it was horribly humid. It was dry and hot, but the mist was wet and cold.

Eventually, they stopped making comments on every change they saw, for everything changed in the blink of an eye, and the tongue cannot keep up with the eyes so easily.

Time passed, and the others were some paces behind, having fallen into a conversation about the dangers of resentful energy and similar topics. It was the sword who had spoken first, striking up a heated back-and-forth with the god and the luminary, one of which had some very strong opinions and the other of which had even stronger ones, though he could never decide whose side he was truly on.

The girl had left because she had grown bored of the shouting, and the boy followed, driven away by the loud noise as well. The girl found herself appreciating the company greatly, as the boy was the only person other than herself who was true to his heart.

“Oh,” said the girl, all of a sudden.

“What is it?” the boy asked.

“That’s a city,” said the girl, pointing forward and below.

It was a city indeed, but it seemed to take the girl’s spoken word for everything to form around them. Suddenly, they were looking down the steep face of a cliff, and before them was a sprawling settlement of tiled roofs and red wood and burning lanterns. It was night, also; sunset and twilight had somehow passed unseen, and the sky was full of stars.

The boy gaped downward, then upward, then at the girl.

“It’s just like that sometimes,” was all the girl said.

They waited for the others to catch up, and pointed out there was a city to them, after which they had a brief moment of confusion. But they were all smart, and they were quick to adapt.

Not so far in the distance, there was a towering pagoda. It shone like a beacon even though it jutted up well above the floating lanterns, and no matter how hard the girl focused and tried to keep count of the levels, she would lose focus and forget herself.

The god took one look and said, “We’ll aim for the top.”

It sounded foolish, but they were even higher than the top level of the pagoda, and it only seemed right to try and aim for the tallest structure in sight. There would be extra points, the girl convinced herself.

The girl grabbed onto the boy, and with an implosion of darkness, they were flying through the air and hurtling toward the tower. She tried to make the landing as gentle as possible, but they rolled a little anyway, and the briars in her hair itched horribly.

An ebony sword shot out from the sky and into the floor beside them. It shook, and then he shook, cracking his knuckles and his neck. A few moments later, another sword deposited the last two members of their party onto the tower, and they all made for the ground level without much of a fuss.

Surprisingly, it took them no time at all. Soon enough, they were roaming the bustling streets and muttering to each other about how strange some people looked (there were masked strangers, but the masks were disturbing, and that left many questions as to if the face underneath it was even worse).
and how interesting everything was.

But they were in a city, and one of them was a god, and there was always more work to be done.

They reached a plaza, or something resembling one. It was a great big open space, and it was good enough.

The god nodded at the girl, then the sword. He whispered something in the boy’s ear, receiving a sharp but nervous nod in return, then uttered something else into the crook of the luminary’s neck. He turned back, met eyes with the girl, and the girl cleared her throat and spread her arms.

“I see lanterns above,
And they shine down upon me.”

It was like the beginning of a song—no, it was the beginning of a song. She knew that now, and so did everyone else, because everyone turned, no matter how beautiful or ghastly they looked, and there was wonder in their eyes.

There was music. The god was singing, his melody weaving into honey-gold. It was delicious and sweeter than anything the townsfolk had ever known; all they knew now was that there was a festival that was beginning. A beat pulsed in their hearts, then tapped on the ground, then finally banged against drums.

The girl snapped her arms and legs into position. Her form in this side might have been the stuff of nightmares, but she knew her steps well, and she knew herself better.

“I see lanterns above,
And they shine down upon me.
Hark! Hear ye!
Dance along with me!”

A second voice, younger and thinner, joined in, and then a third that was just as young and twice as soft. A strum of strings twined into the voices, and with it, the girl snapped her fans upward and outward, toward the lanterns.

“Hark! Hear ye!
Dance along with me!”

She spun and she danced, all while a light rain of flowers fell down upon the plaza. The music continued, bursting from the mouths of all those who spun and danced alongside them, kicking their legs and plucking their fingers. They were all dancing like they had known the steps and the song forever.

The sword grinned something lively at the boy as they matched hands, and the boy smiled back as they changed partners, disappearing into the chaotic mass of silks and colours and limbs.

It was difficult to guide the dance, but the girl had strength to spare for a thousand lifetimes. She pointed her fans one way, and the crowd would turn; she waved the other way, and the crowd would follow; she snapped them shut, and they would change partners. She twirled, throwing her entire being into the dance for as long as the god behind her threw his voice to the stars.

There was an opportunity to be had here, she realized suddenly. No time to waste. The night would only last so long.

She made her way beside the luminary, whose notes rang out brilliantly but were no longer needed.
With no shortage of pride, she snapped her fans closed and pointed at the luminary, returning his thousand-year gaze with one even bolder.

“Play and sing another day,
What the heart hides, your eyes betray!”

The crowd turned, changed partners, and they all bowed dramatically, repeating the same words. The longer the girl held it, the more the chanting broke into cheers and whoops, urging the god to come dance and the luminary to be his partner.

“Come on,” said the girl, short of breath not of heart. “It’s a celebration!”

The god sang, the language ancient even in a place that had existed before the beginning of time. He flinched, and his eyes were full of hesitation.

There was a deep inhalation from the luminary. In one swift movement, he swept the god up into his arms and moved to the beat within their chests.

The crowd cheered, whooping and shouting, and the girl was among them as she guided the dance to an ever faster pace, quick enough for the youngest of children and lively enough for the oldest of creatures.

“About time!” the sword shouted with an uproarious clap of laughter.

“Congratulations!” the boy yelled as well, his head popping up from the crowd for just a moment before being swallowed again.

Now everyone was dancing underneath the light of the lanterns. The silhouettes of the living, the dead, and everything in between plastered onto every ruby-red wall and sloped roof. The rumbling of footsteps sounded like thunder, or perhaps the marching of soldiers, but there was no battle to be fought and no war to be won. There was only music, a dance, and a blessing that would last until the end of time.

They spun with everyone, in between every person and thing, into and out of each other’s lives with such ease and haste that come morning, they would have already forgotten what their partners looked and sounded like.

The girl began to tire just as the first morning light broke the horizon. With one final swish of her fans, she clapped them closed in the very center of the plaza. She bowed, respectful and deep, and was met with a thousand bows, or perhaps it was ten thousand, or a hundred, but it was hard to keep count.

She straightened up, and watched as her companions separated themselves from the rest of the exhausted crowd. They were tired, but not nearly as tired as those who had been pulled in by song and dance. Those folks stumbled away, sleepily, heavily, like they had been shaken out of a deep sleep.

The god was out of breath when he approached, and so was the luminary. Both their chests rose with a quick up-and-down, and if the girl was seeing things correctly, they were both smiling.

It was so surprising that she dropped her fans. She stumbled awkwardly to pick them back up, then coughed loudly when the sword and the boy stepped near.

“We all had a good time, I guess,” she said simply.
“Oh, the best of times,” the sword sang. He slung an arm over the boy’s shoulders. “But Fuxing had an even better time than we did.”

“He sure did,” the boy said cheerfully.

All three of them were smiling, and they were all trying very hard not to laugh. They had all seen the sort of nonsense the god put himself through, which was good fun up until it became annoying.

“Let’s just keep moving,” the god finally said, as if he was forcing the words out. There was a flush on his face that might have been embarrassment, or merely exertion. They all thought it was probably the former. “We’re coming up on Qinghe, and I want to make sure everyone else is alright.”

“Wen Ning and Wen Qing-Jie are more competent than we’ll ever be,” the girl pointed out.

“They’re probably worried that you’ve done something stupid and gotten us all killed,” the sword said, then added with emphasis, “again.”

“Xiao Xingchen Daozhang and Sect Leader Song seemed very capable and responsible to me,” the boy added helpfully. “They might be there already.”

They were all good points, and the god knew this. Knowing it did not make him feel any better.

“You’re all so mean,” he wailed, leaning half his weight on the luminary. “So cruel to me! What shall I do?”

“Get a move on it,” the girl declared, slipping the fans back into her robes. “Qinghe’s close, right? Sect Leader Nie’s probably waiting.”

Those who understood knew that a few more days, weeks, months, even years—a bit more time was nothing to Nie Huaisang. There were the patient, the fey, and then there was the so-called helpless leader of the Nie clan.

The girl respected him for his ability and his cunning, but there were many words she wanted to speak to him, and most of them were less than flattering.

“Let’s get to it,” said the god, righting his robes. He pressed his palms to his cheeks. “Goodness. It’s been a while since I danced so hard!”

The sword snorted. “Hard indeed,” he tried to say, but the girl kicked him before he could finish it entirely.

Now that the sun had risen and was blooming gently in the sky, it was easy to see just how strange the city was. Under moonlight and stars and lanterns, it looked so lively and vibrant. As they walked and walked, the red paint faded and peeled, and the roofs caved in and became dilapidated.

The city was slowly becoming a ghost town. Perhaps it had already been a ghost town, and they were all too caught up in their own adventures to realize.

Oh well. Those sorts of thing happened often. It was important to be flexible, open-minded, and empathetic.

Ghosts deserve blessings, too. Everything that lived and died and made life of its own deserved a bit of luck, the girl thought. It was better for everyone and everything to live in happiness, as impossible or foolish it sounded.

“How long have you been collaborating with Sect Leader Nie?” the boy asked, as the only one who
was still mostly unaware.

“Maybe three years,” the god answered, though he frowned when his memory failed him. “He’s always been sharp, and he has eyes and ears everywhere. It was only a matter of time before he reached out.”

“I... I thought you were the patron god of Yunmeng? Of Lotus Pier.”

“I suppose I am, in a way. But then I’m also the patron god of Yinhe. Both in Yinhe and in Lotus Pier, I have a home of sorts.”

“Oh,” said the boy.

“Qinghe’s our base of operations,” the god continued. “For now. If I could only get Jiang Cheng to invite Huaisang over to Lotus Pier, we wouldn’t need to make such a long trip, and it would be great fun for all of us.”

The boy continued to ask questions, though he was unsure of where exactly to start. It seemed that all the others had known each other for a while now, had somehow stumbled into each other’s lives and muddled them up. Instead of fixing things and leaving, they fixed each other, and they never left. It was incredible, and romantic, and almost impossible. There was kindness, there was family, and then there was this, and they all felt indescribably grateful for it.

The god, the girl, and the sword answered his questions to the best of their ability. The luminary sometimes asked questions too, though he did more answering overall.

They walked, talked, and became a little closer. It was nice. It was good.

The city was long behind them and the moon was already rising when they felt a shift in the air, but time and space were tricky things in the Other Side.

The moon was rising, or so it seemed for a moment. Then it marched closer, and closer, until it stood between the travelers and the path ahead.

She carried the night upon their shoulders, a glistening sky full of stars, and the full, golden moon followed behind.

“Good evening,” spoke the Trader, in a hundred echoes at once.

The girl was quick to bow, and the others followed suit without hesitation. “Good evening,” answered the girl, for she held the respect of all who walked these planes.

The skeletal beasts by the Trader’s feet chattered in what might have been amusement. Their bones rattled with no breath to shake them, no blood to drive them. In voices that made no sense and carried no meaning, they yipped and howled and spoke.

“Wind-girl,” the Trader greeted. Her eyes were black stones that held yellow irises which looked like tiny moons and diamond-slit pupils which were even blacker than the skies she bore. “Sword-boy. God-child. You’re travelling again.”

“We are,” said the girl.

“You have new guests,” said the Trader.

“They’ll be working with us from now on.”
“Five is a crowd, my girl.”

“One could be a crowd as long as they’re loud enough. A hundred could stay rumours as long as they play smart.”

“If my memory serves me correctly—” it did, and there was no doubt about it, for the Trader does not simply forget— “you are not very subtle. You are the opposite of subtle.”

“Then everyone else behind us can work while we shout over them,” was the girl’s answer.

The Trader was silent for a moment, and so were her beasts. They looked like one of them as she stood, observing each of the curious travellers behind her bone-woven mask. Two little moons peered into their eyes, their tongues, and their souls, searching for deceit. Her shoulders fell in satisfaction when she found none.

“An heir as young as yourself should exercise more caution,” said the Trader, in a voice that almost belonged to a parent, or a mentor, guiding a small child. “No harm will befall you on this side, but the realm you call home is not so kind.”

“I know,” said the girl, and it was as true as it was false: she knew that the world out there was not kind, and that if she lacked knowledge, it would not be as easy to learn as the whisperings of the fey. Her home was dangerous, a strange place full of strange people with strange thoughts and strange emotions, and none of them made even a lick of sense.

The Other Side was otherworldly and weird, but the fey were far more gracious than mortals. The fey had lived forever, and they would continue to do so. They saw life, its pain, its pleasure, and they could see every tiny moment in a grand spectrum far greater than anything humans would ever understand.

It was better that way. It was a comforting thought to the girl, who knew that knowing too much was a great tragedy for all things that could breathe and die, for it is always safer to forget what hurts.

Knowing all this, the girl held her chin high. “I know who I am,” she said. “And I know who my friends are, and I know where my family is.”

“They’re with you,” spoke the Trader.

“As long as they’ll have me.”

“And they won’t leave?”

The words stung, but only a little. “Not without telling me first.”

“You have a family here as well,” said the Trader, though it was impossible to tell if she sounded angry, sad, or entirely vacant.

“I think,” the girl said, “that the one before me had a family here, and it was wonderful. But I’m not her.”

There was something akin to longing at the corners of the Trader’s eyes, but it disappeared too quickly for the girl to decide if she had truly seen it or not.

“Perhaps,” was all the Trader said, their conversation already forgotten. Tiny yellow moons turned to the god, and the warmth that had softened their edges froze over with an ice so thick that no sunlight could ever thaw through it. “You will protect her, and you will see that she lives a long and
meaningful life.”

“Of course,” the god said. In this, he stood tall and held the Trader’s wintry, ancient gaze. “It’s my duty.”

“Good.” The Trader’s skeletal beasts yapped, repeating her words in a grinding, clacking language. “Then I’ve said everything worth saying. Where will you go now, god-child?”

“To Qinghe. To meet the king and barter for a life.”

“I see. Then, a blessing.”

The Trader held out her hands, and the god took met them easily. Calloused palms met, fingertips dragging over the lines of journeys the other did not know, and the words began.

“May your journey be long and peaceful,” spoke the Trader.

“May our paths cross often under the light of moon,” said the god.

“May your steps fall steady, and hold you strong.”

“May you meet many, serve many, and find your heart.”

“May you live long and well, and find your home.”

“May you roam in peace, until you find home.”

There was something sad about the ending, which made the girl feel wrong. Endings are always better off happy, but it was so hard to find one that could truly be called happy that she would be satisfied if it was an ending at all. Then she could do her best to make it happy even after everything had passed.

The god and the Trader parted, and the air seemed to become a little warmer.

“A pleasure, as always,” said the Trader. The beasts at her heels cackled.

“As always,” the god agreed.

“You’ll be wanting to head off now.” The Trader stepped to the side, then raised her arm to gesture down the path and into the unending future. She saw something, in the darkness of the night they heralded, and she pointed at it with a single pale finger. “Your friends are waiting, and I’m sure you have much to talk about. It’s best to leave now, when night has only just begun.”

“We’ll do that,” the girl answered in place of the god.

She tugged him forward by the sleeve. The peonies twined around her fingers for a moment, and then the flames tried to push her away. But she held on, and walked forward.

As she passed by the the Trader, who had lived a life longer than anyone or anything could remember, she wondered if there had been anyone to hold her hand as she first awoke in the world. Before light, before dark, before time, it must have been cold and empty and lonely.

The Trader watched on silently. Perhaps she knew the girl was thinking such thoughts: she did not seem surprised when the girl turned to bow, low and deep.

“Thank you for your help,” said the girl.
“It was my pleasure,” spoke the Trader, and there the warmth was, filling her eyes with an emotion that must have been yearning. It struck the girl to see a being older than the world fall to their feelings, but it was better that way.

With three long strides, the girl threw her arms around the Trader.

It was like holding twilight: it was cold, but it was beautiful, and underneath the warm summer air, it never seemed to end. The beasts whined, sighing in delight and longing, and then it was silent for a while.

“Surely you know what this is,” said the girl, her cheek plastered against the Trader’s chest. She could hear something pulsing from within, but it was not a heartbeat.

“Ah,” was all the Trader said for a very long time. Then, “I believe, if my memory serves me correctly—” it did, it always, always did—“that this is called a ‘hug’.”

“Of course it’s called a hug,” the girl said.

“Yes,” the Trader spoke again.

“You aren’t going to ask why I’m hugging you?”

“I,” began the Trader, with a breath that would have been imperceptible if not for their proximity, “don’t think I need to.”

She were right. She was always right, of course, and the girl and everyone else knew it.

When the girl let go, she found that her arms shone of stars that had rubbed off the night sky. The thorns had disappeared, or found some place better to be, and she could almost see her sun-kissed skin underneath all the ink.

“Best be going now,” the girl said.

“Of course,” spoke the Trader.

“We’ll be seeing you soon.”

“Underneath the full moon. But no sooner. And no later.”

There was nothing more to say, then.

The two of them turned, facing opposite directions, and set out on their own paths. One walked into the day, beckoning the night come with their weary hands, and the other ran to her companions, who waited for her from some distance away.

“Let’s go,” said the girl, walking to the very front of the group. She looked over her shoulder, counted four faces full of life, and faced the road.

There were stars on her arms and thorns in her hair. There was a faint smile curving at her lips, for she knew that the journey to come would not be easy. There would be betrayal, revelations, hearts to change; the world, an unsteady future, and reconciliation. She would bear the weight with pride and dignity, and when her arms grew tired and her legs shook, she would sit down for a moment, go for a hot meal with her friends and family, and when she returned, the world would still be waiting for her.

The boundary up ahead no longer seemed so scary. Perhaps it had never been.
And that was alright. The girl had much to do, and this was only the beginning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have nobody to dedicate this book to.

Understand, now, that it would be unspeakably foolish for me to do so. The memories of one person are not for any others to breach. It would be rude, of course, but it would also tarnish those experiences—the thrill, the heartbreak, the confusion, the romance—whatever the author felt in those days, when they were younger and freer, are precious. To destroy them would be a tragedy.

I said that I could not and would not dedicate this book to anyone. I will leave that part of me behind for a moment. “Swallow my pride,” as to say.

I came across these chronicles during my long stay with the Jiang family. They were kind enough to take me in, and were even kinder to allow me access to their library, which was a great honor and a terrible horror. If you had seen it, you would understand. Years and years of historical records, preserved with the utmost of care, and half of them were fables. The fables were no better: half of them were fact.

There were many days spent in that library, which should more accurately be called a museum. So, to the Jiang family and the Jiang family records: thank you, but also curse you, for you made my job a thousand times harder than it needed to be. You are all very lucky that I am fond of challenges.

Of course, I must give credit to my brother, who was the one to urge me to translate these chronicles in the first place. A great deal of nonsense comes out of his mouth, but without him, there were times where I would have truly been lost. Bad company is better than no company, sometimes.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my teacher, who I know will read these one day and laugh. He taught me most of what I know, though I like to think he threw his lessons at me and laughed whether I caught them or not. We have been through many trials together, and it puts me at ease somewhat to know that he is out there in the world, travelling happily with someone who will love him unconditionally.

(Do not misunderstand: I am not a romantic in the slightest. It puts me at ease to know that he finally has a handler he will listen to. Those years I spent pushing them together were the most frustrating of my mortal life.)

There are tens of thousands of names I owe a part of these chronicles to, but you will find all of them scattered across these pages if you look closely enough. They are all there for you, and some of them may still be waiting. Unfortunately, I am a busy person, and it has been a long while since I visited some of them last. If you have the time, feel free to seek them out. They know there is no sense in hiding—in fact, given their long lives, they will think it more entertaining to throw the hook out and see if anything bites.

I might be the same in some respects. But I am not them, and I do not like speaking for others.

Every tale comes in its own time. I could insert a sappy quote, or a heartfelt thanks for you, the reader, and for your time, but that would be a very stupid thing for me to do. You will soon realize that the story you have read is the beginning of a long, long journey that touched many lands and
many people.

I am happy that it has touched you. But that is all.

See you next time.

—Wei Chengfeng

Chapter End Notes

another 30k chapter. this is par for the course now. i desperately hope you all know what you've signed up for, because i still have no idea what exactly it is.

this chapter was incredibly challenging and fun to write! lwj is a really hard character for me, but it was kind of a breath of relief. something like, "oh, he's finally here" or the sort. wwx, as usual, is completely lost, and a-qing is the only one holding it together. the others will have a greater presence the next chapter, i promise. everything in its time!

so i. uh. really went wild with the narrative style in this chapter. i thought it would be an interesting way to lead into the next chapter and maybe the epilogue. neil gaiman's the graveyard book was a huge creative influence, and if you know anything about me, it's that i would die for the graveyard book. i also borrowed a quote from his poem, instructions: "know that diamonds and roses / are as uncomfortable when they tumblr from / one's lips as toads and frogs: / colder, too, and sharper, and they cut." i also threw in a little fma reference for fun. but really, mo xuanyu is a very smart boy and the purification arts are very useful. who knows?

AND BEFORE I FORGET AGAIN: we have fanart!!!! how incredible is that???? here's a beautiful adult a-qing, here's the chaotic happy-go-lucky luck squad, and here's the lively-even-in-pseudo-death ying huohua! thank you all so much for the beautiful art, and i hope you've enjoyed the ride so far!

if you'd like to ask me anything at all, feel free to ask me directly on my curiouscat!

thank you so much for your patience and support! i'm always open to making new friends over on my twitter!
“The world was bright and strange and he was in the middle of it.”

— Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, *Good Omens*

The *Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe* is a series of fantasy novels by the Chinese author and historian Wei Chengfeng, based off of various myths and fables from predominantly Eastern Asian cultures.

*The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe* follows the adventures of A-Qing; an orphan turned cultivator, Jiangzai; her brother, and Fuxing; the god of prosperity.

Originally a collection of fables preserved by the Historical Society of Yunmeng, *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe* exist both in the form of journal entries and short stories. The journal entries were originally collected and organized by Wei Chengfeng, who later rewrote them in the form of more coherent novels.

Wei Chengfeng has frequently addressed events in *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe* as a reflection of modern times and is a vocal supporter of inserting empathy into historical studies. When asked if she wrote *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe* with such a theme in mind, she said:

“I didn’t put anything into it [The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe] that wasn’t there to begin with. All I did was piece together the entries. The original author of those fables saw and felt everything she wrote about. Writing and translating all those journals was a pet project of mine. If they day ever comes when people read The Chronicles and think, ‘oh, so that’s what it was like back then,’ my work is done. But if people still see themselves and the world in all those adventures, then it means nothing’s really changed. The world might change, but we don’t, and that’s awful and wonderful all at once.”

Since publishing the first volume of *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe*, Wei Chengfeng has continued to translate and adapt fables. These works include *The Alchemist’s Travels* and *A Young Goddess’ Guide to the World*, which are implied to exist in the same universe as *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe*.

A-Qing, the main character of *The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe*, returns as the narrator for *A Young Goddess’ Guide to the World*, and characters such as Fuxing, Mo Xuanyu, Jiangzai, and others are mentioned frequently in all three works.

To read more about Wei Chengfeng, visit the Historical Society of Yunmeng or the author’s personal website. Upcoming events include [....]
AFTERWORD

If you can read this, I’m assuming you either have very sharp eyes, are magically inclined, spiritually intact, or know me already. With that said, I’d love to drop all decorum.

How was it? I gave it my all, you know. I even called up some old friends to ask for advice. They had a lot to say after they finished laughing. For once, I let them laugh: let’s not forget who the author is. I have the final say in what embarrassing stories are revealed to the world as folklore. Test me if you dare.

To all of you who have found your names in these pages, I’m sure you have questions. For half of you, I’m pretty sure it’ll be curiosity, something along the lines of, “Why, that’s my name, I believe, and I get such a strange feeling in my gut when I read these words.” For the other half, I’m confident you’ll either be laughing at me or yourselves, which I can’t fault you for. I’d be doing the same.

Don’t get me wrong: it doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to be bitter or irritated. You know how it works.

This all began in very recent times, although it was through no fault of mine. My emotional connection to my journals lives more in memory than in my hands, but when Xue Yang first came across them in the Jiang family records, I was decently surprised.

It started in Yunmeng, on a wet summer’s day, as most things do. I was sorting through a particularly old section of the library with the intention of locating Mo Xuanyu’s original flame array (which I’m pleased to say I found after two months of searching, but that story is for another time). It was difficult, tedious work, and there were tens of thousands of texts in tens of thousands of languages, and caffeine could only get me so far.

I enlisted the help of my brother, Xue Yang—though many of you will know him better as either Jiangzai or Xue Chengmei—and together, we began to search for that flame array we used to know so well.

(Mo Xuanyu, if you happen to be out there, and if you, by chance or by fate, come across this, please contact us. We lost track of you after that ouroboros incident back in ‘92. We have every faith that you’ll come back. We’re patient, but we miss you.

Skipping over the sappy stuff, we have all the research materials you’ll ever need or want here, so pop in if you feel like it.)

Anyway. We spent the summer digging through that god-awful ancient section, whose very name makes me feel uncomfortably old, which is fair but shocking all the same. It was a rare blessing to be working in the library.

I’m sure you’ve heard of the Jiang family records: floor-to-ceiling windows, arched ceilings, ancient artefacts dating back to the ever-so-popular Romans and even before that, all built around an enormous wisteria tree that’s been going strong for the better part of two thousand years. Most importantly, there was plenty of natural light to stave off that creeping feeling of cabin fever.

On that day, I was working through some horrible medieval arrays that would’ve had any real alchemist rolling in their graves. It was pouring outside, a heavy torrent of grey rain that made me that much more thankful for the warm-lit lanterns. The sound of rain was the only thing keeping my patience from snapping in half.

Xue Yang was looking through some children’s books. He’d found a code in one of them a few
days prior, which was an excellent lead, but that meant he had to read through the grizzly and awful stories involving themes and topic much darker than what normal children would consider fun bedtime stories.

Needless to say, we were both frustrated and tired. Fortunately, we happen to be most productive that way. It’s a thing. Don’t think too hard about it.

It was a little past noon. We had started working at six. By eight, we started playing a drinking game but with an ungodly concoction of Monster, black coffee, caffeine pills, and guava candies. By nine, we were loudly and viscerally cursing the lack of historical and scientific accuracy in our respective scripts. By eleven, we were reminiscing on the good old days, and by noon, we were wondering if there was a more convenient way to call Mo Xuanyu back and have his genius brain take over for us.

The librarians were genuinely worried we were going to burn the place down. It was fair, but it also meant that we were more determined than ever.

Then, suddenly, with no warning whatsoever: “Hey! A-Qing! Come look at this.”

It was strange. Xue Yang never calls me over to look at anything; we research separately, yell ideas at each other from across the hall, and make do. So, putting my book down, I tried to make eye contact with him from where he was perched up on a tall, wooden ladder. He caught my gaze and tried to wave me over.

“What is it now?” I asked, which I always do. I read fast, but forcing myself to eat up all this medieval nonsense was making my eyes burn. All I learned while flipping through those pages was that something had gotten horribly lost in translation and completely butchered Mo Xuanyu’s genius works. So I said: “I want to get through all this crap before lunch, as I’m sure as hell not making Jiang Qing wait for us.”

“Just get over here,” said Xue Yang, in the same tone and voice. I was beginning to get annoyed when he suddenly asked, “What’d you do with your journals the first time around?”

That caught me off guard. Of all the travelling companions I had over the years, Xue Yang was the only one who never bothered too much with my journals. He’d been with me from the very start all those years back, and there he was then, with a spark of curiosity in his eyes, and here he is now, still by my side. It was unlike him to ask questions about something so utterly familiar.

I was confused, but I was also suspicious. “Did you miss the part where I write every day, or are you just more braindead than I expected?”

Xue Yang wasn’t impressed. “The first time around, dumbass,” he said. “When you were an illiterate novice.”

I’m sure that if you’ve been paying attention, you know what that means by now. Call me Wei Chengfeng, call we Yufeng-Zhe, call me A-Qing—it doesn’t matter. All three of those people were surprised.

“Those?” I asked, mostly to myself. I thought long and hard: what had I done with them? “I have no idea. Charmed and protected them, I guess? I think I gave them to the Jiangs for safekeeping a few centuries back. They’re probably... somewhere.”

“Sure,” was Xue Yang’s only answer. A wicked grin came over his sharp features, perking his nose and chin up. In his hand was a thin journal, its colours worn from red right to dull brow. He waved it
You know that feeling when you can’t recall something for the life of you, but when it appears before your eyes, you’re struck with one thought: how did I forget? That was me then.

“Now,” said Xue Yang, “doesn’t this look like your handwriting?”

To be honest, my reaction wasn’t the most pleasant or elegant. I scrambled off my own ladder, crawling down railings like some sort of feral beast, shouting all the way. The librarians, more terrified of me than death or god, fled to make way.

“You piece of shit. Give it here.”

“Not my fault these idiots don’t know how to peel off a talisman nowadays.” Xue Yang happily peeled off the talismans I’d slapped onto it god knows how long ago. “It’s all fancy arrays and spells. I knew we were old, but we’re really old now.” He sighed, flicking the talisman away into the musty air of the library. It scattered to dust in an instant. Xue Yang only heaved a joking sigh. “Goodness, my back aches.”

I remembered that talisman then: I had drawn it with Mo Xuanyu’s direction. It was only one of many but I remembered how gentle his words were, how they were always laced with a soft sort of anxiety that bloomed wonderfully into humble confidence.

I was furious, then, and I was ready to kick Xue Yang off the ladder and into the pond three stories below. “It’s going to be more than just your back,” I yelled. “Give it!”

“I never did get a chance to read your first attempts at journal-keeping,” said Xue Yang. One hand was on the thin spine, and the other—the one with the pinky cut short—was thumbing through the pages already. “What was it like?” he asked, far more genuine that I would have ever expected. “Fuxing was probably the most irritating teacher ever. What, oh what could be in these pages?”

He knew what was in that journal: he had lived it beside him, or behind me, but he had never seen it from my eyes. Looking back on it, I’m embarrassed to have been embarrassed. A few months later, and I would be making my second draft of adventures I would have never before thought of releasing to the world. Then again, hindsight is a traitor half the time.

I lunged onto the ladder, and it wobbled. Xue Yang laughed. I was not amused.

“I’ll be spilling bits of your brain matter if you don’t give it back,” I shouted, shrill and ear-piercingly girlish. “Xue Yang, and so help me, if you don’t give it back—”

He was already flipping through the first entries. He cleared his throat, and with a smile, he began to read.

“Let’s see. Hello. My name is A-Qing. I—”

That one-sided argument devolved into a brawl after I clocked him. Only then did he fight back.

Luckily, the librarians were more than used to playing chaos controllers, and we we also very familiar with how far great the arcs of our attacks were, how far the branches of Old Lady Wisteria stretched, where all the precious artefacts were. We brought the battle outside and continued to yell at each other.

The journal was left inside. We were late for lunch. Jiang Qing wasn’t very amused when we trudged in looking like a pair of angry, drowned rats.
After lunch, we returned to the library and sat down with my journal. I let Xue Yang read it. I watched him in silence, I saw his every twitch and sigh as he relived my early days before him, then after him, and then even after that.

We’ve lived for a long time. Remembering the days when the world still resembled the one we were born into was... a strange feeling. Not nostalgia: we’ve seen too much to yearn for the past. The two of us have been moving forward through time since the day we learned how to walk on our own.

So, no. It wasn’t nostalgia at all. It was something twisted, tangled, old, and broken.

“You know what,” said Xue Yang. “Let’s publish this.”

I truly thought my ears were failing me. “What?”

“These journals,” Xue Yang said. “Rewrite them into an adventure fit for today, and then we’ll publish them.”

I could’ve said a lot of things. I could’ve laughed, or thrown back a joke, or anything, really.

Instead, I asked: “Why?”

He never did answer me. We returned to search for the flame array after a silence neither of us could fill. We settled into our usual back-and-forth, and that was it for the day.

The very next morning, I walked into the library with a well-worn fountain pen and a thick journal.

I sat down with my old, old journal, cracked open the pages, and was a helpless girl whose family had been destroyed, who had been saved by a stroke of pure luck, who was lost but not as lost as all the others she saw along the way, who watched as people walked and died and were killed and born again.

Xue Yang resumed the hunt for the array. It was raining again, and the scratch of my pen was so loud. I still remember it.

I love writing, but before then, I loved it because it was beautiful to me. I liked—well, in English, I liked curving my els and my tees; I liked looping my gees and my jays. I liked giving my yous short tails, and I liked dropping my cues down low. Writing was a beautiful thing, and it helped me keep my memory straight.

I never considered writing to tell my story. And that’s the thing: it isn’t my story. It’s the story of hundreds, of thousands of people, all meandering in and out of each other’s lives with such careless fluidity that it never seemed to matter until they ran out of breaths and heartbeats.

That’s just how it is with people like us, who live forever. Life seems so long in the moment, and then you blink your eyes and it’s already over. Where’d that time go? I don’t know, so I keep it in journals. As long as I know it existed somewhere, I’m satisfied.

So. Rewriting the journals. It was... difficult. Again, hindsight is rarely kind, and it was difficult for me to try and narrate without feeling stupendously dumb. I was both omnipotent and omniscient, and I hated it.

But I did it. Why? I don’t know. I can’t say it was for closure, because the story hasn’t ended yet. Neither was it for fame or riches (though I was pleasantly surprised by the attention my writings received) since I had plenty of it already, being the head of the Yunmeng Historical Society and whatnot.
I wrote, and here it is. Turns out I’ve always been writing. It was just a matter of realizing that my stories had worth to others.

If you’re reading this, and if you think I’m an idiot, or a romantic, or still the same naive child I was all those years ago, then go ahead and think whatever you want. I did it. I’m here. This is my way of celebrating the journey so far.

I want to say I learned a lot from writing The Chronicles of Yufeng-Zhe, but in reality, everything I learned, I already lived. I’m passing these lessons down to you.

May they stay, and may they be read and adored by children and pointlessly analyzed by adults. May you be kind to others, for the world is not a kind place.

See you on the other side.

—Wei Chengfeng

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[a-choo]:
i finally finished translating the journal
go read
half of it’s 0 brain cell work but like. mood

[a literal sword]:
it’s ass o clock you dumb shit
i’m tired

[a-choo]:
dumb shit sleeping at 11
who the hell are you

[a literal sword]:
fuck you let me see

[a-choo]:
done and shared
go check it out and then slander me afterward
english is a stupid language

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Journeys That Start (And Never End)

The girl did not have too much to call her own. It might have been sad to some people, but to her, it just made packing for travel much easier.

A hairpin and a pouch full of candies; that was all she had chosen to bring. Her bamboo pole had been left in that dark, lonely house in Yi City. In its place was a sword as black as night and red as
blood.

She felt excited. It was a strange feeling. She was leaving her family behind, but a promise was a promise, and it would be awfully stupid to cry over people she could visit every now and then.

“Well,” the god said cheerfully, “I suppose we’ll be travelling together for at least a while.”

The girl watched as the god ran his fingers through his hair, weaving them into thin braids. He tied them off with ribbon, then ran the stem of a golden flower through the mess, and beamed.

She simply said, “I guess so.”

“You’re taking this far better than I expected,” the god said.

“I think I’m taking it just fine. It’s just some travelling, right?”

“I think you’ll be a fine assistant,” said the god, glossing over the question entirely.

Before the girl knew it, they were already walking into another town. Yi City was at least half a day behind them, and for a moment, the girl was overcome with the shocking weight of distance.

She had never travelled on her own before. If she wanted to survive, she had to play blind, and that was not as much play as it was work. It was dangerous for her to demonstrate any sort of independence, because people only felt sorry for you if you looked like you felt sorry for yourself.

Things were different now. The girl walked with a rolling gait and an open gaze. She stopped to point out weird trees, or frog-shaped rocks, or clouds that moved too quickly.

It was strange. It felt a little lonely. But she also felt free, like the entire world was at her fingertips, and that was a good feeling.

There were plenty of stalls scattered around the streets, and the girl bounced between them with near-frantic energy. She would point at items, then look at the god, and watch his brows rise. One meant he was sceptical; two meant he was willing to cough out some coin.

By dinnertime, the girl was struggling to fit all her items into her small travel pouch. A silver hairpin shaped like a flower, a smooth piece of jade that looked like an eye, a short dagger with a snowflake on the hilt: these were the pretty things she admired over a hot meal.

“So,” said the girl. “What do you want with me?”

The god seemed surprised for a moment. “I don’t want anything from you,” he answered eventually. “You offered your life to me. I thought you wanted something from me.”

They were in a difficult spot. The girl and the god had been convinced that the other wanted something from them, and now they were very confused to discover that they were both as clueless as each other.

After emptying their plates, they retired to their room. The girl set the sword by her bedside, where it was safely in reach, and the god set his weimao down and tugged his braids free.

“You could go back to Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen,” the god said after a while.

“I don’t think so,” said the girl.

“I sent them to Yinhe,” whispered a voice that came from lips that barely moved. “Mie Yu will take
care of them. She would take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself just fine,” the girl pointed out, though she was not quite as sure as before.

“You should go with them.”

The girl was getting irritated. “And break my promise?” she demanded. “I’ll stay here, and I’ll go with you, and we’ll see the world and do all sorts of stupid things, and then when we’re tired of all that nonsense, we’ll go to this Yinhe of yours and stay for a while.”

The god was silent again. Then, in a voice that sounded like the rustling of dead leaves, he said, “I’m not sure what you see in me.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said the girl.

She reached into her candy pouch, hesitated for a moment, then tossed a honey-sweet marble his way. The god fumbled, but caught it nonetheless.

“I see you,” was the girl’s curt answer. “And I think you look like you’re about to pass out.”

A smile found its way onto the god’s pale features. “Why, A-Qing, I’ll have you know I’m the master of staying up late.”

“You’ll die early that way,” the girl snapped.

“Well,” the god said, contemplative for a long moment, “correlation isn’t exactly causation, but that’s fair enough to say.”

The girl asked no more questions, and the god gave no more quips. They were both exhausted in both mind and body. It was understandable.

By the time the moon had climbed to its highest peak, the girl and the god were fast asleep, utterly ignorant to the whirling ways of stars that passed above them.

There was a long journey ahead of them, longer than anyone could have guessed. All they could do was eat full, sleep well, and walk onward.

Not so bad after all.

Hello.

My name is A-Qing. I am a girl. I am 16 years old.

I have cloudy eyes and people think I am blind because of it. I am learning how to write from Fuxing. He is very good at writing. It is hard but I will try my best. There is nothing much to lose from trying hard.

Writing is pretty. It is also helpful. I have a lot of words to say. When I get better, I will not have to ask Fuxing all the time. He is smug and smart but he is a god and gods know a lot.

I have many questions to ask. It will have to wait until tomorrow. I am very tired.
The stars are very pretty. It is weird how Fuxing has stars in his eyes. He is a star. It is in his name. I am confused. But it is good that I do not have to pretend to be blind anymore.

I do not think Fuxing will try to hurt me. He seems like a good person.

He seems very lost. That is very confusing too because I do not know where I am going. It is better to travel as two than one. It is safer that way. This world is a dangerous place. There are many bad people out there.

I do not think Fuxing will lie to me.

I feel like he will lie to himself.

Hello. My name is A-Qing. I am a girl. I am 16 years old. Fuxing has taught me how to write these useful words:

Murder
Dumbass
Fucker
Murder
God
Candy
Blind

We saw another village today. It was much nicer than Yi City. The people were much nicer to me because Fuxing was there. One day when I am strong and grown they will treat me with the same respect.

Fuxing finally bought me a new sash. He also bought me lots of snacks. Maybe he is not so bad.

A Little Something (Twice)

The sash was pretty, but it was also tough. It held the weight of the sword splendidly, and it sparkled under warm light.

It was great, but it was also the second sash the god had bought in three days, and the girl was confused.

“I’m not complaining,” she said, replacing her two-day old sash with the new not-yet-one-day-old sash. “But we’re going to have a problem if you keep buying sashes, because I won’t have anywhere to put them.”
The god looked confused. His brows furrowed, and he held a hand to his chin, as if he was thinking deeply. “I bought you one already?” he asked.

“Two days ago.”

“Huh,” said the god. “Strange. I can’t recall.”

That was not good news. With a creeping suspicion, the girl asked, “Where were we two days ago?”

“A town,” answered the god, though he did not sound sure. “Or a city, or a village.”

“Because you bought me the sash.”

“It’s the only logical conclusion,” was the god’s unfortunate response.

They walked and walked, and the topic was lost. The god spoke about Yinhe, and how he wanted to go back to check on some people, and how the porridge there was fantastic.

The girl listened, picking at high grass and fallen leaves, making her fingernails green by peeling the pale veins out.

At the very next town, the girl demanded that the god buy her more paper and brushes. The god complied easily, then laughed just as easily when the girl began to furiously list all the cities they had passed along the way.

It was ridiculous how the god only remembered what he wanted to remember—and even then, he would forget the most important bits. Talking to him would be a headache and a half if he struggled to recall even the simplest of things, so the girl took it upon herself to be the responsible one.

She would continue to do so for longer than she expected, and far longer than she wanted.

---

I forgot to explain why I am keeping a journal. It is because Fuxing has the memory of a rock if I broke the rock into dirt and threw it into the sea. He is dumb and I am the only normal one here. He eats spicy food that makes me feel like I set myself on fire even when I do not eat it. Food should not be that red.

My head hurts already and it is not because of the spice.

---

**A Little Too Late (Maybe Next Time?)**

The town was just one of many they had passed through.

There was nothing particularly special about it except for the fact that a small cultivation clan existed there, and they were awfully proud of themselves, and they made some decent coin off of their books.
The girl thought it was stupid. Everyone seemed convinced that they were blessed by some sort of luck, or some kind of god. They praised the not-very-impressive cultivators, who did little more than look pretty with their fine robes and shiny ornaments, and they were quick to cheer for them when they walked through the streets.

Everyone held their heads very high, as if showing their nostrils made them any better than anyone else. The girl thought it would do them good to stick bamboo shoots up their noses and let them grow into their brains.

The god made a few passing sweeps of the town, saw that everything seemed quite right, and decided to move on the day after.

As such, they had some free time on their hands. The market was of particular interest to the girl: it was bustling and busy, smelling of all sorts of foods and fabrics and strange trinkets, and she was eager to see a bit more of the world.

The god simply followed the girl as she viciously bargained prices down to half, and then even lower. She thought the people here were in great need of a reality check, and she was kind enough to spare some sense.

Her pouch was a little heavier with hairpins and combs and tassels. The god stitched coins together from nothing with half a mind to spare.

The townsfolk seemed satisfied and happy, though most of it was in delusion. The god took one look at one of the cultivation manuals and broke into sharp laughter.

“Jeez, I think we ought to buy you some books,” said the god.

“I would rather throw myself off a cliff,” said the girl, feeling very betrayed.

“Not these,” said the god. He searched through the pile of books, then lifted up a thinner volume. It looked more like a stack of papers than a book. “This one looks about right.”

The girl tried reading the title, but it was difficult to decipher all those characters. The god passed some coins to the vendor, who thanked him kindly for his patronage, and they were off.

That night, over dinner, the god pulled out the thin book and set it on the table.

“These,” he began, “are ancient fables and stories pertaining to divine beings.”

The girl paused for a moment. “Gods?” she asked.

“Very much so,” said the god. A smile took form on his lips, curving upward into something curious.

The book was a sad thing. It looked like it had been written long ago, and going off the author’s abysmal script, it looked like it had been scribbled with a fervour, then forgotten somewhere dusty and damp, only to be rediscovered decades or even centuries later, and now it was here, in the hands of a god of fortune. It was a funny tale for such a short book.

The girl flipped through the pages. They were worn at the edges with age and wrinkled with the distinct patterns of wet-and-dry. It refused to lay flat, and more irritatingly, it refused to close all the way. It looked like a wriggling worm from the side.

Fortunately, it had been tied up very nicely, and the string binding the pages together sparkled of something fancy. The girl brought this up, and the god smiled, but said nothing.
“I never knew there were legends about gods,” the girl said. “I thought they were just names.” Thinking about her days on the streets, and the passing names of long-lost gods that were more fable than fact, she added, “Nobody really believes in anything until they see it.”

“Well, I’m here now, and I’m quite real,” said the god.

They ate mostly in silence. The girl was quick to finish her meal, as always, but she threw a few glances at the god, who was reading through the small book with impressive haste.

When they settled in for the night, the god flipped the wriggly book open on the table, and he grinned.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said, and then he began.

There is a magic or myth of sorts in moonlight: it travels within word of mouth in the form of rumours and promises, and it is a tangible thing, too, that twines itself into moonbeams and scatters all across the night with careless ease.

That was what the god said.

The girl looked up at the sky, at the moon, that was big and fat and shining, and found that she could believe it.

And there is a mystical something in starlight, too, but it is much older and fainter, like a dust that drifts from the great beyond and only sparkles in the corner of your eye. But it is there, and it will always be, for we were born underneath the moon, and the moon was born underneath the stars; therefore, we ought to treat all things that reside above us with respect, for they are our extended family of sorts.

That was what the god said.

The girl looked up at the sky again. She thought of all those cold, lonely nights, and found herself grateful for the opportunity to choose her own family.

Then, the god continued, since the gods live above us in the heavens, we should respect them as well, but not as the gods they are; we ought to treat them like our distant relatives, who wear much nicer clothes and walk with much longer strides, but who share our features, bleed our blood, and feel just as much hurt when they are abandoned as we do.

The girl thought long and hard about this.

“Guess there’s no harm in having a bit of tact,” she muttered.

The god beamed. It made sense, his being a god and all, but that only raised more questions.

“Why are you the only god here?” asked the girl, after the god had read aloud the general layout of the heavens, the fancy buildings and temples, the convoluted communications.

“I’m not sure,” the god answered. “I was was born as I died.”

“Powerful?”

“Alone,” said the god, and the girl decided it was time to go back to listening.

“It’s weird how gods have such crazy powers,” the girl said, after the god finished a passage about the deities that ruled over elements and light and dark. “Who gives it to them? Do they just decide to
be strong one day?"

The god fell silent. “I’m not sure,” he said again. With a hint of sarcasm, he continued, “I pray that whoever’s making the decisions has a good pair of eyes, a fair tongue, and a reasonable mind.” He went quiet again. With a sigh, he said, “But having one is already a miracle.”

“Isn’t that true,” the girl added, just as flatly and sarcastically, and that was that.

The god spoke deep into the night.

He set forward a simple premise: the heavens, hell, and the mortal realm in between. Humans could rise or fall depending on how they lived their lives. They were slapped between two places, and they could go either way.

Most saw their end coming, but could not see past it.

It was the same for those who resided above and below. The gods could fall hard, harder than any mortal, and then become something horrid, and the ghosts and demons could crawl out of the flames if they put in a tremendous amount of effort.

“That’s how it is with all things,” the girl pointed out. “All things go either way.”

“Not with life,” the god said, though he did not seem sure. “Not with time, either. Some things are meant to be lived in one direction.”

It made a terrible sort of sense. Life was vast and infinite until it could not bear to be anymore.

A cup can only hold so much water. A body can only hold so much heart. A person that feels and breathes can only suffer so much hurt. And a gift can only become so strong before it becomes a burden.

It was probably better for life and time to go in one direction, the girl decided. It would be too hard to live it in the opposite direction, or without moving at all.

But legends are only legends. The god certainly spoke a lot, and he made a great story, but the girl, like all other reasonable folks, thought that it was an awfully fancy way to deliver a moral.

“Treat everyone equally, try to be nice when you can, see things from eyes you hate, and live life before life lives you,” the girl recited. She crossed her arms, feeling very proud of herself and her cleverness. “Did I get that right?”

The god closed the book. He lay a pale hand on the wrinkled cover, and his fingers fell between the creases.

Under warm moonlight and distant starlight, he spoke, “That’ll have to be enough.”

Hesitation seeped into his voice, thought it might have been sadness, or confusion, or something equally as confusing.

“That story—those stories,” she corrected, for a story is not just a single plane; it was a physical thing that lived and died and had many sides, like the grooves on her sword and the curls of her hair. “Are they real?”

“What other kinds of stories are there?” the god asked.

Neither of them could answer the question. They sat awkwardly in silence, steeping in the deadliness
of their own curiosity, half-awake with attention and half-asleep with loose nonsense.

Then the god declared that it was time to rest.

He shrugged off his heavy, gold-laden robes, snipped short the frayed strings of his veil, fixed everything that had come undone.

And then he said a simple goodnight, turned over, and slept.

The book rested on the table. It looked even older under the shining, silver light.

It looked even older than it was. Or maybe it really was as old as it seemed. It was hard to tell between fact and fiction, reality and illusion, at night.

That was why they always slept at night and travelled during day. It made sensible, proper people out of them.

The night was cruel, but it was also kind. It coloured the girl’s fingers a pale silver. It stretched taut over her hands.

If she tried hard, very hard, so very hard that her lungs went flat and her bones ground to dust, she could grab the stars out of the sky. She wondered how they tasted. Like candies, she reasoned. Or maybe fire, or milk, or flowers. Things tasted like what they looked like. The stars looked like milky dots, but sometimes they burned, and sometimes they bloomed. A changing taste, the girl convinced herself, that lived in the god’s eyes as they did the sky.

Her thoughts were all over the place, and she knew she was tired.

Stories are always more magical at night.

So she shuffled quietly, peeling back the pages like they were the skin of a ripe fruit. She dug through her pouch for her writing-rock (a smudgy, black stone she had sharpened at the edges) and went to work.

The night was kind, but more importantly, it was diligent.

The girl wrote. And she wrote.

And she never did stop writing.

---

Fuxing bought me more books today. That is good because I do not want to ask him how to write everything. Now I can start relying on myself.

Reading and writing is fun. It is hard, but I am good at it and that is also fun. I will try my best to write as often as possible.
Fuxing told me that he put Xue Yang in the sword.

How did he put Xue Yang in the sword?

Why did he not tell me earlier?

I will stab him in his sleep and I will not be sorry about it.

---

**Blame Game**

“Are you still angry at me?”

It was a foolish question to ask, and they both knew it.

It was one of those nights, spent underneath the open sky and a million blinking eyes. There was nothing wrong with those sorts of nights, except that it reminded them how big and lonely the world was, and how easy it would be to disappear without anyone knowing.

Now, though, the girl was preoccupied with something else.

She scratched at the soft earth with her snowflake dagger. Half the blade was buried beneath the grass, and she had already carved out a sizeable collection of haphazard criss-crosses.

The sword sat by the fire. It shone even blacker in light.

“Take a wild guess,” the girl snarled, dragging her arm back violently. Another criss-cross completed itself. “Oh, A-Qing, by the way. I strapped the soul of your worst enemy to your sword, and he’ll probably wake up in a while, and we’ll deal with him then.” She slammed the knife down, all the way to the hilt. “Are you kidding me?”

“No,” the god said.

“What possessed you to do it?” the girl demanded. She was furious and confused, feeling that she had been betrayed in the worst way possible, and she did not understand why.

The god sighed. He reached for the forgotten sword, and cast a long shadow behind him.

“Think of it as punishment if you want,” said the god. He traced the wings with a lethargy of sorts, and there might have been sadness as well, but he looked exhausted in all ways of the world. “He ended many lives. He ruined many, too. If he dies, he’ll be gone, and it’ll be up to someone else to fix his mistakes.”

It was awful, but it made sense. That was what the girl hated most.

“I think,” said the girl, “that you just want to give him a second chance.”

“That’s a kind way of putting it,” the god replied, though he said nothing more.

They slept under trees that moved like giant creatures and a sky that bloomed with stars. Moonbeams scattered across curls of grass, and everything seemed so small.
Both of them were caught in dreams of the past.

It would not be a restful night.

Fuxing told me that Xue Yang will not remember much when he wakes up. That is good and bad. Good because he is an evil fucker and bad because he is an evil fucker. If he does not fix his mistakes, I will throw Jiangzai in the ocean and find another sword.

I will have to think about this until he wakes up. It is very complicated. I have many feelings and they are not good.

Today we saw a big temple on a big mountain. Nobody else went in because it was a weird temple. There was a big statue of a god, but I do not know who it was. The inscription was too old and worn down for Fuxing to read. She had a big sash and a big sword. She looked very strong.

When we got in Fuxing told me to try feeling my spiritual energy.

It turns out I have a golden core for some reason.

I can become a cultivator. This is very good news. I do not know what cultivators do, but they seem very useless. But they are strong and I want to be even stronger. Then I will help everyone they refuse to help.

Now I will not slow anyone down. I will prove that I am worth keeping.

---

**Walking The Moon (Literally)**

There were stars in the sky, and they were not very bright.

Sometimes the girl and the god would find shelter in town; other times, they would set up camp underneath the open sky. Sometimes the ground would be wet with rainwater and smell of worms. Sometimes the air would be dry and still and tickle of firescent.

On that night, it was dry: the very air felt like it had cracked, and the girl sat as far away from the fire as she could. She picked the bark of a branch she found a little while back, exposing the misty-wet, soft flesh beneath.

“It’s a full moon,” said the god, all of a sudden.

The girl looked up. Her glassy eyes saw the stars and the moon, but there was nothing reflected in her milky gaze. “It is,” she said. “So what?”
“It’s good luck.”

“I guess it might be,” said the girl. “It’s brighter, I suppose.”

The god smiled. It was a knowing smile, full and flush with an unspeakable wisdom of the unknown. “Yes,” was his answer, though it was not much of an answer at all. “You never know what you might find under light such as this.”

Something clattered in the bushes. Only the god recognized the sound: the girl was still young, and she had only seen death, and not decay.

The branch in her hand was the least of her worries. She shuffled closer to the god, eyes wide and searching the darkness wildly. Something was moving outside of the safe boundary of light the flames created, and she could hear it.

“Fuxing,” called the girl, unnerved. “What’s that?”

“Shh,” hushed the god.

Something clattered in the bushes again. It was a hollow noise, like knocking on old wood, but it was much older than that, and it echoed much further.

When it finally strolled out from the undergrowth, it might as well have walked through a wall: the girl knew that it was there, and it would approach, but the fear of the known kept her in wary curiosity.

“It’s a dog,” said the girl.

“It’s a hound,” the god retorted, strangely decisive about the dog’s hound-ness. His voice was a bit higher than usual, like he was scared. But that must have been the girl’s imagination.

They walked in a group of four, keeping a formation of two-and-two. Every step they took brushed the ground, airy and delicately, as if they were running their paws over the dry grass. They walked lightly, and they pawed the ground lightly, but their joints clacked noisily against each other. Neither skin nor flesh covered their gaunt, sharp bodies.

As they approached, they cackled something in a strange language. It sounded like laughing, but it also sounded like drums, if they were full of sand and bark.

“Hello,” said the girl. “Can we help you?”

The hounds laughed. Their heads clacked and wobbled.

There was nothing more to say. All the hounds did was laugh and warble in some ancient language, and all the god did was sit stiffly.

The girl tried reaching out to pet one of the boney creatures, and it giggled so viciously that she tucked her hands between her legs for the rest of the night.

It was only when a cold gape swept a blanket of clouds over the full moon that the hounds left. They lifted their heads, growled at the darkness, and trudged back into the bushes, all while they shook and clattered.

It was silent for a moment, but only a moment.

“Let’s just go to sleep,” said the god, the relief obvious in his voice. His shoulders slumped
downward, and he breathed like he had been holding his breath all this time.

The girl was tired. She was confused and more wary of the shadows than ever. Even so, she simply said, “Fine.”

She hugged her sword to her chest and put her back to the god’s. Even through his many layers of robes, he was warm, and alive, and breathing.

“Where are we going?” asked the girl, when they were both walking the border between wakefulness and dreams. Her voice was young and drowsy, like the child she never truly did get to be.

The god was silent for a moment. Then he said, “I don’t know.”

“Then,” began the girl, “why are we going?”

“To find something. To... be found.”

“For what? By what?”

“I don’t know,” spoke the god. His voice sounded tired, and something far more weary than sleep crept into his song.

He sank into himself, or so it seemed. The lull of his chest and head slowed, and he drifted off with a deep sigh.

The girl was alone now, and she was awake. For a few moments, or perhaps it was hours, she wrung her fingers together. They were small and dirty, scabbed and tough. Just how she liked it.

They slept underneath the stars, the clouded moon, and a great black sky.

There are many monsters in the world. Here are some weird things I have seen:

1. Lots of walking corpses. They make weird noises but are very dumb. They run away from Fuxing. They are very easy to kill. As long as they do not bite you, it is not that bad. Even when they try to attack, they are very slow. Stab them and it will be over.

2. Some fierce corpses. They are very scary. They are loud and fast and have sharp claws. I do not like them. Fuxing handles them because they are too fast for me.

3. Foxes with too many tails. They smile and talk and it is very weird. I do not like them very much. They know too much and they are everywhere. Fuxing does not like them much either. At least he is somewhat smart.

4. Skeleton dogs. They are VERY weird. They do not talk but they make weird noises. They only appear under a full moon. When we travel they like to follow along and bring us shiny objects. We do not touch them. They are weird and I do not like it.

People do not see them, but Fuxing sees them. Sometimes he kills them to make the world a better place. He is very strong, but I knew that already. I will be just as strong as him one day.

Some of the monsters do not seem that bad. They beg for their lives and cry when they die.

I feel a little sorry for them. But only a little.
“We’ll be practicing breathing today,” the god said, so very sure of himself that the moon could fall out of the sky and he would have thought it inevitable.


“Don’t give me that,” said the god. “It’s time for you to learn how to breathe properly.”

The girl thought this was all immensely ridiculous. There was a good meal to be had of fresh game and dried herbs, yet it was being delayed by some strange antics once again.

A *plop* accompanied a small splash of water as the girl kicked a stone into the river bank. “I think,” she said petulantly, “that you’re out of your mind.”

“Am not,” the god retorted, not a single hair out of place. “Shall we begin?”

These sorts of weird things were all because of the girl’s potential, which was round and golden and a little larger than a marble. If you held it up to the sun, it would shine just as bright, and if you held it to the night, it would light your path. It revolved deep within her, in her heart of hearts, and it made her more durable, more powerful, and more competent.

The girl knew this, and she was willing to put up with many things. This time, things seemed ridiculous.

Even so, she simply said, “Fine,” and that was that.

They sat by the river bank, dipping their toes into warm water. The god preferred to teach as if he was holding a conversation, and the girl thought that was good, because she had little patience for being told what to do all the time. Her skin tickled under the late afternoon sun as she listened and tried her best to understand.

So.

Breathing. Is there really anything to talk about? Air goes in, air goes out. Reflex is all it is: a rise and fall, like the ebb of the tide. A natural thing given at birth, and a natural thing taken at death.

“I don’t think so,” spoke the god. “I think that anyone can be just as strong as a cultivator if they train correctly. Golden core or not.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Not yet, it doesn’t.” The god’s smile was a shiny, vicious thing. It gleamed under the drooping sun and shone upon the marble-pattern waters. “You’ll be the first, you see.”

The girl endured the lesson as best as she could. She tried breathing as the god told her: in through the nose, and out through the mouth. She closed her eyes and tried to smell everything around her at once, but all that she could make out was honey and ash. Her tongue tickled of something bittersweet, and she felt no stronger than before.

“Nothing’s happening,” said the girl.
“Keep going,” the god urged.

“Until what? What’s supposed to happen?”

“I’m not sure. But you’ll know when it happens.”

That only made the girl angrier. She shut her eyes with such ferocity that her fuzzy orbs clouded her vision. Water splashed as she kicked her legs up and down.

It smelled like fire, and the girl was losing her patience, and this was all stupid and a huge waste of time.

Beside the girl was a sturdy rock, shaped somewhat like a round tablet. It had been worn down over time by rain and wind, and it was smooth to touch.

In the foulest of moods, the girl clenched her fingers into a tight fist and swung it at the rock.

Three things happened in succession:

A blinding light erupted from her hand. The rock exploded into pieces. The girl and the god both shrieked.

“Oh my god,” said the girl.

“Oh my god,” said the god, with a healthy pinch of hysteria.

“That,” said the girl, feeling much better about herself, “was awesome.”

There was a twisted look on the god’s face that might have been fear. “A-Qing, no,” was all he said.

But his words were spoken to deaf ears.

Surely there were more rocks around. Bigger and stronger, but punchable all the same.

“Let’s try again,” the girl declared, mostly to herself.

They ate lunch late that day. If the girl noticed the god sitting further away than usual, she made no comment. All that she knew was that her hands were sore, her head pounded, and her throat was cold and wheezy. She also knew that fires burn strong, but with the wind, they burn even stronger.

There was dust on her robes, and she shook it off beside the river.

Her nose tickled. It smelled of fire.

She sneezed.

Fuxing taught me how to control my breathing today. It is harder than it sounds. He said it makes you strong because you are at peace.

I only figured it out when I got very angry. He is a fool. He says things should not “just explode like that” when they are punched. How does he know this? He is not me and he has not punched anything before like me because he is a fool. Maybe I will punch him instead.
Making things explode is fun. I will practice breathing so I can make even bigger rocks explode. Fuxing is scared of it and it is very funny.

---

**What You Want**

It was raining.

The skies were grey and damp. It smelled of heat, but it also smelled of sharp lightning. The distant rumble of thunder ran through the air, and with it came sweeping and sudden gales.

The god and the girl were not afraid of rain, but they were also not fond of catching their deaths.

At the top of a small hill, there was a small structure made of fine stone. It was rugged and worn, overrun with moss and vines upon every surface. Perhaps a hundred, or even a thousand years ago, it would have been something of importance.

Now it was a shelter from the storm.

The girl and the god settled beside each other, their knees tucked close. There was not much room under the stone slab, but it would do.

The rustling of their robes came to a halt. They sat there, upon the cold earth, and watched as the rain washed down in unrelenting waves.

It was silent for a while. It was always silent for at least a few moments.

The sword was heavy on the girl’s back. She swung it in front of her chest, and for a moment, she hesitated.

“You don’t need to use it if you don’t want,” spoke the god.

The girl was silent. Her fingers brushed over the outstretched wings, following the upward curve of the ebony steel. With the blade sheathed, it looked like it was rising; used as a the weapon it was, it looked like it was falling.

There was a slumbering spirit within the sword, and he was not kind.

When the girl spoke next, her voice was hoarse.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I know what I want.”

The god looked weary, as if the rain had eroded away at him, too. “I suppose,” was all that he could manage.

The rain fell, fell, and fell. It seemed as if the heavens would fall. It seemed like it would never end.

But, as all things do, it did.

(An end to the rain, and an end to the heavens. Everything has an end.)
Jiangzai is hard to use. It is supposed to be used with one hand but I need to use two. It is long and heavy and always smells like blood.

I will ask Fuxing to make it better later. For now I will train so I can kill monsters too. I have already killed one. It should not be so bad from now on.

Strings That Snap

It was a quiet night in a quiet village. Twilight had not yet descended into true night, but it was plenty dark and far too dangerous for children to be running around.

That was what the innkeeper had said, smiling at the girl with equal parts kindness and condescension.

The girl had been in a bad mood all throughout dinner, picking at the dishes with a vengeance. She huffed and harrumphed to most answers, grumbling out words whenever she had to. It was a relief to finally retreat to their room, but it felt like a great defeat of sorts.

Needless to say, the girl was exceedingly frustrated. She sat on her bed, legs crossed and hands clenched together, muttering curses and breathing in the tepid air. The god sat on the other bed, flipping through manuscripts with half a mind to spare.

It was only when a small “Oh” broke the monotony that the girl opened her eyes.

“What?” she said, annoyed all the same.

The god held up his sleeve to the window. Moonlight danced across golden peonies and revealed a large tear where something had split the divinity in half.

Red flames flickered for a moment, but only a moment. The god lowered his arm, and all was good and normal.

“What’d you tear it on?” the girl asked. She was more curious than angry now. “How’d you only realize now?”

“I’m not sure,” the god answered, though it was not much of an answer at all.

“You don’t know a lot of things.”

“Well,” began the god, in a voice that could have been denial.

But as the half-moon peered out from the rolling clouds and shone bright alongside a million stars, light fell onto the room like a thick curtain.

Sometimes, though, you only realize how brilliant the light is when you see how far your shadow stretches.

The girl looked up and met the night. Silver light bounced off her dark hair and hugged her young,
full face. She blinked once, twice, her eyes cloudy like fractured ice, and she turned back to the god.

The god’s shoulders fell, his head lolled, and his eyes were half-lidded and radiant like the moon.

“Well,” he said, and for a moment, there was blood on his lips. “I suppose it can’t be helped.”

The girl stared at him for much longer than she had the moon. With half a sigh and half a hesitation, she simply said, “I suppose.”

Like that, they returned to themselves, and that was it.

The god’s fingers moved quickly and quietly under the wobbling moonlight. It seemed as if he was trembling, but that, too, might have been a trick of the night.

On thin sheets and an old bed, the girl breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth.

It smelled of river water, fire, and honey. There was something that smelled sharp and thick of blood, but it was impossible to tell on whose hands it smelled stronger.

The sky darkened, and darkened, and fell into night.

---

I think there is something weird about Fuxing. He says he is a god of luck, which is dumb. He is not very lucky. He actually has very bad luck. Maybe he cannot change his own luck. That is dumb as well. Is that a rule for gods? If it is, then that is a very cruel rule.

I am getting better at breathing. It takes a lot of focus but one day I will be able to do it without thinking. Tonight I will try to practice in my sleep to make sure I can keep it up all the time.

My golden core is also getting stronger. I do not understand why cultivators say meditating is the best way to improve. I have tried meditating and it is boring and makes me angry. The best way to improve a golden core is to do what you love and I do not love meditating.

I wonder what Fuxing’s golden core looks like.

I wonder if he has one.

---

The Advantage of Vantage Points

One foot in front of the other: that was what she had been taught.

Lips pressed into a thin line, the girl leapt for the next branch. She barely caught it, and her fingers slipped on the bark.

Panic welled in her for a moment, but she quickly found her footing. With a great deal of effort, she scrambled into the crook between two thick branches.
“Not bad at all,” said the god, from high above in a neighbouring tree.

The girl grumbled. New blisters were plastering themselves over the soft skin of her palms that had yet to be toughened by the sword. “I can’t get a good grip,” she complained.

“It still hurts to grab too hard,” the god guessed. When the girl’s frown deepened, he nodded. “As I thought. Keep practicing, and you’ll build up skin thick enough to face anything.”

“I don’t think,” said the girl, “that tree-climbing makes you invincible.”

“Of course not!” There was a rustle of leaves, and a familiar face popped out, dangling upside-down. When the god smiled, the canopy-filtered sunlight only shone upon his eyes. One half of his face was smiling, and the other was not. “If it did, I certainly wouldn’t be here right now.”

If you looked close enough, you would have seen something akin to grief.

But the girl had already turned away. She prodded at the scabs on her hands, but avoided peeling them, as she had been told.

“I’ll try again,” she declared, rising unsteadily to her feet.

If you looked close enough, you would have seen something soften and melt.

“Then come on up,” said the god. His voice was distant in an instant. “Can you catch me, A-Qing?”

“Who do you think I am?” the girl asked heatedly.

Neither of them knew the answer well, but that was nothing new.

They climbed, they leapt, and they fell. The girl fell many times, and it hurt. The higher she climbed, the more terrible the pain would be.

The god fell, too. His falls were from great heights, and the girl feared for his life more than once, though she never spoke it aloud.

But they were alright. Nothing broke, though skin had been broken and bruises splotched their skin. They hobbled away, leaning on each other a little more than they would have liked, but they were standing, and they were moving forward.

There were blisters on the girl’s hands, and they smelled of wood and honey.

---

Nothing very exciting happened today. We walked most of the day. When I got bored Fuxing taught me how to climb trees. He is very good at climbing trees. I am not surprised. Half of learning to climb is learning how to fall.

Fuxing is a god but he is very strange. Why does he know so much about climbing trees? He knows much more than a god should know. Why is he not in the heavens with all the other gods?

Maybe they do not like him. I would not blame them, but that means they are not looking closely enough.
Maybe they are better at hiding. But that is dumb. There is nothing to hide from.

Maybe they have all died and Fuxing is the only one left. I am not sure if that is true or not. People do not believe much in gods these days, but they will pray when there is one in front of them.

Maybe the gods gave up a long time ago. Maybe they ran away.

I do not know which one is worse.

Today Fuxing started sparring with me.

He has eight golden swords that are very long and pretty. They float, but he can swing them very easily. Maybe other people would be scared, but I am not scared of him. He is a big baby under all those robes, and he knows it.

Fighting with Jiangzai is still hard. I am getting stronger, but it is hard to keep up a long fight. Fuxing said that was okay.

He taught me how to fight with my bare hands today. I liked it. I am good at it. I am small, but I am fast, and I can punch and kick very hard. The next time someone tries to do bad things to me, I will dig my thumbs into their eyes and press down as hard as I can. Then we will see who the blind one is.

Sparring is fun. Fighting is not.

I think the world would be better if people did not fight so much.

---

Experimental Inaccuracy

It was a beautiful day in the middle of nowhere. Fresh winds, clear skies, sunlight that was neither too warm nor too cold: it was perfect weather for children to be getting into all sorts of trouble.

That was exactly what the girl was doing.

If you had come across that scene, you would have been very confused, and I would not have blamed you. Your best choice would have been to back away slowly, as if you had never seen anything to begin with, and return to life as normal.

There was a girl, and she had scrambled up into a tree without losing her grip. Slips of paper scrunched in her hands as she hugged a thick branch.

“A-Qing, get down here!” shouted the god, from the very base of the tree. He sounded fearful, or annoyed, but it was difficult to tell.

“I don’t want to!” the girl shouted back. “Who wants to draw boring flame talismans?” she continued, her outrage directed toward something senseless and unseen. She stomped, and the entire
tree shook. “Let me finish these and I’ll come down!”

“Those are exploding talismans!”

“Why else would I be screaming, you idiot?”

“I haven’t even tested them yet!”

Outrage turned to heated confusion. The girl, rightfully angered, snatched a pine cone from a nearby branch and hurled it at the god. The projectile hit him between the eyes, and he reeled back with a yelp.

“If you haven’t tested them, then what’s the problem?” the girl demanded, reaching for another pine cone. “Stop being so stingy!”

“You know how my test runs go,” the god said, brows pinched in childish petulance.

“Then make it *my* test run, and we’ll all be fine!”

The god massages his temples. “Please cooperate,” he eventually said, each word clipped like a fine hedge. “I really don’t want another repeat of the flying talisman incident.”

A pine cone pelted him square in the face. It was infused with a fair amount of spiritual energy, and the impact was akin to being attacked with a large rock.

Luckily, the god had a hard head. His breath was knocked from his lungs, and his vision went blurry for a moment, but in the end, he was only exasperated.

“A flying talisman, too?” demanded the girl. “All these useful things, and you want me to be your personal lighter?”

That was only partially true: the god was a good teacher, but talisman-drawing was difficult to teach. He was, after all, the leading expert during his time, and he did not think it was a stretch to say that he still was.

Talisman-drawing was difficult to teach because not many people thought of the weird, fanciful, outright crazy ideas the god did. However, the girl was ambitious, and she had no such reservations as long as it made her stronger.

The god was an a loss of what to do. Not once had anyone shown such interest in his work, and perhaps it was better that way. It was dangerous stuff, hypothetical and theoretical until something either worked or caught on fire, and he was not sure how to teach a child such perilous studies.

So there they were, a god and a girl, yelling at each other about how explosions were dangerous on two completely different sides of the same argument, and it was almost funny.

The girl fell out of the tree after her foot slipped. The exploding talismans were confiscated. The god promised to teach her less destructive talismans that would keep her interested and entertained as long as she mastered the flame talisman.

She became very good at drawing flame talismans.

Years later, she would become very good at drawing explosive talismans, too.
Today I started drawing talismans. Or writing talismans. It is more like writing, but it is harder because the words do not make sense.

Talismans are very useful. They can be used by normal people as well, and they can last a long time. I think more people should learn how to draw talismans. If they do not have cinnabar, they can use ink, and it will work as well. If someone is bleeding, they can use blood, and it will be even more effective.

Blood is funny that way. It is very useful, but people get upset when you cut yourself, and it is not fun when they try to take the knife away from you. They are very stupid.

Fuxing is very stupid!!

I have noticed that sometimes, he does not sleep. Or he pretends to sleep, and then he wakes up and does dumb things, like drawing arrays or reading.

Nighttime is for sleeping. There is a reason it is dark. He is very, very stupid and it makes my head hurt.

I set a bedtime for him. If he does not sleep by then, I will tie his hair into knots and he will spend the entire day combing it.

He is a god!! Why is he so dumb!!

We met someone from one of the Big Four today.

She was wearing purple robes and had a bell so she was from Yunmeng Jiang. I did not recognize her, but she seemed to recognize Fuxing. They seemed very friendly with each other, but for some reason, Fuxing seemed very nervous.

They talked about things I did not really understand. They mentioned a teahouse and an infant and archery. I think the girl was called Jiang Muai. I do not really remember.

She also talked to me. She did not seem that much older than me, but she was very strong. I could tell because she was confident and had a sword and a bow, but she was also modest. She told me that Fuxing taught her a few years ago when he was in Lotus Pier.

We did not talk for long because she had a night-hunt to attend. If all the people in Lotus Pier are like that, then I would like to visit one day. They seem very competent.

I am just happy to know that I am not Fuxing’s first student. At least he has some kind of idea what he is doing.
Lotus pods are hard to pick. Fuxing does not get to say otherwise. He picks them too fast. He laughed at me so I pushed him into the water. Now all our clothes are wet and it is his fault. He is very stupid.

---

**Rust**

There was a small town, unimportant and forgettable in every way.

Small buildings accompanied small fields and small gates. The people, too, were small, hunching in on themselves and walking with their heads down.

It was in the middle of nowhere, far from the beaten path and trading routes. The people there had lived in solitude for many years, tending to themselves and their crops with a sort of mundane acceptance you would show while washing your face. They did not move through life as much as life moved through them: skin sagged and cracked, hair dried and greyed, and they never changed.

The air was still, as if it had not been disturbed in many years. It smelled faintly sour, not the fruity sort of nose-wrinkling, but instead an intolerable rotting away of something many years dead.

Everything was boring, and they liked it that way—or, rather, they had a sense of how much worse it could be. And they liked how things were. It was fine.

Or so it seemed.

In such a small town, with such small houses, small gates, and small people, you would not notice if a few grisly murders passed here and there. You, after all, would not have lived there. You, a sensible individual, would be perfectly and utterly ignorant.

Torn to shreds, broken to pieces, drained of blood, skinned down entirely: these were only a few unfortunate fates. Others—well. We will not speak of the others.

It smelled sour of death and decay. The wind wailed something grey and dark. It was noon, and the sun was absent. The very earth felt like it was crumbling, dry and flaky and settled over with dust.

There was a town, and it was dying.

“Fuxing,” spoke the girl.

Her voice shook. The air fractured. Every breath she took into her small lungs was cold and scratched at her throat.

“Fuxing,” she spoke again. She dug her fingers into her palms, etching tiny, bleeding crescent moons into tough skin.

It smelled of blood. It smelled as if everything was awash in blood. It smelled like what the girl imagined a smithy to be: metallic, a little rusted over, sharp with iron and steel. But there was no firescent, and there was nothing to be made here.
The girl stood still as the death before her.

How many corpses were there, strewn throughout that barren street? Ten? Twenty? Fifty?

How many of their hearts had she pierced? Ten? Twenty? Forty-nine?

Her hand shook. The ebony of her blade was clean, for walking corpses shed no blood. Yet her shoes were splattered with tiny crimson droplets.

The god’s blade dripped slowly.

One. Two. Three.

There are many ways to kill a man. The girl knew that, now. Pierce his heart, lop off his head, slit his throat.

It was so easy. Skin was so thin, and flesh was so soft. Any blade could do the trick.

It happened so fast, as it always does.

One moment, there was a man. Manic laughter rang through the streets as he stumbled on the sharpness of his own words, his own existence. He raised his hand, and his victims rose as they fell: bloodless, ghastly, and lost.

When they fell again, it was one by one, as it had always been.

When the man fell, it was to a golden blade.

It cut through his neck in a single thrust. His eyes went wide, and the tremors of his last breaths shook the sword that delivered unto him justice. His gaze was manic, too, as he searched wildly for his executioner.

Open lips tried to find pungent breath, perhaps to speak, or to scream. What left him was a spurt of blood, spat from his mouth like his body could not bear him any longer.

The girl lowered her sword, then, and thought it was awfully cruel to kill someone from behind.

The god felt the last twitches fade, watching with the same flat expression. He dragged his sword back. The body wavered, and shook, and finally fell.

And here they were: a girl and a god and a corpse.

“Fuxing,” the girl called one final time. She sheathed her dry blade, then moved to tug on the god’s robes. “Let’s go. We’re done here. It’s over.”

The god took a rattling breath. Something was loose inside him, but he only said, “Yes. I suppose we’re done.”

It was over. It would all be over. The townsfolk were beginning to peek out of their windows. Relief filled their eyes and their words. The corpses could be returned to their families. A good rain would wash the blood away.

The end was in sight, and yet—

“Murderer!”
Fuxing killed a man today.

I do not understand it all yet. I am... not scared. I am surprised. That is all.

He was a bad man. There was a small village, and he had murdered many of the people there. Everyone was scared of him. He could control corpses. He smelled like hate and anger, and his laughter hurt my ears.

He reminded me of Xue Yang.

It happened so fast. He was evil, and he killed many people, but he died so quickly. Fuxing put a sword through his throat and he stopped.

That was it.

He deserved it. He was evil, and everyone hated him.

But there was a lady who cried for him.

She ran out of the house he came from and cried over his dead body. She said some very stupid things and called Fuxing a monster.

She did not get to speak for long. The townspeople dragged her back. They thanked Fuxing, which the lady should have done, and said that he was their hero.

I am not sure why Fuxing looked so strange. He was smiling, but it looked like it hurt. I wanted to tell him not to make such a weird face, but I did not know how to say it.

Now that I think of it, I think Fuxing might just be confused. It is always confusing to see someone that everyone hates loved by a single person. Because then you must ask yourself why, and what they saw in them, and those are uncomfortable questions to ask.

There is nothing we can do. Life is hard. Living is hard.

We can only try our best and hope that it will be enough.

Fuxing has been quiet for the past few days. I think he is still bothered by what happened.

He likes lotus pods, and I heard that Lotus Pier has a lot of lotus pods. I will ask him if he wants to go there tomorrow.
“Fuxing?”

“Yes?”

“You like lotus pods, right?”

“Of course I do. They’re beautiful, they’re tasty, and they’re very easy to steal.”

“Uh-huh. You know, I was talking to a merchant yesterday, and he said that Lotus Pier is great for stuff like that around this time of year.”

“Lotus... Pier.”

“I’ve never been, but the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s there, right? It must be huge! I mean, I know it burnt down, but you helped out a bit here and there. We could go back. Well, you could go back, and I could come along. That lady—Jiang Muai, I think—said to visit sometime. We could go.”

“A-Qing.”

“Uh-huh?”

“We can go anywhere, but we can’t go to Lotus Pier. Not now.”

“What? But why?”

“Just trust me.”

“Whatever, I guess. Then when will we go?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“You don’t know a lot of things.”

“I know.”

“It’s fine. Doesn’t matter much, anyway. Where to next?”

Fuxing does not want to go to Lotus Pier. I think that is very strange, but as long as we go somewhere, It does not matter too much.

We made in to a city called Yiling today.

It is a bleak city. I am not sure why, but things seem heavier than usual here.

Fuxing seemed very upset, and I think that is his own fault. He was the one who wanted to make a
big detour around Lotus Pier, and now we are in this dusty city. He has not taken his weimao off once. I think he is afraid that people will recognize him.

I am tired. I will write more tomorrow. We will walk around the city in the morning and see if there is anything we can do. Apparently, there is an evil place called the Burial Mounds around here. The Yiling Patriarch died there four years ago, and I am sure people are still scared because of that.

I think they are very stupid. The Yiling Patriarch was not killed. He died at his own hands.

I do not think he ever wants to come back. But that is just my guess.

I will not be able to write much for the next few nights.

There is a ghost that is terrorizing the townspeople. They are very scared, and once they heard about Fuxing, they begged for him to help.

Now we are chasing a ghost. We will stay up all night if we must.

I will write as soon as I am able to.

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That Time In Yiling

It was quiet in Yiling.

Silence filled the streets and the houses, sinking into the dry earth and dry wood. It was an oppressive sort of silence, the kind that comes before a clap of thunder, or that walks the edge of a knife before blood is shed.

It was quiet, and the moon had hidden itself behind the plum-coloured clouds. The only light to guide the way was a talisman, held between two calloused fingers, which were attached to a calloused hand, which led up to the figure of a girl. She walked alone through the dusty streets, which wound throughout the darkened city, which was utterly silent under the dead of night.

There was a sword on the girl’s back, but not once did she reach for it.

Something clattered in the unending darkness. She flinched, swinging the talisman over to investigate, and saw a matted tail vanish behind a cart.

A breath left her, but it was not one of relief. She took in a lungful of the old, ashen air, ran her tongue over her lips to wet them, and sang.

Hey, itty bitty girl,
Walking the streets all alone.
Do you need a helping hand?
Or some coin to make your belly full?
Her voice shook and cracked. She was not a bad singer, not in the slightest, but the weight of what felt like a thousand eyes pressed down upon her, and she felt very small.

Down the street, in the shadow of the Burial Mounds, which cast upon the town in darkness as it did in light, something silver and spectral flickered.

The girl’s lips felt dry, so she wetted them again. Louder, she sang:

*Hey, itty bitty boy,*
*Walking the streets all alone.*
*Do you need a helping hand?*
*Or some cloth to make cold nights not cold?*

At first, there was silence.

Then, little by little, like a child reaching to be held, someone wandered through the starless night.

His robes dragged along the ground. Something fell from his eyes, but in the darkness, it was impossible to tell what it was: blood, ink, or tears.

“You,” said the girl. She lifted the talisman higher. “Who are you?”

The ghost stepped closer. Each footstep fell slowly, like he did not want to move forward at all.

“You must be here for a reason. You’re from the Burial Mounds, aren’t you? How’d you get out? And why did you choose to stay here, of all places?”

The ghost moaned. It echoed of a pain that was old but not gone. It bled of regret and sorrow. It smelled like flowers and blood. It trembled and shook, and it was so, so lost.

“Wait,” the girl spoke suddenly. Her voice, which did not shake, shook. “Wait. Are you—”

Whatever she wanted to say was lost and would never be found.

A golden sword cut through the shadows, and it would have cut the ghost, too, if he had not stumbled back over the length of his own robes.

It seemed as if a star had plummeted out of sky. Soundless, shining, and impossibly bright: this was a herald of better days, prosperous futures. The hand behind it was not.

For a golden god of luck, he was not so bright.

He was breathing hard, like he had been running for a long time. His hair, usually messy with thoughtlessness, was knotted and wild. Writ all over his features was panic, or fear, or even deadly recognition, but it was so finely controlled that it was impossible to tell.

The girl was frightened. She had never seen the god in such a disheveled state before. Even when he killed, he was cold and elegant as marble.

“You,” spoke the god, and his voice trembled. “What are you?”

The ghost only wailed. He stumbled back, pushing himself to his feet, and began to back away.

The god drew breath and held it. Expelled it. His hand shook as he drew his sword from the ground, but he brandished it like it was his birthright.
“Hang on,” said the girl. “We should talk to him. We don’t know why—”

“It doesn’t matter,” spoke the god. He twisted his wrist, ready to gut. To flay. “It’s an illusion, A-Qing. It has no place here. We kill it tonight.” His arm drew back, and the light of his sword made his cheekbones seem hollow and thin. “It dies here and now. Do you hear me?”

The girl no longer knew who the god was speaking to. All she could do was nod, unsheathe her own sword, and let the weight of the black metal scratch the ground.

A single red jewel, embedded between two falling wings, pulsed like a beating heart.

It was cold. She knew there were things that were right, and things that were wrong, but this was not one of the things she knew how to tell good from bad.

A strange something clogged at her throat, congealing from spit, blood, and ash, and it itched and burned and made her feel sick.

“This isn’t right,” said the girl. Her voice, which shook, did not shake at all. Not here, and not now. “It doesn’t feel right.”

The god laughed. It was a bitter, hollow thing, that knocked against his ribcage and lungs and was caught somewhere in between. “Don’t be foolish. Nobody sensible believes in ghosts. They’re all filthy liars.”

Finally, the girl knew what it was she felt. It took only a few words, stitched together like bleeding gashes on a dying man, to properly settle that deepening pit of injustice that was welling in her.

“I think,” said the girl, moving to position herself between the god and the ghost, “that someone’s lying here, and it’s not me, and it’s not him.”

A trembling breath left the ghost. He let out a quiet sob, then hung his head in shame, of relief, or thanks.

The girl looked back at him once. She swallowed. His face…

The god was silent for a moment. His eyes, under which she had memorized half the night sky, were empty grey and burned crimson.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” the god said coldly.

“Neither of us know what we’re doing,” the girl fired back. She could bear the weight of a thousand lives, and in each and every one, she would fight for what she believed in. “Would it kill you to just let him talk?”

It was dark. The god’s laugh was darker. The shadows were long. The god’s chuckles were longer. The girl prided herself on her endurance, but when she stood before the god, she could not help but feel exhausted.

“Kill me?” repeated the god, almost shouting the words. His voice was thin and mocking. “My words—do you think they ever helped me? You think they ever helped anyone?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl. “I don’t know a lot of things.”

“Then get back here and stop spouting nonsense. Better yet, kill that thing behind you.”

The ghost wailed.
In a steady beat of one, two, three, the gem pulsed. The girl raised her sword higher, against the one person she never thought she would meet on the other side of the night.

Was she scared? No, not exactly. She felt a little betrayed, but deep down, she knew it was foolish: the god owned her nothing, and they were just two people.

But there were things she would not stand for, and this was one of them.

“No,” said the girl. “I won’t.”

A cold gale dragged through the ghostly city, and with it came a low fog that settled like snow.

Sometime between her resolute denial, the god’s angered cry of, “A-Qing!” and the spectral howl of velvet night, the ghost had slipped into nothingness with a sob.

The fog lifted as suddenly as it had fallen. A horrible mix of fury, confusion, and forced serenity painted a delicate image of a being that was neither divine nor wretched.

“Come with me,” the god said suddenly, dispelling his sword in a burst of starlight.

The girl sheathed her blade at last. “Where are we going?” she asked, cautiously.

“To find the ghost.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“You can’t change my mind that easily,” the god said, and his voice was cold as frost. “But if you’re so insistent, you can try speaking to it.”

The girl was pleased and relieved. She took long strides to keep up with the god, almost running at times, but she nodded her head and felt better knowing that her words had been acknowledged.

“But,” spoke the god, “once you hear him, you won’t need any more convincing.”

It was awfully rude and arrogant of the god to say such things, but the girl thought that he had at least a bit of a right to be somewhat godlike, and she let it pass. “We’ll see,” was all she said.

Not a single living soul peered out from the houses to inquire about the noise. They likely all knew better than to get between a god and a ghost. They were cowards, but at least they were sensible. Or rather, cowards were too sensible, and that was why neither the god nor the girl understood them well.

The streets were not difficult to navigate. The roads were wide, and even in darkness, you could walk from one end of the city to the other as long as you set out in a straight line.

As soon as the girl felt dry earth slope upward, she knew her fears (or anxieties, but she was nervous all the same) were confirmed.

“You want to go to the Burial Mounds at night?” she asked, astounded by this rash, very foolish decision.

“Are you scared?” the god asked.

“No,” the girl lied.

“Then we continue.”
It was an uphill climb. The dirt was loose and unstable, like it had been ground up and scattered atop tiny rocks. In the back of her mind, the girl knew why the ground beneath her felt so hollow, but that was not a good thought to entertain under inky night.

The girl knew what resentful energy smelled like now. It was sour with decay, but it also burnt of hatred. The higher they climbed, the more everything smelled like rot and fire. It was horrible.

The flame talisman lit up their surroundings, but just barely. There were weeds, and there were trees, but they were even blacker than the sky above. They looked like they had been black to begin with, but then they had been badly charred, and now they stood as monuments to themselves. It was unbearably lonely to see graves that were marked by dead things.

The first house they came upon was barely a house at all. The girl stepped closer, bending down to seek out the four corners of the dilapidated structure.

“Someone lived here,” she said, astonished. She widened her area of search and found even more ruins. When she stood, her robes were covered in ash, and her fingers were blackened with soot. “People actually tried to live here. But they didn’t do so well.”

The god was silent for a long time. “You can’t make life in a place like this,” he finally said.

“But they tried,” said the girl. “Why?”

The more she searched, the stranger things became.

There were planks of wood that might have been benches. There were bones tied together with fire-razed rope into what might have been lanterns. There were curved shards of what might have been jars of some sort, but it was all so dark and so utterly destroyed that it was impossible to tell.

“These people tried really hard,” the girl said, and she was almost impressed. “I guess you’d have to get creative in a place like this. You know, I lived in a coffin house before, and we literally slept like the dead.”

“I see,” said the god.

The girl had only heard rumours of the Yiling Patriarch, his evil deeds, and his inevitable demise. She knew what everyone knew: that he was a demon in human skin, that he had killed thousands upon thousands, that he got exactly what he deserved.

What the girl imagined now was this: the fearsome Yiling Patriarch, drinking himself silly on wine aged from local fruits, crammed between the few others that had lived here, fashioning bones into shoddy lanterns and wondering what sorts of crops would grow in the dead soil.

She bent down again, picking up a clay shard. “I wonder what it was like,” the girl said aloud, “to live with someone like the Yiling Patriarch.”

The god’s gaze was somewhere distant. “You would have to be the craziest or the kindest people in the world.”

“I guess that could apply to both parties,” the girl muttered, but she thought it was a rather stupid thought.

There was not much to see. The First Siege, according to stories, had burnt everything to the ground.

The god was quieter now, and he had lost all the furious energy he carried not so long ago. His feet
scuffed along the ground, like the weight of his robes was making him sink into the ashen earth, and the girl could not understand why.

“Say,” began the girl, “what do you think the Yiling Patriarch was like?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m curious,” was the girl’s answer, but it was only a small part of a greater whole. “You’re a god. What do the gods think of him?”

The god sighed. It caught in his throat and rattled out, like a broken bell. Like a child’s toy, that had been played with too hard for too long, only to be tossed aside in favour of shinier things.

“I wouldn’t know.” There was a despair of sorts in his words. “I’m the only god I’ve ever met.”

Tiny rocks rolled down the ashen hills as the girl scuffed the ground. There were shards of bone caught in the dirt and between the stones. The ancient and the newly dead were all here, and they were just as dusty as everyone else.

It was a mysterious, barren, equal world. Death was strange that way.

“Then,” said the girl, “what do you think of him?”

The god looked up with piercing, red-veiled eyes. They were sharp, very sharp, so very sharp that the girl thought that he had been cut on them many times before. “I think he must have been a monster,” he answered. “Don’t you?”

The girl could not be sure. It hurt to carry carry the god’s bleeding gaze. In the end, she nodded. “I guess so.”

Their trek continued. Ghosts began to crawl into sight, but they were weak in the presence of divinity. Even in a place as cursed as these death-sunken hills, it was easy to exorcise them.

A single swing of her sword sent the wailing spirits somewhere better. None of their faces were familiar.

As they marched upward, more and more talismans appeared, each one greater and stronger than the next. They were dormant, then glowed as the two passed, and fell silent again when they sensed no evil.

“Must be security measures,” the girl said, mostly to herself. She knocked her knuckles on one of the many stone beasts adorning the hills. “But is it to keep something in, or to keep something out?”

“Keep walking,” spoke the god, and nothing else.

They kept walking. The girl was confused, now, and she thought this journey was growing more pointless with every passing moment.

All she could see ahead of them was the gaping black void of a cave entrance: it opened wide, like the jaws of a giant monster, and it was impossible to peer in without stepping inside first.

The winds were cold. They stung at the girl’s cheeks and eyelids, whipping dust and coarse bone into the air, cutting like tiny blades.

“It’s too windy out here,” shouted the girl to the god, over screaming gales. “Let’s go in first!”
She left before she could hear any sort of answer. The earth crunched beneath her, and she thought for a moment that she saw what looked like crop fields pass beside her—turnips, maybe, by the looks of it—but it was likely just a trick of the shadows.

It was a relief to feel the wind drop away. The maw of the cave was dark, but a few talismans lit up the walls proper. It smelled like blood, a tangy, metallic odour that was sharp and sat at the back of her tongue stubbornly, but it was also warm.

The girl walked forward. When she reached out to touch the cave walls, her fingers returned covered in soot.

“A bit overkill,” she muttered to herself.

Soft steps echoed even softer through the vacant walls. The girl stopped before a pool of what appeared to be blood, but it was thinner (it rippled like water when she kicked a stone in) and smelled like rot.

Her nose scrunched involuntarily, but she edged closer to the horrid thing regardless.

What was this thing? Some sort of breeding grounds of evil things? Or a place to throw unwanted beings?

Whatever it was, its light was far softer than it had any right to be. It flickered crimson against the ashen walls, at times crackling like a tiny fire, then waving back and forth like a warm river, and it made no sense whatsoever.

There were slow steps behind her, and the girl turned.

The god approached like he was hesitant; each step had a sort of weight behind them, as if he was wading through a deep swamp.

“Look at this,” said the girl, beckoning him to walk faster. She tossed another rock into the blood pool, and this time, the liquid rose up to meet it, swallowing it down with a short blorp. Weird. “This must’ve been one of the Yiling Patriarch’s weird inventions.”

Curious, but also a little ignorant, the girl stretched out her hand above the red waters, as if to reach out for something.

And, just as something deep inside her expected, a rotting, death-eaten hand broke the waters to reach back.

She flinched back, a simple reflex to save herself, but it was not entirely needed. The god grabbed her collar and tugged back hard, dragging her away from the silent dangers of whatever resided in those awful waters.

The hand danced out, fingers skittering wildly like a spider. It slumped under the girl’s disgusted gaze, then slowly sunk back under.

“Don’t do anything foolish,” the god scolded, the most alive the girl had heard him in a while. He seemed faintly annoyed, though his stars swirled with panic. “This is an evil place. Things aren’t what they seem here.”

“Even though the Yiling Patriarch’s gone?”

“Especially because the Yiling Patriarch’s gone,” the god answered, with all the certainty in the
world.

The god moved with more confidence than he ought to have had. There was a large, flat stone along the wall, and it looked something like a makeshift bed, especially when the god scrutinized it, sighed, and set his outer robes upon it.

“That’s filthy,” said the girl, knowing that the god was lazy and disliked cleaning his robes.

“Yes, well, it’s better than sitting on the ground.”

“I think the ground’s cleaner than that rock.”

The god paused. He looked down at the rock, then down at the ground.

“You’re right,” he eventually admitted. “But I think I’m fine where I am.”

That was fine and all, but the girl thought the more important question was why they were sleeping in this god-forsaken place.

“It’s not as bad as it seems,” the god said defensively. Then, with a laugh that turned bitter and curdled as it left his lips, he continued, “That thing couldn’t possibly run away from its home.”

“You mean the ghost,” said the girl.

“All things want a home,” spoke the god, and his voice resounded through the cavern, shaking ash from the cold walls and disturbing the deathly still waters of the blood pool. He laid his hands on his lap and said, “It’ll come.”

He sat there, dressed only in the thin layers of his inner robes. His black hair spilled down his back and over his shoulders, rising and falling with each slow breath he took. In the darkness, and under the light of the talismans, he blinked, and all that was left was grey.

The god coughed to break the silence. “Well,” he began, “make yourself comfortable. We have a long night ahead of us.”

The night would be as long from now onward as it had already been. The girl knew this and said nothing.

“Fine,” was all left her. She settled on the ground, propping her sword against the rock, and leaned back.

Sleep was a tempting thing, and the girl found herself closing her eyes more than once. But that only made the darkness darker and the quiet quieter, so she traced characters into the old earth and rock beneath her.

She wished she could write in her journal as she always did, but she was not sure exactly what to write, for she did not understand what was going on.

Gods are weird, the girl thought. Ghosts are weird, too.

She closed her eyes, and she rested her head against the rock. She did not mean to fall asleep, but it is called falling for a reason. And as she fell, she thought she felt warm fingers brush her cheek, delicately, tenderly, as if it was afraid to touch, and there was a quiet song, or a lullaby, that reminded her of nonsensical stories by a crackling fire, that filled nights with sounds nobody understood.

Eight notes rang clear.
And then she slept.

In The Mouth Of Dreams

The girl kept her sword close at all times.

She knew of the spirit that resided within it, and she knew of his sins. But she also knew that when the time came, she would be strong enough to deliver his sentence.

So there she stood, in a house that smelled cold and dry of harsh winter snow. There was a table that was scratched and scuffed, there was an old furnace covered in rust, and there were three coffins, decorated and housed by the living.

There the girl stood, amidst in all, and she was awfully annoyed.

“A dream,” she grumbled to herself. She stepped closer to the furnace, and when she reached out, she could feel the warmth tickle her fingers. “It’s almost too real.”

The girl knew it was a dream for more reasons than one.

First: she was here, as she was before, but when she had been here before, she was far weaker than she was now.

Second: the sword was warm in her hands. Third: there was no blood, and no resentful energy.

Fourth: the monk pushed open the battered wooden door, and smiled kindly at the girl.

“A-Qing,” he greeted, in a voice the girl would have recognized even if she had been dumb and deaf. “Where have you been? You ran off so quickly.”

Winter howled into the house from the open door. It was cold, frightfully so, but he made no move to shut it. He only smiled, a crescent curve of a thing.

Perhaps it would have worked for any lesser person. However, the girl was neither desperate nor foolish, and she could see the sharpened teeth behind those pale lips.

The winter night was starving, and it would have to find its prey elsewhere.

“Daozhang,” spoke the girl, wintry as the unending snow, bitter and numbing as all those nights she had spent wrapped up in scraps on her own. “Or the thing that looks like Daozhang.”

“What do you mean?” said the thing that looked like the monk. His skin pinched and moved to form a worried frown. “Perhaps you’ve caught a cold,” he continued, unaware that the girl’s blood ran much hotter than his own. “Come warm yourself up. I’ll start dinner.”

He shook the snow from his hair, shut the door, and moved to dry his frostbitten robes by the fire. He disappeared into the kitchen soon after, promising to be back soon, and took with him the cold smell of oncoming winter.

It smelled only of rust and fire now. The girl would have felt comforted if she was a fool.
Flowers do not bloom in winter, but the girl kept a careful gaze on Shuanghua. She had always known it was something special, and now she could tell that it was looking at her through that one-eyed snowflake.

“I see you,” she hissed to the sword.

The snowflake blinked once in surprise, then shut itself in vicious displeasure.

The girl tightened her grip on her sword.

True to his promise, the monk returned shortly with two bowls of hot soup. He handed one to the girl, smiling when she took it, though something on his lips twitched when she tucked her sword between her legs and held it there.

“I hope it tastes alright,” the monk said bashfully.

It tasted more than alright. It was almost incredible. The god was more than willing to shovel coin out of his pockets and out of nothing for a good meal, but this was better than all good meals combined. It warmed her from the inside out, it was just the right amount of every taste, and it was rich but easy to swallow.

The girl downed it all in a few breaths, and she wiped her mouth hastily when she was done.

The monk watched her, but his gaze did not only come from his sunken, missing eyes. It came from the sword, the walls, the fire, the howling winter, the dark beyond the woods. It was everywhere, and the girl was determined to stare back at everything.

“You ran off so quickly,” the monk said. His own soup was untouched. He spoke the words with a push, as if he was trying to convince her.

“I didn’t,” the girl answered. “I showed up here, and I know this has to be a dream.”

Another silence. “You must be cold,” said the monk, more insistent than before. He offered her his bowl with a smile that was more brilliant than kind. “Please, eat your fill. You’re still young, and we wouldn’t want you to fall ill.”

“Where am I?” the girl demanded.

“We’ll need to buy warmer robes for you,” the monk continued, like he had not heard her at all. “You’re growing fast, and the winter is far from over.”

“I said,” the girl shouted, “where am I?”

The monk stopped: stopped moving, stopped breathing, stopped blinking those bloodless eyes.

His skin paled before her eyes, like the winter had robbed him of all his warmth. His sunken eyes sunk even deeper. His hair writhed like a nest of snakes.

“You’re here,” said the thing that looked like the monk. “And that’s all that matters.” He sounded displeased, but not in that parental, disappointed way the girl had grown to love. The words were cut short, and he was growing irritated with this new pet of his.

“That’s not an answer,” the girl snapped.

Thin, wispy fingers ran over Shuanghua’s hilt. “Of course it is. I wouldn’t lie to you, A-Qing.”
The girl was angry before, and she was furious now. She hated the way her name left the monk’s false lips. She hated the way whatever was playing him did him such injustice. She hated it all, and she wanted to go home.

“I was in Yiling just a while ago,” the girl said coldly, “and I was with Fuxing, the god of luck and prosperity.”

The monk’s hair billowed wildly. His shoulders rose, and in grew very cold all of a sudden. “A god,” he said nervously.

For some reason, the thing that looked like the monk was afraid. The girl thought that was ridiculous, and that this was all a huge waste of time.

“He’ll be really angry if you don’t send me back,” the girl declared, holding her head up high. “And when he gets angry, he gets dangerous, and he’ll banish all of you to a place even worse than death.”

The monk seemed to consider this. He winced, and it was more of a twitch that started at his eye and crept down to his fingers.

But then a smile came over his pale, breathless skin, and he bared his teeth, all too long and too sharp. “I don’t think so,” said the monk, in sing-song. “You may be strong, but your god is not.”

The girl took a step back and wrapped her fingers around the hilt of her sword. “Liar,” she sneered.

She thought quickly: what could they have done to him? The god was strong, far stronger than anyone the girl had met, and he was smart, too, far smarter than any of those loudmouth cultivators.

The pieces fell together, and it was not a pretty picture.

“So you’re trying to trick us into staying here,” the girl said, “in the past.”

The fire crackled quietly. As the wood and coal burnt, it sputtered out weak wheezes and coughs amidst what sounded like breaking glass. The snow outside crunched under the weight of unseen figures. Shadows danced across the walls, but there was nobody there to make them. It was all beginning to smell very old, like dirt and moss. The more the girl listened and watched and smelled, the more it felt like the world was breaking around her.

“You’re trying to trap me here,” the girl repeated, her words much sharper than before.

The monk’s hair moved slower now, less sporadically, like a lazy ocean beast. “We wouldn’t stoop so low,” he cooed, and it sounded very wrong coming from his lips.

“Trap, trick, convince, it’s all the same.”

“You misunderstand,” said the monk. “It would have been better if you dreamt peacefully, of course, but we’re here to present an opportunity.”

He placed his full bowl on the table, then he placed his hand flat on the wood. It would have looked like a natural motion if his fingers were capable of sitting still; instead, they tapped and skittered something terrible. He sat, and his other hand cupped his chin. It made him look very impatient even though he was trying very hard to look patient.

“Come sit,” said the monk.

The girl hesitated. She took careful steps, and even when she sat, her hand was ready on her sword.
The monk had no eyes, and this thing had no eyes, but he could see through all the eyes he had stolen. And he was very observant.

“You’ve lived a difficult life,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “So many struggles. So many challenges.”

“Sure,” said the girl.

“It must have been painful. Wasn’t it painful? Don’t you think it could have been better?”

The girl thought for a moment. It was an interesting question, and interesting questions deserved decent answers. In the end, she chose to say, “I suppose some things weren’t all that great.”

“Exactly,” the monk said triumphantly. He leaned back, both hands tapping wildly on the table, and held his head high. “But we can make it better.”

“How?”

The monk was smug, now, and his smile turned ugly. “By giving you a second chance,” he answered. “Everybody likes second chances. We’ll give you the peaceful, wonderful life you wanted. I’ll be your kind Daozhang, and there will be no Xue Yang, and everything will be right in the world.”

“That’s just living a could be,” the girl said. “I don’t want to live a could be. I want to live a... an I am.”

The monk raised a single brow. It arched high, and his skin pulled tight from disuse. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Of course,” the girl responded.

There was silence for a while. It sat uneasily, like the silence that exists after you find a particularly large spider: it existed only because you saw each other, and you were both waiting for the other to make a move.

“Let me show you something,” the monk finally said.

His fingers stopped twitching. He turned his hands over, cupped them, and rested them on the table. In a moment, something black and shiny that smelled foul began rising in them.

The girl’s nose wrinkled, and her brow furrowed deeply. “What is that?”

“What could have been,” said the monk, but it was not much of an answer at all. The ink-black pool reflected his teeth perfectly. It might as well have been a mirror made of night: it was clear, and dark, but held no stars. “Watch.”

And the girl watched.

There she was, in purple robes, with her hair tied up high. It was late afternoon, or so it seemed, for the sun flickered in great reds and oranges and yellows as it sank below a wide river. She smelled faintly of lightning and rain, and she reached between lotus pods to snatch a lotus lantern from the warm waters.

“In one life,” said the monk, “you heard that the Yunmeng Jiang Sect was in need of disciples. You were in need of a comfortable life. You joined them, but couldn’t cultivate your golden core past a
certain point, and you collected lanterns for the rest of your life.”

The image clouded over, as if a great fog had rolled over it, and then it changed.

There she was, in green and gold, a sharp pin tucked in her hair and a saber by her hip. It was either sunrise or sunset, and the cold winds were particularly sharp that time of day. She stood halfway up the steps to a great hall, all carved into a steep mountain face, and as she turned to watch the sun, she sighed deeply.

“In one life,” said the monk, “you were found by the Qinghe Nie Sect. Someone wanted to keep you silent, but you held on. You were never able to understand each other, and you died early, as most of them do, after an unfortunate incident with qi deviation.”

The sun dropped out of the sky. Black fell over the jagged hills, and then it changed.

There she was, but she was not there at all. Her body faded in and out, pale as death, and she stumbled through the streets of Yi City with only a bamboo pole. The fog was thick, so horribly thick that death could be standing next to you and you would not notice.

Her eyes bled. When she opened her mouth, old blood dribbled out. She looked like a nightmare, or a ghost, or both. The relentless tapping of her bamboo pole echoed through a city lost to time, and she walked onward, praying that one day, someone would finally deliver justice.

“In one life,” said the monk, “you were found. You were killed. You were blinded and silenced, but you clawed on and lived a wretched existence as a ghost. Your soul was scattered, and the day was won, but you drifted away, eventually, as all things do.”

The pool clouded, then cleared, and all that was left was darkness.

The monk let his hands fall loose, and the dark liquid spilled out and hurried to the ground, where it crawled into the cracks in the floor. The monk stood, then walked unhurriedly behind the girl. He rested his hands on her shoulders.

The night was waiting. The moon stared downward.

“You were you in every could have been,” said the monk. He tried to sound sad, but he sounded awfully smug, and it dissonant and painful to listen to. “The world is dangerous. As long as you choose to be you, the world chooses everything else.”

Dancing fingers brushed over the girl’s shoulder. The monk smiled.

“The only true could be is right here, where everything is as wonderful as it could be.”

In the corner of her eye, the girl saw the snowflake blink. Everything was watching and listening, but this one more than the others. It was watching. It was listening. It was waiting.

The girl thought for a moment. “And we’ll have warm food?”

“All those fortunate enough to meet you will be stunned by your beauty,” said the monk, in a song that fluttered above her ear.

“And I’ll never be lonely, I’ll always have fun, and everything will be alright?”
“We will have the best of lives,” said the monk, victory colouring his gaunt features. “Everything will be wonderful, and you will always be happy.”

The girl sighed.

“No,” she said. “I won’t.”

In one swift motion, she swept her sword from his sheath and hacked off as much of the thing as she could. It screeched and howled behind her, but she had already lunged for the snowflake-eye.

There were hands pulling on her robes, far more than what any human has, but she wasted no time in looking back. The girl knocked Shuanghua to the ground, raised her sword above the snowflake, and with both hands wrapped around her hilt, she drove the blade downward, deep, deep, deep into the snowflake and the eye of the world.

The entire world shook and screamed at once. All the eyes were gone, and the snowflake was bleeding something that looked like tears and blood.

And the thing—it barely held the form of the monk. Tendrils pulled at its skin, revealing something pulsating and fleshy and crawling with maggots underneath. It held its face in its hands, wailing as the shadows tore apart its false body and dropped bits to the ground.

“This life is my own,” the girl declared. “I won’t live a dream. I won’t waste away and let you have my eyes. I’m going to live, and it’s going to hurt, but I’m going to overcome it all on my own terms!”

The thing cried, and shook, and bled. “I don’t understand,” it might have said, but the girl had already pushed the door open, and it might have just been, as it always was, a trick of the wind.

It was dark, darker than night, darker than shadows and the things that live inside them. The world had broken around her, and she was wandering through the fragments of a life she had no intention of living.

“Fuxing!” she called out, over howling winds and blinding darkness.

He had to be somewhere. He was strong and smart. He would never be fooled by something as pathetic as this.

But his demons were stronger, and they were not as kind. And so his could be would be kind, and dangerous, and harder to bury. It was always harder to bury people who have already been buried.

The girl stomped and stumbled. “Fuxing!” she shouted, again and again. “Are you there?” she would ask when the wind quieted.

No answer.

It was impossible to tell how long she wandered the darkness. Her voice grew hoarse, and she was cold and lost. But she never stopped walking.

And it was good that she was so stubborn, for her final call was lost when she stumbled out of a wall and into the cave again.

For a long moment, the girl was confused, and even in the faint light of night, her eyes burned. She rubbed the fuzzy splotches from her eyes, collected her bearings, then set out to find the god.

As she walked through the cave, she noticed many things. Books, papers, brushes that had certainly
The girl walked faster. She could hear sounds, now, of what she could only imagine was a great battle. It came from outside, and she grew more and more anxious with every step forward.

Flames licked at the maw of the cave. It was hot, but the fire was the least of the girl’s concerns.

She tore through the flames and saw—

And saw—

And saw hell.

Fire burned all the way to the sky, where the clouds swallows the ashes of everything that died. People screamed and shouted, some in pain, others in rage. The sound of swords hacking flesh was everywhere. Blood splattered across the blackened hills, and there it stayed, and there it sank, as if it could take back the life that had been stolen.

Hell is a place, and that place was not here, but hell is also a time, and that time was now.

The girl knew this was all a dream. It had to be. It made no sense in reality, so it could only make sense in illusions. None of this was really happening.

But the smell of rot and fire and blood choked her and made her feel sick. She wavered on her feet and tripped over a lifeless arm. She pretended not to notice and found a better place to stand.

“It’s fine,” she said to herself, though her voice was quiet and small. “I’ll find him, and we’ll leave, and it’ll all be alright.”

She took a deep breath, searching for the faintest smell of honey. And she ran.

Everything was burning. Those who ran and screamed in pain were cut down, and after they had fallen, their limbs were sliced to shreds and their bones were hacked apart by those who chased after them and screamed in anger.

Banners whipped back and forth in the hellish wind. Green, gold, white, purple: all these were here, and as the girl watched them murder people who held no weapons, she felt a hatred rise in her that she had not felt for months. She felt that the entire world was unfair, and that they all deserved to burn.

Suddenly, two things caught her attention at once: a loud clap of thunder and the shrill notes of a dizi.

It caught everyone else’s attention, too. They all stopped to look up at the highest peak.

There. He had to be there.

Where else would he be?

The girl took a single step toward the storm and the song when the smell of honey turned in another direction.

For a moment, she hesitated. The smell pulled down the mountain, toward a forest that had lost its leaves and hardened into stone long ago.

It smelled like honey, and it also smelled like tears, and despair, and exhaustion.
The girl turned down the blood-soaked slopes and ran.

Nobody paid her any attention. Perhaps it was because this was all a dream, or perhaps she wore no sun on her robes. She ran as fast and as hard as she could.

It was quiet near the dead forest. The blood had not reached the trees, and the girl was thankful for it. She caught her breath by a tree that had a large hole, like it had sunken in and never healed.

“Fuxing?” called the girl. “Are you there?”

If the girl had chosen any other tree to rest by, or if she had been a moment later in calling out, she would not have heard the whimpers at all.

It came from the tree. Inside the trunk, deep in the sunken hole, someone was trying very hard to be silent. They were scared, and they smelled faintly of honey.

The girl stopped. Softly, as gently as she could, she asked, “Is someone there?”

A gasp, muffled by small hands, shook the tree. It was young sound, far younger than the girl, and it was unbearably alive and terrified.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” said the girl. “I’m looking for a friend of mine. I thought he might be here.”

For a long time, there was only silence. Then a small, boyish voice whispered, “A friend?”

“That’s right,” the girl answered. “He’s tall, has long black hair, gold eyes, and gold robes.”

“I know someone like that,” said the boy. “But he has red hair and red-and-black robes.”

“Well,” the girl said. She thought hard, then said, “my friend is very smart, and very brave, but he has an awful memory, and he buries himself in books a lot.”

A lick of hair popped up from the hole in the tree. It bounced with the sudden motion. “My friend is like that too,” the boy said excitedly. “He’s strong and smart and reads a lot, and he forgets what Jiejie tell him all the time!”

“Who’s Jiejie?”

“Wen Qing!” the boy said cheerfully, his full, soft face appearing from the trunk. His robes were smeared with ash and dirt, but the sun was still round and whole. “They’re friends, too!”

A thought began forming in the girl’s mind. Her eyes widened, and her breaths shortened, but she smiled. “My friend knows Wen Qing as well,” she said. “I guess our friends have a lot in common.”

The boy’s small mouth fell open in awe. “Are you Xian-gege’s friend, too?”

“I am,” spoke the girl, but she had never been so unsure of anything in her life.

In an instant, the boy crawled out of the trunk, grabbing onto the ashen bark with his tiny hands. The girl caught him as he stumbled and lifted him into her arms. He was small and light, as all children are at some point or another, but the girl was surprised anyway.

“You have to help him,” the boy begged. His eyes pinched and began filling with shiny tears. “Xian-gege needs help! He’s all alone!”
Something uncomfortable caught in the girl’s throat. She tried to swallow it down, but it stayed, like a stubborn cough.

She set the boy onto the ground. She shrugged off her outer robes, then wrapped them tightly around the boy.

“What’s your name?” she asked as she tied her sash around his waist.

“A-Yuan,” said the boy. Shyly, he added, “Wen Yuan.”

The girl laughed, pinching at the boy’s cheeks. “You have two names, and you’re so young! That’s unfair for me, isn’t it?”

“No!” the boy shouted, wriggling out of her grasp with a giggle. “Jiejie’s old! Don’t you have two names?”

It was a good question. “I’m just A-Qing,” the girl answered. She lifted the boy into her arms, holding him with one, sliding her sword out of its sheath (quietly, quickly) with the other. “How about that? You’re A-Yuan, and I’m A-Qing.”

“Then A-Yuan and A-Qing will go help Xian-gege,” the boy declared, more sure of himself than anyone else in this dream world. “Because we’re friends now, and we don’t want Xian-gege to get hurt!”

There were many things the girl did not know, but now more than ever, she knew he was right.

The smell of honey was close, and it was in her arms. The smell of fire and blood was everywhere. Just before they left, the girl tore a piece of her sash off and tied it tightly around the boy’s eyes. She pulled on it to make sure it would stay, and made sure to tuck it over his ears.

“Why do I need to wear this?” the boy asked, feeling at the silk.

“Fire can get very bright,” the girl lied. “And your eyes are still growing, so you need to protect them.”

“But I can’t see!”

“I’ll see for you,” said the girl, “but only if you trust me.”

The boy was silent. He huffed, and wriggled, but he settled down quickly.

“I trust you,” he finally said, and although he was young, and his emotions changed every other heartbeat, it was clear to see he was scared.

But being brave did not mean you were not scared. Being brave meant you were scared, really scared, badly scared, and you did the right thing anyway.

The girl ran.

She could feel the boy tense and whimper in her arms. She tried to soothe him as best as possible, but being gentle was not her strength, and the same words sprung from her lips without meaning. The corpses stayed away from them, but the murderers did not, and she grew weary every time blood splattered across her sword and onto her face.

So she said, “One time, when I was lost and scared, Fuxing... Xian-gege taught me how to climb
trees.”

The boy tried to look up. He made a single confused noise.

The girl’s sword cut into flesh; she dragged it out silently and swiftly. The blade was always good at making quick work of living things.

“I hadn’t known him for long,” said the girl. “He told me it would be useful to know how to hide in trees.

“I thought that was stupid. Only cowards run away, right? I didn’t want to be a coward. So I argued with him, and I fought with him, until he said I was probably too scared to climb up.

“Looking back on it, I know he was trying to get a rise out of me, and it was silly, but it worked. I called him an idiot. I said he was stupid. I said a lot of meaner things. But I climbed up anyway.

“Or rather, I tried to climb up. Xian-gege did it so fast, so I thought it would be easy. But the bark was hard, and it scratched my hands, and my feet kept slipping. I hit my teeth, then I bit my tongue. I fell backward a lot. I had bruises on my knees and my hands. It was awful.”

The boy made a small oh with his lips as he listened. The girl ran, and she cut down all the ghosts that tried to hurt them, and she continued.

“But I got up,” she declared. “There was this crook, you see, and I thought it was awfully impressive of me to have climbed so far.

“Then I looked up, and Xian-gege was so far above me that I could barely see his robes through the leaves.”

The sky was growing darker with velvet night, but the roaring flames destroyed even that. Reds and oranges and yellows tore an ugly hole in the plum-coloured clouds. The stars were hiding in the darkness, and they were terrified.

The girl ran onward. The figures were losing their shape and colours. This world was breaking apart at the seams.

But the boy in her arms was small and warm, and despite it all, he felt very real.

“I was angry for a moment, but I thought it was awfully impressive,” said the girl to the boy. “How many times would you have to fall to be able to climb that high? How many bruises and cuts would it take? How many terrible falls would it take?

“I only realized later that maybe he wasn’t trying to teach me how to hide, but he just wanted to teach me how to climb. He’s dumb that way. He could’ve said it to me straight, and it would’ve been easier. I guess he isn’t good at that kind of stuff, sometimes.”

A few paces away, a shadowy figure notched a bow and pulled back. The girl hurled her sword forward, and it embedded itself in the thing’s chest. It fell back, sinking into a pool of shadow.

The girl moved to retrieve her sword.

It smelled of fire and lightning.

“To this day,” said the girl to the boy, “I don’t know why he taught me how to climb trees. He might have been bored. He might have thought it was fun.
“He might have thought it was good to learn how to fall. I’ll never know, because I’ll never ask.”

The boy began to wriggle in his arms. His brows had long since furrowed. His lips were gently parted.

“But why?” asked the boy, a little frustrated. “Xian-gege’s smart. He’ll know the answer.”

The girl was silent for a long time. Then, as the shadows began to eat away at the battlefield behind her, and as the skies began to shatter like glass, she said, “Sometimes, it’s okay to hold answers close to your heart, because it hurts too much to give them away.”

“I don’t really understand,” the boy admitted.

“Well, that’s alright,” said the girl. She shifted him up in her arm, bouncing him up a bit, and the boy giggled. “Xian-gege’s a bit dumb, but he’s a nice person.” She thought long and hard about this, about his name, about everything she had seen. “And even if the world doesn’t like him, we do, and that means something. Right?”

With a sort of determination so tangible that it seemed the very sky would rend if he told it to, the boy nodded his head once, looked onward even though he could not see, and sat taller. “Xian-gege is kind,” he said resolutely, “and I want him back.”

That had to be good enough.

The world behind them had been swallowed by a writhing darkness of sorts. When the girl slowed, it slowed, and when she ran fast, it followed eagerly after her heels. When she looked back, it tucked into itself, as if it was nervous or afraid.

She could not tell if there was something driving the shadows, or if the shadows were just that: cowardly shadows that watched her back for weakness.

There was no place for weakness here.

Blurry figures no longer threw themselves at them. The things only watched, standing silent and unmoving, as they returned to whence they came.

The girl marched onward, into illusionary heat that bent the path forward, into curling tendrils of smoke that hugged her ears and cheeks, into sweet lightning that made her hair rise, into an inevitability that made her eyes sting and her throat close.

A clap of thunder shook the hills. The boy whimpered.

She walked onward, the boy in her arms, and she had no idea what she would see, or what she would discover, and she was very scared.

There was a small shed of sorts, or at least the ruins of what had once been a shed. It had been destroyed but not burnt. It would work.

“A-Yuan,” said the girl, “it’s going to get dangerous from here on. Can you stay here and wait for me?”

The boy shook his head adamantly. “No!” he shouted. “I want to see Xian-gege!”

“You’ll see him soon,” the girl promised. “I’ll make that horrible storm go away, and then I’ll drag him back.”
Hesitation and reluctance danced across the boy’s face. “What if you don’t come back?” he asked, and it was a question so terrible that the girl did not know what to say.

Words were meaningless here. She could make all the promises in the world, and she could break all of them and more.

So she cleaned her sword of blood, slipped it back into its sheath, and sat the boy down in the center of the wooden planks. She pressed her sword into his hands, and believed with all her heart that it would be okay.

Her hands were small, but the boy’s were smaller. Their fingers overlapped, and they were rough and scratched, but not broken.

“This is my sword,” she said, as gently as she could. “It’s protected me so far, and it’ll protect you, too.”

The boy reached up to remove his blindfold. The girl caught his hand.

“It’ll be okay,” she said simply.

With great apprehension, the boy shook his head. “But I can’t see, and I’m not strong enough to use this sword!”

Silence fell. Fire crackled in the distance, a silent growl of sorts, but it was awfully cold.

The girl untied her second sash—one the god bought as a result of his poor memory—and wrapped it around the boy’s shoulders.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” said the girl, keeping her voice hushed, like it truly was a secret. “But you can’t tell anyone. Okay?”

The boy’s brows shot up, and his mouth parted in surprise. “Okay,” he whispered back.

“There’s a person in that sword,” said the girl, “and he knows how to fight, and he knows how to use that sword, because it was originally his.”

The boy looked down at the sword with blinded eyes. He ran his small hands down the sheath and the hilt, tracing over all the curls and rounded edges made by rising wings.

“Oh,” he said, barely louder than a breath.

“He’ll protect you until we get back,” the girl promised.

And then she rose to her feet, empty-handed for the first time in her life. It felt empty, and scary, but it was also liberating.

“You’re a brave boy, A-Yuan,” said the girl, and she knew in her heart of hearts that it was true. “I don’t know where you came from, and I’m not sure where you’re dreaming from, but I’ll bring Fuxing to meet you one day.” With an oath that would be forged into the very stars, the girl said, “I promise.”

She turned, and she did not look back.

Her steps fell faster as she ran. It was colder without the boy, and it was more dangerous without the sword, but she had lived through colder nights and survived more dangerous trials.
The girl did not know what to expect. She did not know what she would see.

What she saw before her was something she had no understanding of, but she could not say that it shocked her.

Shadowy figures melting with purple, dripping tar that fell like flowers; one in gold, too, that was missing the heart from his chest. They were all bleeding, and their black blood glistened red against the heat of fire and flames. They held weapons in their hands, but they were blackened over with what might have been rust, or false blood, or darkness.

It did not look much like a battle at all. The things were moving, and their lips were moving, too, shaping words that looked like they hurt and stung and cut and killed.

And, standing against all the chaos, there was a single man, with long black hair, red eyes, and red-and-black robes.

There was horror, or sorrow, or despair, or something gut-wrenchingly real and heart-achingly visceral on his pale features, and he was trying to calm himself down, but it grew harder with each passing second, with each dagger-sharp word.

It was enough. It had to be enough.

She had no sword, but she was not afraid. There was nothing to be afraid of. This was all a dream, but dreams reflect reality: so it was reality that was truly scary, and they could face that horrible world together.

The earth was loose beneath her feet. She breathed in, searching past the smoke and honey. Something cold poured into her, like a wind-riding winter, and her fingers tickled.

“Fuxing!” she called, and her voice echoed in a bellow of whipping gales. “Are you there?”

The god turned, shock overcoming every other awful emotion. “A-Qing?” he whispered, but it was so quiet and unsure it was barely heard at all.

The shadows turned, too, and for a moment, they wavered. There she was, a girl who had broken their dreams, and now she was here to break it again.

They looked like people, and they made noises like people, but their faces twisted and folded into a bitter, furious hatred that only monsters and beasts could make.

One of them—the thing wearing gold and missing a heart—lunged at the girl. He wielded a blade, and it looked both sharp and dangerous, but his sluggish movements betrayed his true nature, and it was not hard in the slightest to punch him in the face so hard that he rolled down the mountain and back into the shadows.

The girl was angry. She hated the fire, the shadows, and the monsters that lived within. She thought this was a huge waste of time. She wanted to go home, eat, take a bath, and then sleep this all off.

“I’m over this,” she shouted to the shadows, the things, and the god. Her fists burned cold with northern winds. “I’m sick and tired of these stupid dreams! I’m sick and tired of some faceless monsters thinking they know life better than people who’ve lived it!”

Everyone and everything was surprised. Whatever tragedy was churning before had been tipped over and hurled down the hills. It was a bad brew, it tasted awful, and it needed to go.
“A-Qing,” the god tried to say.

“The past isn’t your playing,” the girl shouted. “It’s precious, and it’s hard to face, and it’s not yours!”

Two of the things lunged at her, but they were even slower than before. She threw her fists forward, and purple burst at her touch. The things were writhing on the ground, grabbing desperately at their false skin, and it only made her angrier.

She marched onward. The remaining two things flinched away from her. They smelled like lotus flowers and lightning.

The god was utterly still as she approached. His eyes were wide in disbelief, and his lips were parted in awe.

“Let’s go,” said the girl to the god. When he remained silent, she repeated, “Fuxing, let’s go.”

When he refused to step forward, the girl grabbed hold of his sleeve and tugged with all her might. The god stumbled after her, his eyes shifting rapidly between red and grey.

“You know?” he said weakly, and it caught in this throat.

“I don’t know a lot of things,” said the girl.

The god laughed. It was a bitter thing, like a bad almond. “I suppose,” he said, a familiar thing in an unfamiliar world.

Behind them, the rainless storm raged. The two things were stalking after them, bring down blinding lightning and trailing the sickly-sweet smell of sweet lotus flowers across the barren hills.

The god did not flinch, but he did wince, as if their presence was painful.

“Those things aren’t real,” the girl said reassuringly.

“I know,” the god replied. “They’re monsters that nest in dreams and consume them.” With a short breath, he said, “They’re not real.”

“If you knew, you should’ve destroyed them,” said the girl. “They try to look like strong people, but they’re stupid and weak.”

“I know.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because,” the god said, his voice shaking, “I tore their lives apart before, and I took everything they ever loved away from them, and I couldn’t bear to do it again.”

The girl did not know much about the war that had raged years ago, and she knew even less about the villain who had died in the aftermath.

All that she knew was that the god was kind, and that he had saved her, and that he valued all life over his own.

That was enough. It had to be.

“Let’s go,” was all the girl could say. Her throat felt tight, and her words were just as hoarse as the
They shadows were closing in on them. They would not be lost, but it would be very dark, and there was someone the girl still had to find.

“This way,” she said, pulling the god toward the ruins of the small shed. “I need to grab something.”

“I certainly hope it’s your sword,” the god said. It was a relief to hear life in his voice.

“And my robes,” said the girl, and with a slight pause, she added, “and something else.”

The smell of honey tickled her nose. It was a soft thing, twining between lotus flowers and northern winds and fire. Bones and dirt crunched underneath her shoes.

The girl let out a sigh of relief when she spotted a bundle of green cloth atop broken planks. She released the god’s sleeve and ran toward the ruins. Relief turned to panic when she saw no movement; it went the opposite way around when she heard the soft squeaks of boyish sleep.

Her hands were slow and gentle as she shook the boy. “Hey,” she called. “Wake up, now.”

The boy stirred drowsily. He rubbed his eyes, but quickly remembered the cloth wrapped over them, and with it came the memories of what he had promised and had been promised to him before falling asleep.

“Jiejie?” he asked, tentatively but eagerly.

“Told you we’d be back,” said the girl.

She took back her robes and one of her sashes. She untied the the blindfold, and grinned when the boy said she was pretty.

The boy reached up to pat her cheeks. “Jiejie has cloudy eyes,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” the girl agreed. “Are they pretty?”

“Jiejie is very pretty,” the boy said resolutely. He patted her eyelid with a tiny hand. “Every part of Jiejie is very pretty, and very brave!”

“Don’t be silly,” said the girl, though she felt quite happy.

The god had walked at a slower pace, and he kept looking over his shoulder and at the awful things. He pursed his lips every time and walked onward, holding his head high, before it would inevitably fall again.

It all stopped when the girl lifted up the boy: time, life, everything and anything.

The girl lifted the boy into her arms once she was dressed proper. The boy giggled and kicked as she tried to rub the ash off his cheeks and the soot from his hair.

“A-Qing,” said the god, and it was a horrible sound, like an animal caught in brambles. “How did you—why—”

He could not bring an end to his question. The girl thought that was stupid. A simple why would have worked just as well, or how.

The boy in her arms cried out in joy when he saw the god. “Xian-gege!” he cried, wriggling with all
his might.

The girl hurried over before he could shake himself out of her arms. With her head held high, and with a gaze that burned of curiosity, she deposited the boy into the man-turned-god’s arms.

For a moment, his expression twisted horribly, and he sucked in a deep breath.

“A-Yuan,” he said, so quietly that it was barely a whisper.

The boy was strangely silent. He buried his face in the god’s robes, clinging to him with his tiny hands, and there was a strange noise, like a keening, that vibrated through the air.

“Your son?” the girl asked.

“No,” said the god. “Yes,” he said only a moment later.

It was enough of an answer to be a full answer.

“Why is he here?” the god asked, something desperate and confused writing over his face with thick ink.

The girl thought hard. “We must all be sharing the same dream,” she said, and she was confident in her answer.

The remaining beasts hissed when she spoke her conclusion aloud, and in a moment, they vanished into darkness. It was getting closer, lapping at the ruins, but it was mighty scared. At least it had some sense.

“But even if he lived, he wouldn’t be so young anymore,” spoke the god.

“Well,” said the girl, “you’re not the Yiling Patriarch anymore, but here we are.”

The god looked down, and then away, as if he was ashamed. A part of the girl’s heart whispered that he should be, for deceiving her so horribly. But her gut understood why, and she knew forgiveness was a hard thing that rolled like a stone and knocked against every corner of your being like a tumbling seed.

“He shouldn’t—he couldn’t have lived,” the god whispered. His arms wrapped tighter around the silent boy. “This can’t be real.”

For some reason, the boy had joined this dream from far, far away, and nobody knew why. The girl doubted herself because she was confused; the god doubted himself because he could not bear for it to be real.

But it was real, warm and whole and very, very real, and the girl wanted this all to be alright.

“You didn’t live either,” she said, trying not to shout. Her eyes stung. She stood tall. “But here you are, living, despite it all!”

She threw her arms out, gesturing at the darkness, the fire-razed earth, the past-turned-dream. “So tell me: what’s real, and what isn’t? Are you really going to make up a reality you can believe in when it’s right in front of you?”

Silence fell over them all. The god gaped, eyes wide with shock, or maybe awe. The boy turned, too, but he looked awfully confused.
The girl took in a deep breath through her mouth. She let it go, and felt her anger die with it.

“Let’s just go home,” she said.

It was with those words that the boy began to cry.

He was young, but as he sobbed, he sounded even younger. He was not really a tiny three-year old, and he was no longer a child, but sorrow lives and grows in hidden places.

The girl felt ashamed. She had no intention of making anyone cry.

“Don’t leave me alone again,” the boy half-cried, half-wailed. He buried his teary face in the god’s robes again. “I was so scared,” he cried. “I was alone, and I was scared you wouldn’t come back, and I don’t want to be alone!”

Perhaps it was reflex, or kindness, or something else entirely, but the god softened, and he stroked the boy’s back soothingly.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He closed his eyes, like he could feel more that way. “I’m sorry I left you alone. I won’t do it again. I won’t. I promise.”

Of all lies the god had ever told, the girl thought this was the worst of them.

The darkness was creeping toward them. It knew it could not swallow them whole, not with broken dreams and unbreakable wills, but it was tired, and it knew this was a waste of time, and it was ready to spit them back out.

It was time to go. And time only moves in one direction.

“We can’t stay for any longer,” said the girl. “This dream is collapsing. We’ll be back in reality after all this.”

“No!” the boy yelled. He cried harder, clutching to the god like he could keep him forever if only he tried hard enough.

It was admirable. It was fruitless. The girl felt very sorry for him.

“I know,” was all the god could say. “I know. It’s time to go,” he repeated, like he did not know how to say anything else.

The girl hated goodbyes. She thought it would be better if everyone could live happily, freely, without ever having to wonder if one goodbye would be their last, or if they would ever hear a hello again.

“A-Yuan,” said the god, gentler than the girl had ever heard him. “We have to go.”

“No,” the boy wailed, though it sounded more like a whimper. He curled into himself, hating his own helplessness, and sniffled horribly.

“Every meeting has a beginning and an end,” said the god. “We’ll have to call this part the end. Okay?”

“No.”

“Don’t be silly. If we don’t end this meeting, we’ll all be stuck here in this dark place, and the next one won’t have a chance to begin. Do you want that?”
“I want to stay,” the boy shouted, “with Xian-gege! And Jiejie, too!”

The god poked at his flushed nose with her finger. A bit of ash rubbed off on his pale, soft skin.

The boy squealed, then grabbed his nose like he had been grievously injured. His eyes were wide with childish petulance and offense: a welcome change from his despairing, teary-eyed complexion.

“Then you’ve got to trust us,” the god said, and he did so with all the certainty in the world. “Do you trust A-Qing?”

“I do,” the boy said.

“And do you trust me?”

“I do!” the boy repeated, and it was a sad thing, because the god’s expression twisted in pain that came from the heart.

The god tried on a smile. It was breaking at the edges.

“So,” said the god, “if we promise to see you again, but when we’re all awake and well, would you trust us to keep that promise?”

The boy sniffled loudly. A keening came from his throat, but he lifted his head and answered, “I would!”

“Then I promise,” spoke the god, in a voice that might have been a song, “that we’ll all meet again, in a better place, in a better time, when we’re all happy and well, and when that day comes, we’ll have the longest, most joyous meeting, and when we part, it’ll be with the knowledge that we’ll see each other soon.”

All his words bled of truth. It smelled like honesty, like an open heart that was bleeding emotion, and it pulsed and beat with life.

The boy was not old enough to truly understand, and he was very confused. But it is an innate thing for humans to want to trust, and the boy trusted his Xian-gege and this new Jiejie very much.

The darkness lapped at their feet. It slithered over the girl’s shoes, sinking into the ground below her feet like a bog.

“Time to go,” she said as she sunk. And she was not afraid. There was nothing to be afraid of. Not anymore.

“Jiejie!” the boy cried, flailing his tiny hands. “Don’t go, Jiejie!”

“That’s a nasty way to say goodbye,” the girl said, and she grinned even as bogwater-thick shadows dragged her under. “How about a see you later, or a see you soon, or maybe even a best of luck? All those sound nicer than don’t go, right?”

The boy sniffed again. He raised his chin, his bottom lip trembling, and he shouted, “Best of luck!”

Even the god smiled at that. It was a good smile. Smiles were good, weren’t they?

“Much better,” the girl declared. She pointed at the corners of her lips, how they were curled upward, and said, “Now give me a great big smile, and I’ll know you’ll be just fine.”

And the boy smiled, a great big crescent of a smile. It wobbled like the pages of the storybook.
It was certainly got a bad sight to see, the girl thought. The god, smiling, and the boy, also smiling, and it was a thing that was undeniably good. It ought to be a thing that was wonderful because it was was like the stars, that broke the sky every night.

And what came after was darkness.

There was a sound like breaking glass, and there was something else, too, that might have been a boyish voice, but that might have just been the girl’s imagination.

She woke in the early hours of morning.

There was a sky blooming with the reds and oranges and yellows of a young sunrise. The night made a hasty retreat, or perhaps it was just dancing with the dawn. It was hard to tell. It was a little hard to breathe.

The girl lay below that sky, and she thought, I could’ve sworn this place was a lot darker before. And she did not only mean in night.

She stayed where she was for a while. She righted her toppled breathing. She loosened her tense limbs. She ran her fingers over her sword. She closed her eyes and smelled dirt, death, and flowers.

Flowers?

The girl pushed herself up. She felt weak, like all the energy had been siphoned from her body. Sluggishly, she stood, and found herself utterly lost.

Red on red on red on red.

From the bottom of the hills all the way to the very top, red flowers bloomed vigorously, almost violently, like they held some sort of vendetta against death. Never again, they seemed to be saying, but that was a foolish thought, for flowers cannot speak.

It was impossible to make life here. Yet life all but buried these mounds, burying them in veils of red that was redder than blood and darker than night.

The girl smelled the air. It smelled real. This was all real.

There were footsteps behind her. The girl turned to the god, and in an instant, she asked, “What happened?”

The god was silent for a long while. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. His robes, black and gold, and a little singed, swayed in the gentle breeze.

“Who do you think did this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think it was the ghost?”

“I think,” the god said, “that we’ve had a very long day, and we should go eat, bathe, and sleep.”

“That,” the girl answered, “sounds like a great idea.”

The thing about climbing mountains is you have to climb down afterward.

Everywhere they turned, everywhere they stepped, there was red. The stone beasts had been eaten
alive by the flowers, which waved and dripped like bloodied spiders. Even as they passed by talismans (devoured) and arrays (chomped to bits), the girl could not decide whether it was horrifying or beautiful.

In the end, she decided it was right. The flowers seemed to be challenging the entire world, and it was a valiant effort.

The people of Yiling were stunned. They watched the god and the girl pass, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. They bowed their heads fervently. They hurried to prepare accommodations.

“Thank you,” they repeated, over and over again that the words became meaningless. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

It was horrible. The girl demanded for their meals to be brought to their rooms, and for everyone to leave them alone until they were rested and ready to go.

The silence that fell between them was almost as bad as the incessant noise. For the first time in a while, they ate without speaking a word.

The sun had climbed high into the sky by the time they gathered enough courage to face each other.

“Fuxing,” the girl said.

“You’d still call me by that name?” the god asked, and it was a bitter thing.

“Well, that’s who you are now.”

“And you don’t care about who I was before?”

“Of course I care,” the girl snapped.

She knew where this conversation would lead. They would talk, it would lead nowhere, and then they would go to bed confused and lost.

It was better to just let everything go, here and now. If she let it sit, it would sink and disappear.

So the girl took a deep breath and said, “I think you did some awful things. I know you killed a lot of people. The reason is important, and I think the story is a lot more complicated than people make it out to be, but people died, and people were hurt, and that takes more than a death to fix.”

“But,” the girl continued, swallowing the sourness and the bitterness, “I think you were brought back for a reason. I don’t know what that reason is. But you’re trying to do good. You are doing good. And... I think that, in your heart of hearts, you’re a good person, and fate is just the worst sometimes, and, and...”

She lost her words. Perhaps she never had them to begin with.

The god was silent. His eyes were shining with more than just stars.

They both sniffed, and the girl laughed nervously and said, “It’s kind of dusty in here.”

“Yes,” the god agreed, laughing as well. “It really is.”

There was nothing more to say.

There never is, you see.
They shrugged off their robes and their burdens, and they slept.

Not so far away, upon mounds and mounds of death, red spider lilies bloomed, and they sang a wordless song.

I do not know what to write.

A lot has happened. I have learned some very strange things. I am not sure if Fuxing is still Fuxing. I think he still is.

I am nervous, but I know that Fuxing is a kind person. He will not hurt me even if I know. I do not think he ever intended to hurt anyone. But he did, and I cannot ignore it.

At the same time, I know that he is trying to make up for everything he did. It is not easy to save the world, especially after you destroyed it.

He asked me if I wanted to go to Yinhe and live with Daozhang. I told him his memory was bad, and that I do not break my promises.

I think it will be okay.

I will need to think more.

I hope things will be okay.

It is frustrating to know I cannot pray to any gods to give me luck. If they let a person like Fuxing fall so hard without batting an eye, I do not think I want it.

I will make things okay if they do not work out.

I wonder where we will go tomorrow.

Today we found an old temple.

It was a temple like the one we saw before, but this time people knew about it. I do not know why it was different. It looked just as old but it was much smaller. There was a lot of grass and moss growing over it.

There was a statue of a god too. It was much smaller than the other one, but it was still there. Fuxing could not read the name. I think this will be a pattern from now on.

I left some flowers by the statue. I do not know if the god is still alive, or if he ever existed in the first place, but if the stories are even a little bit real, I think it is better to be kind. I would be sad if nobody left me flowers after I died.

I hope someone will leave flowers and light incense for me. I think that would be very nice.
Fuxing is not good at cooking. He is very bad at cooking.

Now that I think about it, he is not actually that bad at cooking. He can cook, and he is actually good at it. But then he throws in dried peppers like it will cure him of all illnesses in the world. That is stupid and suicidal. He is a god. Can he even get sick? I have never seen him get sick. I am surprised the peppers do not make him sick.

The good news is that I have become very good at foraging. Sometimes we travel in the wilderness for a long time, so we must make our own food. I have watched Daozhang make food, and Fuxing is teaching me how to make food. I am much better than both of them because I can see, and I do not like setting myself on fire with spicy stuff.

Mushrooms are tasty, but only if you make them right. Leafy greens are not that bad once you learn how to make them work for you. I have a bag of dry spices now, and Fuxing is not allowed to touch it, because he only knows how to make things burn.

He is an idiot sometimes. I wonder how Wen Qing-jie dealt with him.

It has been a while since I last saw Wen Qing-jie.

I wonder what she would think of me.

We came across a village today. It was very small, and it was surrounded by trees.

Trees are hard to climb, but I am good at doing hard things. I am getting much better at climbing trees. It is easy to see what is ahead from the top, and it is relaxing to take naps in them.

The children were very impressed when I climbed faster than most of them. I was not the fastest, but that is okay. I will get faster.

I also helped Fuxing with some blessings today. I do not know if I was very helpful, but I helped, and that is what is important. I held his strings for him as he did some fancy tricks with them.

It looked very confusing. I am glad I do not have to weave anything. Holding the strings is easy, and I am good at it. I think I will hold his strings from now on if he asks.

Maybe he will teach me more climbing tricks. Or maybe not. I think climbing is a thing you only get better at if you practice. That is how it is with a lot of things.

I will keep practicing, and I will get strong. Then I will be able to protect everyone. Then people will listen to me.

I hope things will be okay. Fuxing was strong, and he felt kind, but it does not seem like he was able to protect much, and it definitely does not seem like people listened to him.

People are stupid that way.
Dogs are very friendly. I think I like dogs.

They are a little dumb sometimes. They will take food from you very easily, and they are very easy to read. They are also helpful. I think they make for great companions.

Fuxing does not like them very much. I think he is a coward. But that is okay. We are not travelling with a dog, so it does not matter. I, for one, do not like spiders.

If a dog-spider exists out there, it would be the death of both of us. Good thing there is no such thing as a dog-spider. I hope.

---

I think there might be more to the story than just a few gods and the heavens.

We have been seeing many temples along the way. I never noticed them before. They do not stand out very much, and they do not have many visitors. Most of them are not even built in towns.

Fuxing cannot read any of the nameplates. They are all worn away, cracked, or damaged in some way. I think it might have been intentional, but I might just be imagining things.

I will keep looking for books with stories about gods. They are not very popular. I have read about many gods that I have never heard of.

I think it is very sad to be forgotten.

---

Dogs are friendly. They are soft, and warm, and nice.

Wolves are... weird.

They stare silently, and then they howl. It is always nerve-wracking when they howl, because it means more of them will stare silently.

Fuxing does not like them very much. I do not blame him. Wolves are just sharper dogs.

I do not know how I feel about them. They have never attacked us. I think they have very good senses, and that means they will not try to do anything funny.

They stare a lot. I do not like it very much.
Today we decided to start doing processions.

I think that is the right word. They are not parades. Processions sounds fancier. It is a good word.

Whenever Fuxing sings, people listen. I tried singing with him today, and I do not know if it was magic, or divinity, or something else, but people listened very hard. They found us a nice room, a good meal, and some gifts, which was nice.

It is much easier to let everyone know we are arriving than to run around and look for trouble. It is much faster for trouble to just find us. After all, trouble tends to be very stupid.

We will sing together from now on. It is much easier that way.

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**The Beginning Trials**

The girl was running, and she was exhausted.

Her breaths came in wheezing pants. She could feel her lungs rattling and shaking. There was air, but it would not come; or maybe she could not feel it. No matter how deeply she breathed, it felt cold.

Something sticky caught in her throat. She wanted to cough, but that meant losing time. And she could not do that.

Everything hurt. It hurt more than anything she had ever felt. She hated it, but as it is with most things she hated, she could not do anything about it.

Every step she took splashed water all over her shoes, wetting her pants up to the knees. The world was a flat mirror, a plane of nothingness that had flooded over with just enough water to ripple and splash, but not enough to hinder her steps. It would take an awful lot of water to slow her down. It would take an awful lot of anything to slow her down.

The grey skies were below her as they were above her. Nobody watched her, be it from above or below, but she was being judged by a silent arbiter.

She was alone, with only a sword, her heart, and her strength. It would have to be enough.

A guttural cry rang out across the mirror world. The girl had barely the time to raise her sword before four dogs leapt out from the inverted clouds.

They were ugly things, with matted black fur that looked like briars, tongues that lolled and drooled, and claws black with old blood and tar. If they had been boiled in ink twice over, drowned in shadows, and risen back up, they would still look far prettier than they did now.

It was not a nice thought.

Their howls curdled blood and stopped hearts: their claws and teeth were used only for fighting for their share of the kill. This, the girl knew, but she did not know how. It was one of those things you learn only when you let your mind slip into the cracks between things, and if you let it sit for long enough, it comes back a bit heavier, a lot wiser, and a whole awful lot bigger.
The girl opened her mouth and began to sing.

Again, then. Again, and again, and again, the girl would sing that same wordless song.

It made no sense to her: it was a language of chaos, that folded in on itself a thousand times over and bloomed outward in a million more petal-shaped layers. It made things, it broke things, and whether or not things were created or destroyed depended on your mood and your heart. It made things when you were happy; it pieced broken things together and melded shiny, joyful things, and it broke things when you were angry or sad or any of the multitude of emotions people feel so much more than joy. The girl knew that she could break mountains, rend skies, and drink up seas if she sang as angrily as she could, but she would not, because the world was not her toy, and the song was not a breaking-thing tool. People did breaking perfectly fine with their own hands. It was the making that was hard.

It was not hers, but it would protect her.

It was an ugly song, almost as ugly as the dogs. But it was pure in intention, and what little protection it could offer in this not-really world worked hard to keep the girl safe. Her notes tore the howls to shreds at the very roots, and she drove her throat as hard as she did her sword. The dogs were quick to adapt. They snarled, they snapped, and they lashed out. One of them scored four burning scratches across the girl’s arm. She stumbled back, but in the next moment, she arched her sword skyward, and the horrid beast’s stomach split open, spilling rotted innards all over her shoes.

It was good, the girl thought, that the god was somewhere else. He would not be very fond of these disgusting mutts.

Vicious as they were, dogs were dogs, and they were not very bright. They threw themselves at the girl with near-suicidal intent, and she threw herself at them with a burning desire to survive. One was stronger than the other. Take a guess as to which it was. There is, as with most things, a correct answer.

In the wake of the gory mess, the girl stopped to catch her breath. She coughed into her hand. It was a sticky, red cough that unlodged the wad in her throat.

It passed over her tongue. It tasted like a coin, but that was silly: who puts coins in their mouth? More damningly, who swallows them?

She studied the splotch on her palm. It was warm, and it smelled like copper coins held in a sweaty hand. When she spread her fingers, it stuck and rubbed in the creases.

It was fascinating, in that way all morbid things are fascinating.

But there was no time to waste. The girl could hear rattling, or maybe it was chirping. But it was drawing near, so very near, and she had no plans of dying today.

She looked down at the sky-water for a moment, and in that moment, she saw a girl, covered in blood from head to toe, dressed in crimson-stained spring, and she saw a sword, pulsing like a heart, like it was alive and fighting just as hard.

A piercing caws of crows rang out.

The birds were here now, and they dragged chains at their feet that could burn and scar. The girl, who had let her mind steep in the cracks between things for a long time—but that was a silly word:
time passed when it stayed perfectly still, and it spun and snipped and cut into all sorts of shapes and fabrics in a place such as this—well, the girl knew the birds had passed through more worlds than one, and if they ate her eyes, she would be stuck here forever.

It was not a happy prospect.

Thunder rumbled, and lightning fell in its footsteps. It illuminated the entire grey world in a flash of brilliant blue.

The sword shook as well. It trembled, either in apprehension or anticipation, but it was impossible to tell.

Lightning?

That, the girl thought, peering into the blade and watching her own polished, black reflection stare back at her, was something she could work with.

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**Would It Kill You To Be Concise?**

The thing about gods is they are very difficult to understand.

The longer they live, the more nonsensical their words become. Their advice goes from divine to cryptic in a moment. Their experiences become myth, and so do their lives.

A helpful trick is to flip open a collection of fables and see if your name is written in its pages. If it is not, you are not old enough; if it is, you have successfully outlived your allotted time.

The girl knew all these things. She had felt them more a long time, like an itch, but she fully understood it now. She would have appreciated it a bit more if every fleshy part of her was not bruised and bleeding. She would have certainly appreciated it more if she could feel her sword arm, which was tingling with adrenaline-shot pain and bent at a weird angle.

“I’m done,” she said to the pillar of light, in the foulest of moods.

The light stretched from the sky to the sky; the ground to the ground. It was difficult to tell how far it went up, and it was equally as difficult to see how deep it was rooted.

Then the light wobbled, and quivered, and spoke. Its voice sounded like the ringing of a thousand tiny bells, if all those bells had been brought down by a clap of thunder.

*What follows after this time of ruination?* asked the light.

“Oh, I’d like to go home,” said the girl.

*The flow of the world is in turmoil*, said the light, more insistently.

“I’m tired,” continued the girl, “and everything hurts. I killed all the monsters you threw at me, or dug up from other worlds and threw at me, or wandered in from my world, which you threw at me as well.”

*All things in nature that touch the dawn of creation will meet their end*, said the light, but it sounded
immature, like a child trying to convince their parents that a horrible monster lived in the shed, or outside the window, or in the dark.

Those monsters existed, of course. Children saw things far clearer than adults. It was a shame that clarity was eaten so quickly.

The girl caught that that childlike petulance and pulled. “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me,” she said, “because you’re not saying it clearly.”

A pause. Then, with great care, *The world is in great turmoil. You have the potential to stem the flow.*

“If it’s a flow, it has to be flowing in from somewhere,” said the girl.

*It flows from within people,* said the light. It wiggled, like it was uncomfortable. *It flows from their heart of hearts. They hate, and they are deceived.*

“That’s how it’s always been.”

*Yes,* the light agreed eagerly. *It must change. It must stop. For the sake of the world.*

This conversation was not going anywhere productive. All those prettied-up words, and the girl wanted nothing more than to go away and be done with all this foolishness.

“Now you’re just being stupid,” the girl snapped.

She stuck her sword into the watery ground with a huff. It stood up straight, pulsing erratically, and shone something ominous. The light bent away from it, like a stiff noodle, and it was almost silly.

“You can’t change people’s hearts,” said the girl. “And you can’t change the world by changing hearts. All anyone can ever do is try their best to live up to the life they’ve been given, and maybe be a better person who loves and cares and feels as much as the people who’ve done them wrong.”

The light fell silent again. It always seemed to know what to say until the girl spoke. Then it was completely clueless.

Red dots fell sluggishly to the ground. They went in a pattern of *drip, drip, drip,* and the girl’s arm was beginning to ache badly.

“It’s not my job to make people behave,” said the girl. “I’m going to try and help people, because people are much braver when they know someone will be there to pick them up, and when they’ve walked and fallen and and learned how to get back up, they’ll teach others, and then those people will teach even more people, and all I’ll really have done is helped a few people, who in turn helped others, and the world might be a bit kinder, but it won’t be because of me.”

The mirror world felt so vast without words to speak. In reality, it was tiny, a round cloud or crack in the center of a marble. It could fit in the girl’s pocket if she tried hard enough to keep it, but she had no interest in holding on for long.

“I’m going now,” said the girl to the light. “I have a feeling I’ll be back. Think hard about what you want to say.” She wiped the black blood from her sword as best as she could. “By the way,” she added, “strength isn’t just how hard you can swing a sword. So. Maybe next time, be a bit more creative.”

*I,* began the light, wobbling and trembling, *will keep that in mind.*
Its answer—her answer, the words smelled and tasted like a her, all scratched up around the edges and crinkled around the corners—satisfied the girl, or at least did a bit to placate her.

The exit appeared to her when she thought of it. It was in the light, and she needed to bathe her sword in the beam first.

With bloodied, battered hands, the girl placed the sword into the shining beacon. It cradled the blade from wings to tip, and it shook once, twice, and three times, so violently that it seemed it would burst.

There was a horrible cracking sound, but nothing broke.

Go, said the light, and it sounded tired. We will meet again.

“Sure we will,” the girl replied.

And then she leapt into the endless light, feeling herself being tossed and thrown and shrunk into something tiny, then bundled up and wrapped in a warm, billowy silk that made her feel comfortable, but little more than that.

Her mind slipped out of the cracks between things. It was like a slingshot, and the band slapped her hard enough to leave a burn on her mind, and the pain was enough to turn that all-encompassing knowledge into the knowledge that she had just forgotten a great deal of stuff.

The girl fell out of the wall, tumbling onto the cold floor of the temple. Her sword was deposited with a heavy clang beside her.

“Ow,” said the girl, with emphasis, followed by, “fuck,” and then a very loud, “oh my god, my arm.”

In a similar tone, the god, who had been panicking for the past few hours, said, “Oh my god, A-Qing.”

They yelled at each other a fair bit. The god tried to act aloof, but his worry was far greater. The girl tried to explain her adventure, and her trials, and everything that came with it.

Her lungs protested violently. She hacked up a wad of stickiness, like a sickly cat.

The god secured her battered arm with some wood and part of an extra sash. His poor memory had been useful, for once.

As for what happened next, the girl was not too sure. With eyes round with worry and hands glowing with stars, the god said, “I’ll fix you up. I’ll try my best. I don’t know how much I can do, but hang on, alright?”

“Whatever,” said the girl, quite exasperated. She was tired, and more importantly, she was starving.

Things went dark after that. It was a peaceful dark, like the bottom of a deep sea, or the shut-eye of sleep, or the safety of a bundle of cloth, or a heart inside a marble, or a crack between all things.

The girl slept.
I need to fix some things I said.

First: I think the gods did exist, and they were quite active, but then something happened.

Second: I think the gods were quite powerful, but then something happened.

Third: Fuxing is a good person. I know this, now. But I do not think the previous Fuxing was a good person.

This is all because we found something very strange today.

It was a temple, and it was a very big one. Much bigger than the others. Much, much bigger. But it was in the middle of nowhere. It was high up on a mountain. We would not have seen it if not for the rumours about dragons (we did not see any dragons).

The nameplate was broken, like it had been smashed in half. I do not know why. It did not look natural.

There was a pedestal in the middle of the temple. Going by the age and wear, it did not look like it had been used for a very long time. So, like any normal person, I used it.

IMPORTANT NOTE: DO NOT STICK YOUR SWORD IN RANDOM PEDESTALS!! THEY MIGHT TELEPORT YOU TO MURDER TRIALS!! DO NOT DO IT!!!

It was not fun. I will not do it again.

That is a lie.

I am sorry. I should not lie. It does not help anyone.

I will not do it again without proper preparation. I almost died and it was awful. I have never fought so hard in my life, and I am a little worried, because I know there will be more difficult fights in the future.

I need to get stronger.

When I returned, Fuxing looked like he was ready to pull out all the hair on his head. He is sort of stupid. But I think it is nice that he was worried.

In short, something strange happened today. I am still sore all over. Fuxing is good at healing, but he is not a healer. We will find a healer in the next town.

To be honest, I feel a little strange.

Jiangzai feels a little lighter.

I am not sure if that is good news. But the blade feels sharper. This time, I will make sure it is used for good. For protection. I will not make the same mistakes as those before me.

The Trial of the Goddess. That sounds about right. I can only imagine these were the beginning trials.

It is just a feeling.

I will be more prepared next time.
“And what do you have to say for yourself?”

The girl grumbled, “I’m sorry.”

And then she added, “But it was only a hill, so don’t worry about it too much.”

After some consideration, she also said, “And I don’t blow things up too often, so you don’t need to worry.”

The god nodded, satisfied. The townspeople shook and trembled. The only person in the entire room who continued on like nothing was wrong was the healer, who was busy changing the girl’s bandages.

It was faintly dusty here, in this small town. People came and went without much of a care, except they certainly cared when a god came carolling onto their streets, and they cared something special when the god deposited a limping, half-bleeding girl into their arms.

“Help her,” he had said. “Please.”

It was the please that had really done it; what sort of god-fearing mortal would turn away a pleading god?

They had turned the entire town upside-down in search of their healer. And when they found her, the god repeated the same thing.

The healer had wiped her hands clean, looking onward with that stony, cold-but-feeling look only healers can nurture. She saw no god, and she heard no please. All she saw was a man, and a girl who looked like she tried to fight the world and lost (but she had landed a few good, solid hits that would hurt for a while, and that was plenty respectable), and she had said, “Bring her in. I’ll tend to her.”

Her wounds had not been too bad. The god had done a lot by himself, but there was only so much fancy tricks could do and a lot more medicine and rest could fix.

And so the girl was quarantined to a bed. She had not been physically trapped, but she felt so tired and numb that the weight of her own body was a prison by itself.

It had been a boring week. The girl fussed in bed, then curled in on herself and twitched in pain when her wounds pulled too tight. She read as much as she could. She drew little pictures of what she could remember.

There had been dogs, and crows, and a multitude of strange and horrible things. The more she drew, the less she remembered them. So she drew frantically, in a daze of sorts, before the healer had come in and declared she had worked herself into a fever.

The god sat by her side from that point onward. He was not there all the time: he too would work himself into a fever out of sheer boredom. Instead, he walked in and out, sometimes carrying books, or fruits, or anything he could get his hands on.
“Those are some strange birds,” he said to the girl’s crows.

“They travel between worlds, and they eat the soul out of your eyes,” the girl said, but she could not be sure.

“And those,” the god continued, “are some awful, awful dogs.”

“They try to howl you to death, but it doesn’t work when you can sing louder.”

The god entertained the girl for a long time. When he spoke, it was different from adults who only talked because their children were babbling away; it carried weight, and he was interested, but he was also worried.

“I’ve never heard of any trials,” he said. A peeled mandarin on a dainty plate sat beside him. He split it and tossed one half to the girl.

The girl caught it and shoveled the pieces into her mouth two at a time. “Jiangzai feels weird,” she admitted. “Heavier and sharper. Is that bad?”

The god thought for a while. “No,” he answered eventually.

They talked for a while, and then the god left to make rounds of the town.

Everyone loved his presence. They were beginning to warm up to him as a person, not just a god.

The girl had been very bored. Then she remembered her notes, the runes in the temple, and she hurried to flip through them.

Armed with cinnabar, cryptic notes, and an explosive talisman the god had failed to take away from her, the girl went to work.

It worked a little too well, hence the blown-up hill, the screaming townspeople, and the exasperated god.

The healer, however, was the most exasperated of them all.

“If you’re all done yelling,” said the healer, in a terrifying voice only healers can muster, “I’d like to finish up here, and then I’d like to take a nap, maybe have some dinner, without any explosions or screaming.”

Everyone shuffled out awkwardly. The god stood by a bit longer before the healer glared him out as well.

“Sorry,” the girl said once they were alone, feeling that it was necessary.

“I don’t care about any explosions or hills,” said the healer. “But save those talismans for the day you actually need them.”

There was not much in this town, but the girl decided there and then than the healer would be worth a second visit. Not that she would appreciate it.
I made an explosive talisman today!!

Fuxing was gone most of the day. I was stuck in bed because of bone fractures and internal bleeding or something just as dumb. Why is internal bleeding such a big deal? That is where the blood is supposed to be.

But it was good! The healer let me write. She even let me grind up some cinnabar. She did not seem like a cultivator, so she did not know about arrays.

I am not sure if Fuxing saw me copy down the runes in that huge temple. He was too busy staring into nothing. He is kind of dumb that way, but I got lots of good notes.

A lot of them were array material! The arrays did not work anymore, and I am not sure what they original function was, but arrays are very similar to talismans.

It was easy to piece them together. I still have one of Fuxing’s explosive talismans. He tried to take them from me, but I can be sneaky when I try.

And it worked!! I can make talismans!!

But I am very sorry for scaring the townspeople so badly. In my defense, I did not know it would blow up half a mountain. It was not really a mountain. It was just a big hill, and there was nothing but grass on it.

Fuxing took the talismans away again. He got all of them this time. It is okay. I still remember what the talisman looked like.

He is very dumb sometimes, and I am very smart!!

The Tale Of—

Let me tell you a story.

No, this one’s a bit different than the others.

We’ve been talking about gods and ghosts for a while now, haven’t we?

Don’t look at me like that. They’re fascinating stories, aren’t they? It makes you wonder who came before all this. People like us? Or were they blessed by the gods?

Well, nothing lasts forever. Not even the gods. It’s a shame. I would’ve liked to ask them a few questions. I’m sure you would’ve had some for them too.

“I still do,” right? I’m sure we all still do. If they come back one day, we’ll ask them them. If they don’t take too long, that is.

Anyway! You’re frighteningly good at distracting me. Where was I?

Right.

This story isn’t about gods, and it isn’t about demons. It’s about humans, and how gullible they are,
how deluded they can be, how power and loneliness and love and hatred can do horrible things.

It’s not a very fun story. Even so, do you still want to hear it?

Of course. It was a foolish question on my part. It’s best that you hear it, after—

It’s best that you hear it.

Maybe it started something like this:

_Prose_:

Once there was a boy who was born to two perfectly normal mortals with a bit too much freedom in them for their own good.

But freedom isn’t a particularly bad trait. Let me think. Oh, perhaps,

_Prose_:

Once there was a boy who was born to two mortals who travelled the world to be happy.

But as long as you’re with the people you love, it doesn’t matter too much where you are. Home is where the heart is, after all. Hmm. This is harder than I expected.

Then, how about this?

_Prose_:

Once there was a boy who was born into the world to parents he would barely remember, to a family he would steal and destroy, to a world that took and took and never gave anything back.

That’s an awful way to start a story. I’m not sure what would work best. I’m not very good at telling beginnings when I already know the endings, you see.

What? Tell the story backward?

I’m not sure that’s how stories work. That isn’t how time works, after all.

Then again, it would be an interesting way to pass the time. Make the night warmer.

Alright.

It ended like this:

_Prose_:

Once there was a man who had driven himself to madness, and loneliness, and despair. Once there was a world that put him to rest, or drove him to destruction, or simply made him not be.

This man wasn’t particularly scared of death. He had danced with it for far too long, and he was tired. He couldn’t go on any longer.

He died, as we all do.

Oh, but the people, they were terrified that he would come back. He had been a monster of the worst breed, commanding dark spells and resentful energies that could so easily rip, tear, and kill. They were very careful to watch for signs of his return.

In the first year, nothing happened.

In the second year, nothing happened.

In the third year, nothing happened.

In the fourth year—well, we’re living in the fourth year now. No demons or horrid ghouls anywhere
to be seen.

Little did they know that they were searching for the wrong thing.

Because, you see, at the very end of that first year, in that sliver of time between the old and the new, a god was born unto the world.

A god with no memories, no past, no regrets—only the feeling that something was missing. That it was wrong.

But he was alive.

We’re moving forward a little too quickly, aren’t we?

Let me turn it back a bit. I’m sure you have many questions.

How did things turn out this way?

Why did he have to go through all that? Why did he choose that walk to begin with? Why did he make himself into something so awful? What did others see him as? Just what did he gain?

I don’t know. I don’t know. To this day, I don’t...

I’ll try my best to answer those questions. Maybe you can answer them for me. I don’t know. But we’ll see. Let’s wait and see.

If we turn back time a little more, before everything fell—

Back to the days that were grey, but still held life—

Before that night—

That one night—

The night everything fell.

And all the came before it.

Before I fell.

It’s not a happy story.

But someone needs to hear it.

Of all people, I’m glad that it’s you.

_________________________________________________________________________

I am getting better at reading. Writing is still hard, but Fuxing reads a lot.

I like listening to him read. It makes me sleepy at night, but it is not a bad way to fall asleep.

Maybe this is how children feel when their parents tell them bedtime stories. But that is just a guess, and it is a dumb one. Fuxing is not my parent, and I am not his child.
Maybe we are something like friends or family. But we are not family.

Oh well. We both chose our families. All we can do is believe in them.

Dragons exist.

It was a very big surprise to both of us. We thought we were going to die for a moment, and neither of us want to die, whether it be the first or second time.

But it just flew past like nothing was wrong. I do not think it even cared we saw it. What would we do? Tell others? Get it in trouble? It breathed fire and made the entire canyon dry and rocky. The entire world could end and it would be just fine.

We watched it for a while. It flew through the canyon a few times. Was it taking a walk? I am not sure. But I am glad I saw it.

The world is a weird place.

Dragons are strange, but for some stupid reason, they are much easier to understand than humans.

Broken? No, Just A Little Fractured

It was cold and windy.

It was always cold and windy here. It was also very dark, and that made navigating by sight quite difficult. Luckily, the girl had sharp senses, her nose being the sharpest of the all, followed by her heart, and then her ears.

Her eyes were unnecessary but appreciated. They were a luxury she was thankful for.

Whenever she stepped into the cracks between things, it felt like tripping into water. One foot would be pressed against solid ground, but the next step would fall far deeper than the surface of the water, or the lake bottom.

It was the cracks between things.

The cracks went on forever. Whatever made the world, or however the world made itself at the beginning of everything, it did a very good job. It pieced itself together from the tiniest pebbles to the grandest of valleys.

But nothing is ever perfect. There are always little defects, tiny little cracks, too small to see with the naked eye, but just right for the wind to whisper through.

Not big or numerous enough to break anything, but just right to create a network of shortcuts for a peculiar girl.
The cracks between things shifted in colour, place, and feel. Depending on the thing she was slipping through, it could be a forest with trees that pierced the clouds, or a dark sea that roared and sprang with saltwater, or a blazing mountain that spat molten gold and puffed dark fumes, or a long road surrounded by shimmering wisteria trees that stretched from Beginning to End.

It could feel warm, or cold, or soft, or hard, or chewy, or rough, or anything or nothing. It could be everything one moment, and it could not be the next.

It was hard to explain. You have to experience some things yourself to truly understand, and slipping through the cracks in things was on that list.

“Thanks for your hard work,” said the girl to the great oak forest. She bowed from the waist, low and respectful. “I’ll be counting on you again in the future.”

The trees swayed as a great breath of wind swept through their branches and leaves. They seemed to be waving goodbye. A rumbling ran underfoot, like they were laughing, and it was a deep, bellowing laugh that crawled up from the belly and came out all booming and rough.

The girl turned, leapt into the wind, and tumbled out of the cracks.

Landing a leap was always difficult. She tripped over her own feet as she burst from the trees, the weight of her real, fleshy body a sudden slap in the face.

It was so different in the cracks between things, where she would be free to run as far and as fast as she liked, flying with the wind like a thousand silken sheets, or a thousand blazing lanterns.

But it was nicer here, in the real world. Of course it was nicer. That was where her life really was.

And that was where the god found her, napping at the base of the mountain, from whose peak he had just hurried down.

“Tell me before you run off,” he said, his breath a little short. He hunched over, hands on his knees, and wailed, “This old man can’t keep up with kids these days!”

The girl opened a single eye. “Okay,” she said, “then take a nap.”

“Why, I think I will.”

He was already making himself comfortable up against the trunk of a gnarled oak tree. His veil draped down his chest and stomach as he tilted his weimao over his eyes.

He slept, dead to the world in more ways than one, and he slept easily.

The girl shut her eye.

Things would be just fine. One day, if the world decided to come after them, she would throw them all into the cracks between things and watch as they crumbled.

People were always a bit stupid when they lost their way.

Crafting jewelry is too hard.
Fuxing is very good at it. I think he has too much free time. I think he gets bored very easily, and then he tries to do things, but he is very good at almost everything.

He is good at climbing trees, being a god, weaving strings, cooking (WITHOUT SPICE), crafting jewelry, writing talismans, archery, and a lot of other things. I think he might be a genius.

He told me I was a genius too. I think he lied. I am not nearly as good at climbing trees, being a god (because I am not a god), cooking (but I think I can get better fast), crafting jewelry, writing talismans, archery, or anything else.

I am much faster than him, though. He has always found that surprising. He is just a bit dumb.

To be fast, all you need to do is see the cracks between things and slip through them. It is not so hard. It is just cold and very windy.

But forging tools is hard. Crafting jewelry is even harder. The tools are too tiny, and the rocks are too fragile. If hit them too hard, they break, and it is very annoying when rocks break.

Fuxing makes a lot of bells. They remind me of Yunmeng Jiang bells. I am pretty sure they are the same. Jiang Muai wore two bells, and one of hers looks like the ones Fuxing makes.

I wonder if Fuxing will make me a bell. I hope it is not too selfish.

There are many monsters in the world.

I used to think they were all soul-eating monsters, but it turns out the soul-eating part is just collateral damage, sometimes.

I think some of them are just hungry.

I do not really blame them. Humans kill animals when they are hungry. It is just a matter of survival sometimes, and that is not fun.

Most of the time, they are not very strong. They think they are very strong because they have killed others, but in reality, they are like chickens that have eaten lots of bugs and tricked themselves into believing they are powerful. Then the foxes come and eat them.

The whole world is a circle. A cycle. Life is weird that way.

At least I know I am getting stronger. I can punch things harder. I can swing Jiangzai faster. Everything is a matter of perspective.

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The Other Side

“What,” said the girl, “is going on?”
The god smiled. It was a lopsided thing, slopped with the tilt of his head. His eyes glowed as red as the sky above, rolling with tumultuous clouds and waning light. Everything passed so quickly that it seemed like the entire world was on fire. The stars toppled over themselves rushing into the sky, where they were burnt to fine ash; the salt-smelling wind carried them away in bold swoops of ocean-tint green and ebbing curves of sea-cut song.

There was no ocean anywhere near. Not that the girl could see, anyway. But it was somewhere. It was out there, in the great, unknown world.

“We’re in the Other Side,” was all he said.

“The other side of what?”

“The world,” answered the god, “or the moon. Or life. It’s a bit unclear.”

The girl looked up at a sky that was bright without sun or moon to give it light. “I don’t understand,” she said, but deep in her gut, she knew she had been here before.

She thought long and hard. Her own weight felt lesser, like she was a fine set of robes without a body to hug.

It was a familiar feeling. But now, it was different: she was no longer a thousand silks or floating lanterns. She was herself, but not quite. Her eyes bled, her mouth tasted like the rusted coins of a greedy, dying man, and her skin was paler than death.

The girl rubbed her hands. She was cold. Her robes dragged down, like they were trying to bury themselves in the wet earth.

“The cracks between things,” she said aloud. “That’s where we are, but beneath that. Right?”

The god frowned. He looked sad when he frowned, even when it was in confusion. He looked sad as long as he looked like the life he left behind.

“I’ve never heard of any cracks between anything,” said the god.

“When you slip between things that are and things that aren’t,” the girl tried to explain.

“Like dreaming?”

“No. More real. Don’t you know?”

“I don’t,” said the god, rightfully confused.

It was frustrating, but there was nothing they could do about it. Instead, the god led the girl around, pointing out her ragged appearance and how it was directly in contrast to her real self. He pointed at the sky, which was still void of any permanent astral bodies, and explained that this place was very, very strange and by far the most mysterious place anyone would ever be.

“All reflections live here,” said the god, when they passed through a small village full of warped shadows. “Everything you aren’t lives here. And when you die, they die, too.”

“Is it the same the opposite way around?”

“No,” said the god. “They’re only reflections. You can’t kill them.”

“What about our reflections? Wouldn’t they be here, too?”
“We’ve stolen them,” answered the god. He spun, a slow, lethargic thing that barely lifted the hem of his robes and smelled faintly of sour blood. Then he smiled. His lips raised and fell at the same time. “See? Wonderful.”

The girl rubbed her eyes. Blood smeared onto her small, thin hands. “Just great.”

Neither of them looked human. They were forgotten beings, dragged over from another world, or another time, or maybe they had been wandering forever and had simply been brought into existence by the pain and suffering that their lives seemed to love tossing toward them.

It was nice, in a way. Life really had it out for them. It was going so far out of its way to make them miserable. The attention was flattering, and also a bit relieving: give all the pain to the strongest people, so all those hearts that are too thin and brittle need not crack and crumble.

Like sheets of dough fried too long, the girl thought. Like crispy treats.

Snap, snap.

Anyway.

The market was an interesting place. Interesting in the very original definition of the word, for it was full of strange things and happenings and sights and smells.

There was a man who spilled coins from every orifice. Through the center of his chest was a piercing gold flower that twirled and twined into his chest, pushing out his spindly nerves and vessels for gold, gold, gold. When he greeted them, it was with a gargling, spit-soaked, crinkling mess of what could have been words.

It was unintelligible. The language of riches was not a language the girl understood.

“The benevolent,” said the god as they passed by, “who serve acts of kindness and desire wealth and riches in their hearts.”

Beyond the greedy man was a woman who cradled a bundle of cloth in her arms. She hushed it again and again, in the same rhythm of hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye-bye, rest now, sleep now. Soothing as it was, her hypnotic voice lacked the potency to cut past the frothy, meaty, rotten smell of her dead child.

“Mothers who killed their children,” said the god, a sigh in his voice. “Their young ones won’t return, but they can mourn and regret here.”

On and on. There, a man with his eyelids and lips stitched together—“incorrigible gossips, who see and speak far too much evil”—and over there, a woman drowning in layers and layers of fine silks and resplendent jewelry—"a poor maiden, of course, that one's obvious"—and then a child with eyes that glowed like fancy glass beads, that rolled violet speckled with red, then pink, then gold, all encased in a glossy sheen—“now that’s someone who really is blind in real life, A-Qing. Isn’t that ironic?”

Each one of them was unsettling. The few that looked human from afar betrayed their human appearances up close; they smiled too wide, tapped their fingers together too fluidly, pointed their gazes in every direction like spiders, or did something equally as discomforting.

The god smiled at the passing figures. His eyes glowed shiny silver at friendly faces. His smile wore blades and drew blood from the depths of his sinking blood.
“They’re just shadows,” the god reminded the girl, as the warped figures scurried out of his gaze. “None of this is real in a meaningful way.”

But as the shadowy people moved and laughed and sang, eating and drinking with hearts that were ignorant but free, the girl thought they seemed awfully human.

The girl and the god ate and drank among the shadows. Black lightning split the sky as they sat down to be served, and everyone was so comfortable and at ease that it almost seemed normal.

They ate, they read, and they did their best to speak over the storm outside. The rain hammered the roads into watery slog, but come daylight, they would dry, and everything would be just as red and glowing as it normally was.

They kept walking. They had no destination in mind, but the god walked in confident, long strides.

“By the way,” said the god, “this place is home to many beings who call these lands home.”

“Like what?” the girl asked.

The god looked around, then leaned down to whisper sneakily in the girl’s ear. There was no heart in it, not really, but he seemed satisfied enough. All he offered as an answer was, “You’ll know when you see them.”

And so the girl’s first journey into the Other Side was not much of a journey as all. She walked around, gaped at a sky that was bleeding out and dropped black scars of heat and sound, ate food that tasted and smelled normal if not a bit sharper, and walked right out through a crack in the world.

Only when she sank into her own flesh and bones did she smell the freshness of the world around her, the openness of the sky above her, and the honey-sweet, sticky, waxiness of the god beside her did she think,

There’s no place like home.

Truly. Not really.

Even though their next meal was not nearly as sharp, and the tea did not sparkle or boil or leap up to her lips, it was normal. And normal was good, sometimes.

They ate, they read, they mumbled to each other, and then they slept.

Just like always.

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Something VERY WEIRD happened today.

I said I was good at finding the cracks between things. That is true. I am very good at it. That is how I can move so quickly. I slip in and I slip out.

It is hard to explain. But today I finally got an explanation.

There is a place called the Other Side. It is very weird. It is like a mirror world. Everything that lives is reflected into what it could be.
But that is only the mortal part. There are also beings that live in the Other Side, and they are much weirder than gods or dragons.

I have been slipping into the Other Side to run.

I do not know how. Fuxing does not know how either.

I will need to be more careful from now on.

Fuxing gave me a courtesy name today!!

I was very surprised when he said it was about time I had one. I thought only people from big schools had them!

He said my name should have the wind character, and then he started going off about all the characters with wind in them.

I said he was wasting his time. I told him to just choose wind as one of the characters and be done with it.

He laughed and said it fit my personality. That was dumb. I am not the wind. The wind has a personality, but I do not think I am the wind. I think he is very empty-headed when it comes to the wind, and I also think he needs to listen closer.

I think that Fuxing is like the stars. I am pretty sure the stars have a personality, too. But I cannot hear them. I can see them very well, but no matter how hard I try, I cannot hear what they are saying. Maybe Fuxing’s stars are like my wind.

Anyway.

Fuxing decided to give me the name Chengfeng, which means “to ride the wind” or “to take an opportunity”. I like it. It is short and decently easy to write.

He also gave me the name Wei. That was very kind of him. He did not need to give me his name, but I like it, even though it is hard to write.

Wei Chengfeng is a good name. It is easy to say and remember. I do not care if people remember me or not, but it is nice to have a proper name. Now people will not have to call me A-Qing all the time. They will have to call me with the name Wei, and if they ask me how to write it, or how to pronounce it, I will say it is the Wei like in Wei Wuxian, and I will laugh when they look at me weird.

It will be fun.

WE MET SOMEONE WEIRD AGAIN!!
I do not know who she was. Fuxing did not know who she was either. I think she was someone from the Other Side, but that is already weird enough, because the people who live there cannot come over. It is not allowed. There are rules!!

I will have to be very careful. I did not know she could come out under a full moon. She is weird, and she talks like she has seen me before, but I have never seen her before.

I will be VERY careful when I travel in the cracks between things.

I do not know why she is watching.

I do not know when she is watching.

She is creepy. I do not like her very much.

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**Everyone Together Now:**

It was a beautiful day.

Truly. The sun was shining, birds were singing, the girl was having a swell time enjoying clear skies devoid of somber tones or splattering rain, and she did so by hunting some game, skinning it as best she could by directing her sword to make the fine cuts (with a great deal of squinting and lip-pursing), sprinkling the meats with some dried spices (only medium spicy, which was just how she liked her jerky), and finally setting it over a particularly potent drying talisman for at least a while.

The girl’s mood was the best it had been in a while. No uncomfortable memories, no rain, no reminders of past failures, no itching undergrowth to scratch at her legs. What a wonderful day it was, to live freely and alive-ly.

So why did the god look so grave?

“Come here,” he said to the girl.

He had been sulking underneath the shade of a tree for even longer than the meats had been drying. He shifted as the sun clambered its way into the sky and sauntered across the vast, cotton-dotted void.

The girl frowned. She had entertained herself by cleaning out her satchels, reorganizing her dried spices and herbs, replenishing medicinal plants she managed to forage in the area, searching for shallow cracks between things in rocks and tree bark and bug-bitten leaves, cautiously peering around the not-worlds that hid beneath the real world, but were not buried deep enough to warrant the help of a vacant god.

The god’s call had startled her out of a careful viewing of a young maiden who wore robes that puffed up like clouds at the waist. Her whitewood bow had caught the girl’s attention immediately; and now it had been ripped away just as quickly.

She threw herself back, taking in a whistling breath between her teeth of real, fresh air.

“What,” said the girl, viciously displeased.
“Come here,” the god repeated. He gestured to himself, then to the empty space in the shade beside him. His smile shook. “Please?”

That smile was a bad smile. It was a fake smile that could only do one thing, and that one thing was break.

The girl muttered to herself. She eyed the drying talismans to check their progress, then walked over and sat herself down.

“What now?” she asked.

“I,” began the god, and it was so hesitant and slow that the words seemed like they would never come. He laced his fingers together, as if doing so would make him whole. “I,” he tried once more, “would like to impart a lesson unto you.”

“Okay,” said the girl, for this was something she had grown accustomed to.

“This is very important,” said the god.

“Uh-huh.”

“I really mean it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This one, more than anything else, is very, very important.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “If it’s so important, why don’t you save your breath for the important stuff?”

The god squeezed his hands. Pressed his palms together, almost like he was in prayer. But that was silly. Who could he possibly be praying to?

“Then listen up, now,” said he who did not know. “What I’m about to teach you is very important.”

“I can’t imagine it’d be that much more important that learning how to hunt.”

“Oh, animals are far easier to handle than humans.”

“And,” the girl said, “sometimes they overlap.” She thought of a golden blade stuck in the thin flesh of a throat. Of the unshed blood of the executioner. Of a heartbroken wail and baseless accusations.

The god sighed. “You’ll be asked all sorts of questions in this life that you won’t want to answer,” he said. “Who are you, for one. What’s your name, for another.”

The girl thought hard. She did not particularly mind either of these questions. But, she conceded, it would be unfortunate to be asked at the wrong time. She had a penchant for giving answers when nobody else was able to.

“Of course, there are also questions nobody else will ask you. Why do I have to go through all this? Why did I choose to walk this path to begin with? Why did I make myself like this? What do others see me as? Just what have I gained?”

The god’s fingers curled. His nails dug little crescent moons into his pale skin. His smile folded into a bitter, waning moon—or maybe it was a waxing moon? It bumped up and down, like the tide, and the girl tried to follow it as best she could.
“Ah, and then… Have I gone mad? What’s left for me now?”

“No,” whispered the girl, too softly to be heard. “And everything you want to be here is still here, if you look hard enough.”

But the god did not hear, and the girl could not speak any louder. As they were now, it was impossible for them to meet in the middle. All they could do was share the same road.

Soon, though. It would be alright soon. Eventually.

“No one will ask you. Sometimes, you’ll want someone to ask. But you won’t want to answer, and that’s what’s important.”

The god raised a finger to his lips. When he smiled, it broke a little at the edges.

“So I’ll teach you a magic phrase: nobody needs to know.”

“But,” said the girl, only to be quieted by the god’s stony gaze.

The grass beneath her felt so cold. It fluttered between her fingers. It writhed like maggots.

The god said, “It’s the answer to everything. Who are you? Nobody needs to know. What am I supposed to do know? Nobody needs to know. Does my life mean anything? Nobody needs to know.”

This was all so strange. Answers are always given, although a good portion of them need to be received first, so why the refutation?

“Hm? Why nobody needs to know instead of nobody knows?”

“Well, that’s a simple question.

“It feels much better to pretend like you already know the answer than to admit you have no idea what to say.

“So, repeat after me—

“Nobody needs to know.”

Nobody needs to know.

Sometimes, it’s better if nobody knows.

______________________________

REMEMBER:

NOBODY NEEDS TO KNOW.

You will know what it means when the time comes.

______________________________
"I told you one thing. Just one thing. I said, please don’t make the dragon angry. I don’t want to see an angry dragon. I said that, didn’t I?"

"Yeah."

"And what is the one thing you did?"

"I made the dragon angry."

"I’ve never seen something so mad before. I’ve only seen a peaceful dragon and an angry dragon. I’m not a gambling man, but I don’t like those odds."

"You’re lucky to have seen a dragon at all!"

"Why, that’s no way to talk to your master!"

"Then excuse me, mister high-and-mighty, but I’m not the one trying to get their attention in the first place!"

"It was gentle pokes. You started throwing fire at them. I think we can tell whose actions were the breaking point."

"You punched the glass, and I tapped it! It broke because you started hitting it in the first place!"

"I respect your metaphors, but not what they imply."

"I’ll show you how to respect me! Get your ass over here so I can skin and tan it!"

Dragons are not as peaceful as they look.

**DO NOT THROW THINGS AT A DRAGON!!!**

They will breathe fire and ice and lightning at you and it will not be fun.

I have learned my lesson. If Fuxing does not shut up, I will stitch his lips together and put spiders in his hair.

We will be heading to Yinhe tomorrow morning.

Apparently there is something strange happening there. There have been rumours of a sun that eats people, and it has not been good for travellers.

I wonder what Yinhe looks like. It is very far south. Fuxing seems to like it a lot.
I wonder why. It is probably just another town.

Yinhe is a pretty small town. It is far away from everything, and that makes it difficult to travel to.

It is also very humid here. People seem to like it just fine, but I do not like sweating. But they sell melons and other fruits, and they are nice and sweet and cold.

Daozhang and Song Daozhang were gone on some trip. It seems like they are gone pretty often. I am a little sad I did not get to say hello, but I heard they are working very hard to start their own cultivation sect.

The hostess of the inn we are staying in looks like she knows a lot. Too much. I cannot tell if that is good or bad. She seems like a good person, but it is too early to tell.

I am tired from travelling today. I will sleep, and then we will see what is really going on with this sun.

I am very sorry for everyone who has been caught up in all this.

All those innocent people who were eaten up, I am sorry.

All those gods who fell to a war I don’t know about, I am sorry.

I am really sorry for Shouxing and Ying Huohua. I do not think either of them deserved what happened, but I do not know the full story, so I cannot say.

But they smelled very sad and broken. I think that is enough to say sorry.

I hope Fuxing feels better soon.

I will ask him to teach me how to write better so I can send letters to Hanguang-Jun.

I hope everything will be okay. Otherwise I will go and make it okay, like always.

Hanguang-Jun,

IF HANGUANG-JUN IS NOT THE ONE READING THIS LETTER, GO GIVE IT TO HIM. YOU KNOW WHO HE IS. THE SECOND JADE OF GUSU LAN. THE SECOND YOUNG MASTER. IF YOU HAVE HALF A BRAIN, YOU WILL HAVE HEARD OF HIM. YOU WILL BE SORRY IF YOU TRY TO PEEK. I WILL CUT YOUR FACE OFF AND I WILL LAUGH.
If this is Hanguang-Jun, please ignore the first part. I was joking. Kind of.

Hello. This is Wei Chengfeng, but I prefer to be called A-Qing. But I am also fine with Wei Chengfeng and Yufeng-Zhe, since that is more proper and formal.

I hope this letter finds you well. I tried really hard to make this talisman. PLEASE DO NOT TRY AND ALTER IT. I tried changing things and it tore itself to shreds. I am not sure why. I will look into this later, so please look into this letter first.

Fuxing has been down these past few days. It is not your fault. He is just thinking too hard, and then he will say some stupid things, but then he will find something interesting, and we will move on.

Something like this has happened before, and he came out of it just fine. Do not worry too much. I am sure he will be just as chaotic as he normally is in a few days. I will write you back to update you.

To be very clear, I know about Fuxing’s past life. He told me his story. Since I am a smart person, I do not believe everything he says, because it is always very skewed. I have talked to some people to get a better idea of everything. It is not a pretty picture, but at least it is a little more whole than it used to be.

I feel like I should try to tell you more. What is there to say?

I have been travelling with Fuxing for a little more than a year. We do not have a destination in mind. We just travel and give out blessings.

Fuxing has been teaching me how to do a lot of things. He is a good person. I think he deserved better, but that is just me. I do not know a lot of things.

I am not sure what else to say. I think that will be it for now. Please ask me questions so I know what to tell you. AND DO NOT ALTER THE ARRAY. Just put your letter on it and it will do its job. OR ELSE IT MIGHT BURST INTO FLAMES OR EXPLODE.

Talk to you soon (hopefully),
Wei Chengfeng

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Fuxing is feeling better!

I tried really hard this time to make him feel normal again. I do not like when he is sad, but I know people get very sad sometimes, and being happy all the time is just annoying.

But he is in a much better mood, and he gave me a new sash.

It is shiny and sparkly and looks like a bunch of flower petals stitched together. I like it very much. It smells a little like ghosts, but I am sure that is just my imagination.

He called it a spectral sash. THE spectral sash.

I think he is just exaggerating. He likes to do that a lot.
Early Morning Walks

It was very early in the morning. Or at least it seemed to be: the girl and the god had both been startled out of sleep by a series of violent rumblings, and they had rubbed the fuzzy splotches from their eyes to find rain pouring down outside the mouth of the cave.

The thunder grumbled and groaned in the low tones of early morning yawns. It was loud and sudden, and when it faded, the crackling stretches of lightning tore through the damp, grey clouds in jagged, wince-worthy blades of light and heat and plasma.

Lightning flashed and fell like the skies had been torn open, and this screaming storm was the result. Nobody was there to patch it up. There were no gods up in the heavens. The only god was down on earth, and he sat beside the girl, staring up at the broken sky with a severe frown.

“It’s not even nightfall yet,” he said, almost displeased.

“What?”

“She’s back. The Trader.”

The girl had never heard of any trader who went by such a formal name, but the nervous back-and-forth flickering of the god’s eyes made the entire cave feel much colder.

The cackling sounded like rocks, at first, like someone was playing with a handful of tiny, dusty pebbles older than the world. It grated quietly from deep within the cave, almost like a trickle of water, but as it grew louder, it creaked and clacked into the push and pull of bony joints upon which no flesh or skin grew.

“Good morning,” said the girl, as the first of the hounds trotted their way out of the darkness.

They laughed and responded in the language of bones, that all things deader than imploded stars are fluent in. Slowly, methodically, they circled the girl and the god, a bell-like twinkling in their marbly eyes.

“Good morrow,” said the Trader, and the dogs fell silent in a hush.

The Trader came closer. The moon dragged behind her, falling low from her starlight robes, and it was a bumbling, golden thing that rolled and bounced, easily distracted by tiny things and always in a rush to catch up with the glistening stars.

“You’re early today,” said the girl. “I didn’t know it was a full-moon night.”

“I go where I please,” spoke the Trader, “as long as the sun is hiding.”

That made the girl deeply uncomfortable. She was not particularly fond of the Trader’s gleaming yellow eyes, and no matter how hard she looked into those diamond-slit pupils, all she ever found was the cold hush of nothing and forever.

The girl looked at the god. He was sitting, and his expression was vacant and loose, but his hands were clenched tightly under his robes. Whenever a hound got any closer than the distance he was comfortable with (which was far, far away, out of mind and out of sight), he took a deep breath, held it, and slowly let it go.
“I guess you’ll be staying with us for a bit,” said the girl.

“Only until the storm ends,” spoke the Trader.

“Rain’s no fun. It’s wet, and it makes you sick.”

“It isn’t the rain I’m trying to avoid,” said the Trader, in a hundred voices that might have sounded annoyed. “It’s what the rain brings I’d rather stay away from.”

The girl did not understand, not really. But she thought of the shattered skies and lightning that fell so violently it almost seemed as if it was attacking the earth, or searching for someone.

“Huh,” said the girl, feeling realization settle in like a cold.

They sat there for a while, in silence, avoiding each other’s gazes like they would catch their deaths if they ever looked at one another.

It was deathly awkward and uncomfortable. The girl kept her gaze on the sky, wishing that whoever was making such a fuss would grow up and take a walk.

The rain stopped eventually. All things come to an end. The rain began to trickle off, and the lightning struck one last time across the summer sky before the hole in the clouds mended itself back up and stopped acting like such a child.

For a moment, it was as if everything was glowing a faint gold. Wherever the sun had peered out from, it was blooming and blazing with an intent-laden vigor to make up for its lost hours, and the girl finally let out a sigh of relief.

“Well,” said the Trader, standing to her full height, “I’ll be taking my leave, now.”

“Goodbye,” said the girl, because it was polite to say goodbye even to people you never wanted to see again.

The Trader turned into the mouth of the cave, where the girl and the god were too nervous to navigate (for fear of losing sight of daylight), and her hounds chattered and yipped after her, turning their heads to stare, even as they were claimed by darkness and slipped far beyond the cracks between things.

It seemed as if their glowing, star-like eyes were left behind. Then the girl blinked, and all she saw were shadows she had no interest in touching.

It was silent for a while. They steeped in silence.

“We should be going now,” the god finally said.

“No more caves,” said the girl.

The girl was not afraid of the dark, but she was not fond of what the dark brought. Shadows always look small until something big and horrible crawls out of them.

The Trader was not big or horrible, but she made them uneasy, and that, by itself, was reason enough.

As they left, the girl wondered where exactly the hole in the sky came from.
The lady is weird.

She stares a lot. Her eyes are very yellow. She looks like a wolf.

The skeleton hounds follow her around. I think they might be her servants, or vassals, or something like that. They are funny, but the lady is not.

Fuxing calls her the Trader. I am not sure why, but he seems to know more than I do, so she will be the Trader from now on.

I wonder what it is she trades. She does not seem to have deep pockets. Maybe it is not anything physical. That is a very worrying thought.

She looks at me strangely. Maybe she has seen me with Fuxing in the Other Side.

She looks a little lonely. But I cannot be sure.

THE SECOND TRIAL WAS JUST AS HARD!!!

I thought I told her to make it less dumb, but all she did was throw more monsters at me!! They do not help!! I am getting stronger, so they just make me angry!!

I made them all explode. I cut some of them up. The cracks between things were helpful, but she was not. If the next trial is this stupid, I will drag her out of the stupid light and punch her in the face.

Jiangzai feels even sharper. I do not know if this is good news.

Maybe he is waking up.

I will need to think about this.

Hanguang-Jun,

Thank you for replying so quickly. I appreciate it a lot. I hope the talisman was not too hard to figure out. I managed to fix it, so it should no longer burst into flames or explode. BUT. Please do not alter it. I am not sure what else it might do.

I will try to answer your questions as best as I can. I am sure you have more, and that you are just being polite. You do not have to be polite with me, because I am not very polite to begin with.

Here I go!

Fuxing is fine now. He is normal again. I think he tends to overthink sometimes, and that spiral is not a good one.
I do not like speaking for others, especially about matters I would rather not be involved in. But I know he remembers you, and I am sure he remembers your interactions fondly. I will not say too much, but I am sure he likes you. His memories just have trouble fitting in with this life, and he is confused.

He will figure it out eventually. He is not that stupid.

I am also fine. I am having a good time travelling with Fuxing. We are just travelling. Sometimes we stay in towns, and other times we just try and see the world.

The world is a very big place. Sometimes, I am worried I will not see enough of it before my time is up. But that is a very stupid thought.

I like candy because it is sweet. I like bamboo because it is versatile and grows very quickly. I like sparring, but not fighting. I like a lot of things. I dislike a lot of things. I am not sure what else to say about myself.

I do not have parents. I am not sure where they went, and I do not care. I have been living by myself just fine, and now I am travelling with Fuxing just fine.

He calls me his disciple. It makes sense. I think I might have traded my life for protection, but I do not mind it. It makes me happy to know that I get to see the world and become stronger at the same time.

I am not a very interesting person. I am just me.

Please do not worry about the flowers in Yiling. We were there a few months ago, and we are not entirely sure what happened, but I am sure they are harmless for the most part. At least the Burial Mounds are much prettier.

Have you been there since? If not, you should visit. The town is much brighter now.

That is all I have to say for now. I will send a piece of candy with this letter so you can try it. I know Gusu Lan has too many rules, and I do not care about them.

Talk to you soon,
Wei Chengfeng

I forgot to write about it earlier, but people have been calling me Yufeng-Zhe recently.

I am not sure when it started. Since I completed the second trial, I have gotten a lot stronger. Maybe some people saw me kill monsters and decided to give me a title. I am not entirely sure why, but I like it very much.

Yufeng-Zhe. It is basically just my name. Well, whether it is yufeng or chengfeng, it is riding the wind all the same. It fits. Whoever came up with it has a knack for naming.
We have been invited to the Qinghe Nie Sect to stay as “honoured guests”.

I am not sure how their disciples found us so fast, but I guess we were making a pretty big deal out of singing and all that. Sect Leader Nie apparently wants some help with something. I am not surprise. He always needs help with something.

This is the ONE time I am happy Fuxing taught me how to fly on a sword.

I will try my best not to slip in the cracks between things until I really understand what the Trader wants from me.

But right now, we are headed to Qinghe. I’m pretty excited. We have never been up north so far.

 Snake

The Qinghe Nie Sect was not a sect known for their patience.

There was angry, and then there was the Qinghe Nie Sect. There was violent, and then there was the Qinghe Nie Sect. There was headstrong, and then there was the Qinghe Nie Sect. The list stretched on and on, and everyone silently agreed that the Qinghe Nie Sect was interesting, a little weird, and a lot angry.

Sect Leader Nie did not seem to fit into any of those: angry, violent, or headstrong.

He was a meek man, tall but small-bodied, bearing great status yet hiding it all behind a fan, shifty eyes, and twitchy fingers. He stumbled even as he beckoned them to sit in a great hall that smelled of nothing but frosty winter (it was not winter, but there was a sharp coldness in the air that lingered).

The girl felt an immediate dislike settle in her gut as she studied the man, who seemed even smaller in person than he did in rumours.

The god thought it was amusing to a point, but felt sorry for him, mostly.

And then the attendants poured them tea, served them some snacks, all while holding up carefully blank expressions. They all looked toward their sect leader as they left, and something tiny shifted in his eyes.

It was a tiny, insignificant thing. It was like a pebble being kicked off the side of a great mountain.

Nobody else would have cared: eyes move, don’t they? They follow light, shy away from darkness, and seek out colour. Nothing strange. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But the man’s eyes slid slowly, coldly, like a fine blade over a sheet of ice.

The girl felt her dislike settle into something much heavier.

The moment was lost in a heartbeat. The attendants left, the god settled down with his typical lyrical nonsense, and the girl tried to sit as neatly as she could as the man began spewing his spiel.

“Oh, thank you so much for coming,” he said.
“When I heard there was a god in our lands, I was so relieved,” he said.

“I don’t want to bother anyone too much, so I really do hope you can help me,” he said.

And then he squirmed in place, whining out something more about how things had taken a turn for the worse after the death of his brother, whom he had admired very much as a leader, but who had been very strict and controlling, and it was a shame that childhood memories become covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like all the fans he had collected as a boy, now either broken or forgotten somewhere obscure, but never lost for good.

In good humour, the god had laughed and smiled.

Then he said something along the lines of, well, it can’t be helped; at our age, we become our siblings and our parents, and we live long enough to see their faces and legacies repeat in time. That’s the trouble with living things. They don’t live very long, and they grow and pass so fast, and then they become memories, and memories fade and blend and smudge together, and living is really just a mess of a thing that is here one day and gone the next.

And then there had been a great, bulbous silence. It was great in that it seemed to be endless, and it was bulbous in that it seemed to swell with each word.

Something shifted in the sect leader’s eyes again. He almost seemed surprised, and the girl would not have blamed him.

Of all people, of course the god would be the one to entertain him with a truth so tangible and sweet in was like honey.

The conversation dipped into casual topics after that: the weather, the food, their travels, all things stupid and dumb here and now, but wondrous anywhere else.

“I’m so glad you’ve come to help us,” said the sect leader. “Did I say that already?”

“You did,” the god answered.

“Oh, good! You see, I know you’re very capable. I’ve heard of your feats, especially with that man-eating sun in Yinhe. If it isn’t too much trouble, I would greatly appreciate your assistance with eliminating another beast. If it isn’t too much trouble.”

Of course, the god and the girl both found something strange in his words: how did he know? Yinhe was a small town, growing at a frightening speed, but it was still small, and quite far from chilly Qinghe.

The god set it aside. He had experienced firsthand the rapidity at which rumours travel.

The girl grabbed on and refused to let go. She was beginning to feel that something was very strange.

“What sort of beast?” she asked.

The sect leader startled, then shifted his shifting gaze to the girl. It settled, sweeping over all she was all at once. It was the winter wind, and it brought blinding curtains of snow with it.

But the girl knew the winds well. She could see. She could see.

Then the sect leader looked away. “I discovered something truly terrible recently,” he said, despair in
his words. It was very convincing. “A great corruption has spread through the cultivation world. It’s truly horrible!”

“Hmm,” was all the god said, having lived through corruption himself.

Well. Maybe not having lived, but having seen a great deal of it.

“It’s even worse than you might think it is,” the sect leader continued. “I—I don’t want to even think of it, but the Chief Cultivator, Jin Guangyao, has been the center of a terrible scheme for many years!”

The girl was not surprised by this news.

She had no right to be; she was not familiar with the chief cultivator, and she had known for a long time that kindness was a very convincing facade.

The god was noticeably more surprised. He folded his hands over each other, sat a little taller, and said, “Is that so?”

“It is, it very much is so, and it’s terrible!” The words tumbled from the sect leader’s lips like gasping breaths from a dying man. “It’s impudent of me to ask for help, I know, but please, I don’t want to endanger anyone else, and I thought a divine being would certainly be more capable than I am.”

He looked down at his hands, as if he were ashamed. It was very convincing.

The girl was beginning to fidget.

It was a good act. The sect leader was very, very convincing. From one liar to another, it was high praise. That did not make it less irritating in the slightest, but it made it a little more bearable.

The girl saw his act, polished by rumours and his own true weakness, and she found it despicable in that she hated being lied to, and she found it respectable in that she knew what lying for survival felt like, and she had no right to condemn it.

Instead, she slapped her hands on the table.

It was a jarring sound, accompanied by the loud rattle of cups and plates. The sect leader flinched as if he had been run through.

“Can you drop the pitiful god-save-me spiel and just get on with it?” she demanded. “We don’t have all day!”

The god studied her in surprise. “A-Qing,” he said, “that’s not that very polite.”

“I don’t care.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” said the sect leader.

There was a slight twitch at the corner of his lips. His eyes were heavier, slower, and his head fell to one side, just slightly, just enough to sway his hair over his shoulder unevenly.

The girl could act, too, if she wished. But there was no need for it, and she was growing tired of this intellectual back-and-forth.

“I commend you,” said the girl. She lifted her chin and held the sect leader’s icy gaze, took all those sharp edges and blunted them against her own ego. “Your acting is incredible. And you’ve put a lot
of effort into building up a stage for yourself, haven’t you? All those rumours and pitiful demonstrations do a lot to build up character.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” said the sect leader, and his voice was flatter now, with a dissonance that prickled in all the wrong ways.

In another life, perhaps she would have been scared, or perhaps she would have been killed. This life was not that one. Or any of them.

The girl swung her sword onto the table. She watched the disciples at the doors move to draw their weapons.

The god shifted his balance. He raised his hands, slowly, sluggishly, and the world sat in monotone for a split second.

The disciples froze. There was a god before them, and he was moving his hands, which spun gold that blessed as it killed, and there were coins in his sleeves that sparkled like stars when you squint your eyes too tight, and there a smile on his face that was charming in the way red is pretty until the smell of iron hits.

They, of course, realized quickly that a god was still a god no matter how jovial his voice was, how light his song was, or how bright his smile was. One by one, or all at once, depending on your standards of efficiency and speed, they yielded.

“Let’s all calm down a bit,” said the god, in sing-song, but his song might have been a chorale, or a war cry, or a hymn for sacrifice.

“I didn’t even draw my sword,” said the girl. “I don’t think I’m the one that needs to calm down.” With no shortage of self-righteousness, she added, “Your disciples are awfully jumpy, Sect Leader Nie. Maybe there’s a reason you’re so on edge all the time.”

“They’re just,” said the sect leader, “cautious.”

“I think,” said the girl, “that this act has gotten horribly stale, and I would love to get to the point.”

The sect leader opened his mouth to tell them that he did not appreciate their baseless accusations, and that he really was helpless without the help of any of his good allies, and that his prowess in acting was even more pathetic than his prowess in cultivation.

He would have said all this and more if the god, whose eyes had muted into a silent grey, had not cleared his throat.

He could have said anything. He would be heard no matter what he said.

And yet the words he decided on were, “Nie Huaisang. It’s been a while since our school days, hasn’t it?”

Silence. Then, cautiously, with all the wariness of a fish that has already been halfway gutted, the sect leader lowered his fan.

“Wei Wuxian?” he asked.

And it is there, perhaps, where things began to get wobbly.
I KNEW THE QINGHE NIE SECT WAS WEIRD!!

They were weird to begin with! They’re one of the big four, but they’re always so quiet, and they never do anything loud. How is that in character for them? Weren’t they one of the loudest sects during the Sunshot Campaign?

I don’t know how people did not recognize it earlier. Obviously, since the sect leader changed, the sect did, too, so OBVIOUSLY the change has to do with the sect leader!

Just because people are quiet doesn’t mean they are weak. Some of the quietest people are the most cunning people out there! How did they not recognize earlier?

Nie Huaisang is a sly asshole. I respect his patience and his dedication, but the fact that he thinks murdering innocents is fine as long as he gets his way is unacceptable. If he can’t find another way to fulfill his goal other than leading people to their deaths, then I think he just isn’t smart enough.

Idiots!! Every person who thinks they’re high and mighty are all idiots!! Do they even have any hobbies? He looks like he’s been plotting for the past five years!!

TAKE A WALK!! EAT SOME FOOD!! WHAT GOOD IS REVENGE IF YOU HAVE NOTHING TO MAKE OF YOUR LIFE AFTER???

THEY ARE ALL SO STUPID!!!

Fine.

If Sect Leader Nie wants to be a conniving bastard, he can try. I can’t punch him since it would look really bad and draw unwanted attention, BUT I CAN MAKE FRIENDS WITH HIM.

I WILL KILL HIM WITH KINDNESS.

HIS WEAKNESS IS KINDNESS.

I CAN SEE IT IN HIS EYES. HE DOESN’T UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE CAN BE GOOD EVEN WHEN THEY HAVE BEEN WRONGED.

I WILL TEACH HIM. WITH KINDNESS.

(I’m not very good at kindness. This is good practice. This is for you, tiny baby A-Yuan who probably isn’t a tiny baby anymore. I WILL ENDURE THIS FOR YOU.)

I’m so tired. This is stupid.

I wish people would talk about their emotions more.

God.

What is going on?
“I don’t trust him.”

“You’ve made that very clear over the past two days, A-Qing.”

“Great. So why is it we’re still here?”

“You and I both know that corruption is a very bad thing, and Jin Guangyao is a very powerful man. I don’t believe I need to put the pieces together for you.”

“So we’re working with—that snake? Did you even hear him? Did you hear how cold he was? Do you really think he’s all that different from Jin Guangyao, the way he is now?”

“It takes a villain to know a villain.”

“Then why?”

“I know him.”

“That’s different.”

“You’re strong, A-Qing. Stronger than any of us will ever be. Vengeance doesn’t touch you the same way it touches others.”

“I’m fine with killing Jin Guangyao.”

“That’s not quite what I meant. But—well. It’ll be alright. Nie Huaisang is a very cunning man. Without him, we would eventually do the same thing. With him, we’ll do finish a little faster. He can’t hurt us. He’s scared.”

“Doesn’t make for a great villain, to be scared of death.”

“Oh, everyone’s scared of death. Nobody wants to die. Some people will go their entire lives in monotony, thinking that tomorrow will be just like yesterday, which was like the day before, and today will end the same way it always has, and yesterday will be the same, and every day after will be drawn in the same hand, with the same brush, with the same ink. But at the end of everything, nobody wants to die. There’s always something that will be left behind.”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like Sect Leader Nie has anything he’s scared to leave behind. Maybe his vengeance, but not much else.”

“But he’s brave in his own way. Right?”

“I guess it takes a special kind of devotion to put down such a risky play. Why did he come to us, of all people? He doesn’t know us. He doesn’t trust us. He just wants to use us, take advantage of our status and power, and then—what? He just leaves us? He doesn’t have the ability to kill us. He can’t. He won’t. I won’t let him.”

“Do you think he cares about anything that happens after he gets his revenge?”

“Nobody thinks about those sorts of things. Did you think about what you were going to do after you died?”

“I didn’t believe there would be anything afterwards.”
“Yeah, well, it’s the same story here. Nobody thinks about those kinds of things because they’re
dumb and short-sighted.”

“At that point, I doubt they want to think about anything anymore.”

“Life goes on! Even without you, life goes on. Of course I’m worried about myself, and I obviously
don’t want to drop dead anytime soon, but some people think so much and so hard, and they forget
that the end of things doesn’t mean the end of everything. Forget dying—I don’t know how it works,
and I don’t know if I’d ever come back, but revenge is an act, not a reason to live! Doesn’t that idiot
have any hobbies? Doesn’t he paint fans, or read, or write, or do anything else other than being
vengeful? God!”

“Are you, uh, alright?”

“I’m going to change his mind.”

“That… that’s a bold venture.”

“I’m going to do it.”

“Well, if anyone can do it, it’s you. Now finish your soup before it gets cold. I’m sure Sect Leader
Nie has quite a lot to tell us.”

Snow fungus soup tastes very good.

I will admit that Qinghe is a very nice place. It is much colder than Yunmeng, which is nice, and the
food is more flavourful because the spices don’t burn my tongue off, which is also nice.

If only Sect Leader Nie stopped trying to smile us to death. You can’t smile someone to death. I think the smile may have frozen onto his face.

He’s stupid. But the soup here is good.

How long are we going to stay in Qinghe?

I’m worried.

Jiangzai is shaking.

I don’t know what that means.

Actually, I think I know what it means. But I don’t like what it implies.

We need to leave before he wakes up.

Sect Leader Nie doesn’t need to know about this.
We’re going back to Yinhe. I think that’s a good idea. Nie Huaisang has eyes and ears everywhere, but Yinhe is so loud and supportive of Fuxing that even he will have a hard time figuring out the truth.

Mie Yu will be very helpful.

I just hope Daozhang and Song Daozhang will be busy. They don’t need to know until everything is all sorted out.

I have no idea how long that will take.

I will try to be calm and understanding. I gave Fuxing that chance. If I try really, really hard, I might be able to give Xue Yang that chance.

I need to be strong.

Still Reading?

Great.

Give me a second.

Before we continue, I feel the need to inform you all that the following tale is wildly inaccurate.

To those of you who understand, I highly doubt you need a detailed explanation. To those of you who are staring at this excerpt in confusion, eager to read on about the adventures of a girl who, now that I look back on it, carried herself with a grandeur and pride greater than the world and all its celestial bodies (both visible and invisible to practitioners of all crafts), I can only say this: give me a second. I’ll try my best to explain.

I don’t like sad stories. I’ve never been fond of them. What’s the point? People hurt, people suffer, people die. Who doesn’t know that? You will never in your life need to explain pain to someone. Pain is far simpler to come across than happiness.

With all that said, it’s in everyone’s best interest to acknowledge that disaster happened, and that it was awful and tragic, but instead of lingering on how exactly each cut stung or how each wound grew into pale, bumpy scars, let’s hurry on.

What happened afterward? How did people heal, and how did they grow? Why did it hurt so much to begin with? How can we ensure it never happens again? If it does happen again, how can we make it so it hurts less?

Those questions are far more productive than what fiction and reality love to serve us. I have no vendetta against people who exaggerate upon such matters; it’s a well-needed wake up call at times.

From someone like me, you’ll find that sort of hurt scattered sparingly. Admittedly, I don’t like
remembering things that hurt, but nobody does.

Who cares?

There’s a great big world out there, and we’re doing a horrible job of making it into anything worth living in. History repeats itself, and time might be an infinite thing, but this world isn’t. Our lives aren’t. So let’s put all that aside and reach into our bag of hurts only when we need to.

Anyway.

_The Tale of Jiangzai._ One of the more famous stories in the Chronicles. I’ve seen it told to children, or adults, or whoever; what matters is that people like telling it as a funny, light story, that delivers a simple moral: forgive, but don’t forget. It’s kinder. It’s better.

It’s hilarious how wrong they all are.

Let me get this out of the way: forgiveness isn’t mandatory. It isn’t right or wrong. It takes a great deal of strength to forgive, but to refuse to forgive takes just as much heart. That’s the trouble with people who are too proud or too kind.

Now, as I’m sure you all know, Jiangzai was and still is my closest ally. We’ve seen the world expand and grow and grow to die. We trust each other. We wouldn’t die for each other, though. It’s counterintuitive. Life is best lived alive, after all.

Then the question remains: why? Why was Jiangzai forgiven, and why did things proceed the way they did?

I’ll try my best to explain. These matters come from the heart, and I’m not sure if my heart is the best source to extract them from. Well, here we go.

I forgave Xue Yang because it was better for me that way.

I was a girl, travelling with a god, and we were both wandering a world that was far larger than any of us would have ever thought. He was tired of the whole “redemption in death” trope. I didn’t care for it then, but I certainly understand what he was thinking now.

Living is more of a punishment for some. But punishments must not continue forever: a punishment serves to reform, not condemn. It gets awfully boring otherwise. Nurture what good you can find and make it something better. Isn’t it more pleasant that way?

Jiangzai was difficult. He didn’t remember much, and that made it difficult. He was rude, violent, but he was malleable. He was so easy to convince of good and bad.

I don’t regret giving him a second chance, but I didn’t like how it happened. It was like leading a snappish dog around. Whenever things felt strange or wrong, he would complain, but he couldn’t say anything better. He didn’t know of anything else.

Well, he learned in time, and he remembered in time, too. It was all good in the end. Or so I like to believe.

In truth, this story hurt far more than I like to tell. Reconciling before and after is always difficult. But there’s nothing to be gained in making tragedies pretty. Losing hurts viscerally enough without elaboration.

The popular moral is thus: if you try hard, people can be forgiven.
It’s a cute moral. Very easy to understand and very easy to criticize. Perfect for children and adults who want simpler stories.

No stories are simple. We just like to tell them simply. It’s quaint that way. Dainty and pretty and easy to tell over snacks or story time.

This story is wildly inaccurate because that’s just how I chose to tell it.

I like it better that way. There are some things I’d like to keep close to the heart. This is one of them.

Sorry for the trouble, but that apology isn’t sincere in the slightest. You already have so many of my stories: let me tell this one how I like.

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The Tale of Jiangzai

Perhaps it was like waking up, or perhaps it was like being born. It was difficult to tell with those sorts of things: the former is always lost in that boundary between dreams and reality, and the latter is forgotten as soon as the first wail slips from your lips.

The sword neither dreamt nor cried.

He did, however, open his eyes, and with his first free breath, he asked, “Where am I?”

There were two people who greeted him into the world. They were neither his parents nor his friends. Not yet, and perhaps never.

“You,” was all the girl could say.

Anger boiled beneath her like an unsteady bog; it rose up in bubbles that grew and popped, bursting outward in heat and steam and acid born from deep within. No matter how hard she tried to reign her foulness in, it smelled of sulfur and old waters that had been sitting for too long, that had been kept in check solely by a great wall of gold.

But now it was over. Things that had been immutable were changing.

There was a sword whose eyes pulsed like heartbeats and whose wings fell like stars. He stood, bleary with death-stricken sleep, and he swayed in place, as if the weight of a semi-corporeal form was somehow heavier than that of the sins he once bore. That he still had to pay for.

The girl took a deep breath. It was a piercing thing that shot cold air up her nose and garnered a curious look from both the god and the sword.

“You,” said the girl, “are a real piece of shit.”

“I don’t feel very welcome,” was the second thing the sword said.

“You name is Jiangzai,” said the god.

“Your name is Xue Yang, you’re a piece of shit, and now you’re a piece of shit who’s stuck with us.”
“Huh,” said the sword.

He raised a hand to his chin. His body was foreign to him, a strange creation of twisted aether and wills, unable to die or take free breath, the delicate half-being of a divine spirit, yet he seemed to slip into his not-form so easily.

He hummed to himself, and even without any recollection of who he was or what had happened to make him a sword spirit, he nodded.

“You’re a real bitch,” is what he said.

The girl was not amused. The god was amused, but his amusement was lesser to his fear of somehow making the situation even worse. The sword was partly amused, as he always was in a morbid, horrible way, but the clutches of death-induced sleep held him tight, and what left his lips was even more nonsensical than usual.

“You’re a blind girl who can’t even play in the streets without a helping hand,” said the sword, knowing nothing at all. He was very good at making accurate guesses.

“You’re a psychopath who wouldn’t understand love if it ran you through the gut,” said the girl, desiring the possibility of what if very eagerly. The snowflake knife was beginning to glint with a murderous sort of hunger.

“I think we all need to calm down a bit,” said the god, whose gaze was shifting nervously the sword, whose arms had shaped themselves into fine blades, and the girl, who kept flipping the knife between her hands with an ease that was carelessly fluid and worryingly bloodthirsty.

While this was all happening, a small party of traders passed by. Their trip had been quite lovely: the weather was swell, and they had managed to avoid trouble along the way.

When their eyes met the god, they froze: surely their luck could not be so incredibly generous, could it? And then they spied the girl beside him, burning with a fury that was just as potent as her reputation.

They hurried to make themselves look presentable: quick, right your robes, wipe off all that dirt and grime; if you can’t get it perfect, at least get it close, and put on your brightest and most presentable smiles, too; loosen those cheeks and redden those lips. Don’t you want to make a good impression?

They moved forward in a bustling bunch, stepping off the path and into the undergrowth as elegantly as possible. Leaves and small bushes crunched underneath their flat-worn shoes.

“Hello,” one of them greeted, chipper and sprightly.

The god turned, a sharp jerk of the head. He smiled, but it was a strained thing that pulled too tightly at the corners.

“Hello,” he said back. “Nice day outside, isn’t it?”

In the early morning sunlight, he must have looked utterly divine. His robes caught the scattering beams, black silk shiny like freshly polished ebony, gold peonies fat and brilliant like blushing peaches. Handwoven gold hid the fine curves of his features, and rich flowers danced down his braided hair, dangling at the end with windchimes that whispered songs of the wind.

The traders beamed, and then they gaped, and then they dabbed their sweat away as subtly as they could manage.
What good luck! What a fortunate twist of fate! What an honour to be allowed audience before the revered golden god of prosperity!

“Your divine lordship,” the head trader said. He bowed his head low. “It is our greatest honour to stand before you.”

“An honour,” said the other traders, prostrating themselves.

The god shook his head and his hand. “Please don’t bow,” he said. “Come on now. Rise.” With a brief hesitation, he admitted, “You’ve come at an interesting time.”

“Interesting?” asked the head trader.

“Well,” was as far as the god got before someone crashed through a tree, and then another one, and the one behind that.

The traders screeched in fear. They leapt into each other’s arms, convinced that a fearsome monster had found its meal for the day.

What they saw instead was this:

A girl (or a monster taking the form of a girl), dressed in short-cut robes the colour of bright jade, marching forward with a small but terrifyingly sharp knife, and a smile that was even smaller and even sharper. She wore murder on her face, and it took the form of unbridled fury and a few specks of blood on her cheek.

“I’ll kill you!” she roared, and the traders began to scream again.

From the mangled trees, a man pulled himself up. Despite the destruction, his robes were untouched; they stretched out in rounded wings at the sleeves and bunched up at a red brooch in front of his heart. His fury was cold and twisted, tied clean and tight like a noose.

“Just you fucking try it,” he snarled, wiping the blood from a gash on his forehead. “You think you can do anything by yourself, you pathetic weakling?” The sword let out a violent clap of laughter and threw his arms out. “Then please, be my guest! Prove to me just how little you’ve grown!”

The girl continued forward. Her steps fell like wind-blistered snow. “You don’t need to tell me,” she said coldly. “For an empty shell of a murderer, you do a good job of playing the role of a lovestruck maniac!”

Both their expressions warped, and warped, and warped. The girl swept her snowflake-adorned knife through the air. The sword held out his arm and it sharpened to black steel.

Then they lunged at each other.

The traders screamed louder. The god stepped between the girl and the sword. In a rush of movement too quick for mere mortals to catch, he moved his arms and especially his fingers.

Swish, swish, swish. A few stitches here, a loose seam there; line up all the uneven bits and snip them clean.

Snip. Snip.

He was nothing if not handy with strings.

By the time he was done, the girl and the sword sat on the ground, hissing at each other and spitting
acid and vitriol and curses aplenty. Thin golden string bound their arms and legs. They were still very frightening.

“Oh my goodness,” said the head trader, feeling faint. “Oh. Oh my goodness.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” the god said soothingly, gently. Like dollops of honey and sugar.

The traders ate it up eagerly. In times of peril, people lean toward comfort no matter whose arms it is held in. “Oh,” repeated the head trader, feeling very soothed, “if you say so. Then I suppose it’s alright.”

“Just a childish spat,” said the god.

“Of course, of course. Children quarrel all the time.”

“Nothing to worry about. I’ve given them a good scolding. Look at them writhing on the ground like worms. They’re helpless. They’re just misbehaving, as children do.”

The girl snapped something violent about stabbing someone to death. With both arms bound, she no longer seemed as dangerous. The sword struggles against his restraints, but ultimately fell silent. Both seethed in their own ways: like the great crackle of flame, and like a slow-acting poison.

To each their own. Children are strange, aren’t they? Yes. Yes, they are.

“Yes, of course,” said the head trader, nodding. He remembered his younger sister and how they fought nearly every day as children.

They never wanted to really kill each other, but to each their own, no?

The head trader surveyed the girl and the sword, who hissed and yelled at each other with a fluid back-and-forth only those very familiar with each other could manage.

“Are they yours?” the head trader asked.

The god thought for a long moment. “Yes,” he answered. “But enough about us. What can I do for you?”

Their fear forgotten, the merchants bowed their heads low again. “Well,” they began, “if it isn’t too much trouble...”

Success in future endeavours, health for parents and children, good weather for travels; all of them were quite modest, and the god was happy to help. When they parted ways, it was with gentle smiles and pleasant moods.

Then the god turned back to the girl and the sword.

“He deserves to die,” the girl screeched.

“I’ll skin you alive,” the sword sneered back.

In a kinder life, in which fate was softer, more pliable, less fearful of every soul that lived in its clutches, perhaps they would have been siblings. Perhaps they would have found each other, seen each other for the liars they were, and in a strange twist of fate, built up something that resembled trust.

Siblings were fickle to keep. Siblings were easy to lose.
This certainly wouldn’t do.

“I think,” the god declared, “that we need to go back to Yinhe.”


“You’ll know soon enough.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Of course it is,” was all the god offered. He smiled and snapped his fingers; the golden strings dispersed, and in a moment, the girl and the sword were both back on their feet.

After a good, long scolding of their immaturity and inability to keep their rage contained before innocent guests, the girl and the sword were in even fouler moods. The girl hated being treated like a child, and the sword took orders from no one.

They were, however, quieted when the god said that they would be travelling together for anytime between a few months and forever, and it was therefore in everyone’s best interests not to attempt murder on any members of their party before their time together was up.

“Jiangzai,” the god had called the sword.

The sword’s eyes glittered red like jewels. He cocked his head, and from his lyrical tongue came an honest question: “Is that my name, or is it Xue Yang?”

“They’re both yours,” answered the god. “But Jiangzai is a safer.”

“Xue Yang was a criminal,” the sword guessed. “A murderer.”

“He was.”

He did not seem particularly bothered by this. He simply raised a hand to his lips, smiling a little.

The early morning sun filtered through the leaves overhead, dancing over his hands in oblong, green-hued shadows. They danced like faint pebbles of jade, and he would have almost seemed whole if not for the missing chunk of his finger. Cut short at the pinky. A piece lost to the naivety of childhood and the carelessness of life.

“I killed someone close to you,” the sword guessed again, glancing at the girl out of the corner of his glimmering, stone-cold eyes.

“I’ll never forgive you for it,” the girl said, brandishing every word like a blade.

“Hmm,” said the sword.

“To Yinhe,” said the god.

To Yinhe. To home. To the city of second chances and new beginnings. To rebirth, which some might say is truly an overrated word.

Things always seemed to find new meaning in Yinhe. Whether it be the ending of a thousand-year story, the beginning of a golden legend, or the delicate unfolding of siblings: it would all be decided in Yinhe.
Hanguang-Jun,

Thank you for your letter. I’m sorry if took me so long to reply. Some surprising things happened recently. I have not been in the best of moods. Some of it is Fuxing’s fault. I don’t think I can blame him that much, though.

I’m happy you liked the candy. During my free time, I’ve been trying to make my own. I think the honey taste is nice, but it doesn’t smell as nice as Fuxing’s honey. He made me add half a satchel of spices and I think I almost died. It tastes much better steeped with tea and flowers because I am not a HEATHEN.

How is it in Gusu? I’ve heard a lot about it. I think you use musical instruments to cultivate. That’s kind of funny, because Fuxing does something similar. He sings, and it works like a charm, in a literal way.

He’s also good at the dizi. But I don’t think I’ve heard him play it yet. Maybe I’ll convince him one day.

Also, do you know if sword spirits can die? I’m just curious. Also, if you do know, can you tell me where it would be best to stab so they die? Please and thank you. I’m just curious.

Talk to you later,
Wei Chengfeng

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A Place Where Things Become Whole

Yinhe was a small village.

Then it was a modest town. A few months later, it was a town a little larger than its neighbours. A few years passed, and it was a city.

Now, you may think, towns don’t work like that. And you would be very correct: towns simply do not grow with the vigour displayed by little Yinhe.

The reason for Yinhe’s grown is rather simple:

First and foremost, the god’s prosperous touch was, unbeknownst to himself, a subconscious thing. At his command, flowers would bloom, and fruits would grow fat and ripe. Strings pulled out of winds heavy with promise, and they spun into charms that would knot around hearts until the wishes they were tied to faded.

But miracles are called miracles for a reason.

The god had not yet noticed how towns he visited healed. His touch killed curses, yes, but his aura spread across the land like a thin veil, leaving a faint sheen of divinity in every path he walked. That godhood seeped into the deepest ravines and the tiniest of cracks; it made whole everything that was broken.
Wounds healed faster. Illness came slower and lifted faster. Sales finished a little easier. Treaties were written with fewer disputes. Lives stretched for a few days longer. People lived when they should have died.

None of these happenings were worth mentioning, for none of them were noticed until a very long time later.

Yinhe was an exception.

The second reason was this:

There were lucky people, and then there were lucky places.

And Yinhe was a very lucky place.

Now, you may think, just because a town is lucky does not mean it grows so quickly. And you would be correct.

Consider the abyss to the south of town, which came shortly after a thin patch of woods. Look closely at how it squirms and trembles, unstable in the earth of living things, and watch your step, for a fall into its purple endlessness is not a pleasant eternity.

Consider the formidable mountains that stand across from the river. Look at its peaks, and squint as the sun (which sometimes bleeds black and eats innocents in your dreams if you dream deeply enough) rises, and rises, and then falls.

Consider the river that is nothing more than a simple river. It flows, and it flows, and it flows. It is the same now that it was thousands of years ago.

Luck falls like snow: an even layer across all lands that receive it, with all the steadiness and grace of birds coming home to roost, and all the uncaring coldness of a sudden storm. But some places simply collect more luck than others.

The reason? Nobody knows. It happens, though. It surely happens.

Yinhe was a lucky place, surrounded by unlucky things. If it had been any unluckier, or even any more normal, it would not have survived. But it did.

There is a mural on a wall, in a back alley, that remains as one of the only surviving records of the so-called Fuxing. Was he a god? Was he a miracle-worker? Was he a hero?

Nobody needs to know, truly.

What he really was be found on that mural. A steady hand etched it, after all.

“You shouldn’t be so good at drawing,” the girl snapped. “You’re not allowed!”

“Every word that spouts from your mouth makes me yearn for your death,” the sword said lightly, scratching in the last of the flowers on the god’s robes. He eyes narrowed and shone with each rhythmic *scritch, scritch*.

They had been waiting for a while, and they were dangerously bored. The god had left them to handle some business on his own a while back, and he had made it very clear that they were not welcome to start any sort of trouble for fear of collateral damage, explosions, raging fires, dismemberment, or any of the sort.
“What are we supposed to do?” the girl had cried in outrage. Her sleeve slapped out around her arm as she gestured violently toward the sword. “Do you want me to stare him to death?”

The god made an aborted sound in his throat. “Let’s avoid death today, please.”

And that was that. If they were prohibited from sticking their knives in each other, the empty patch of wall between an inking shop and a restaurant (dirtied over by winds carrying dust from the well-trodden roads) would serve as a decent outlet for their angers.

The girl had etched some crude recreations of the sword in various states of suffering. She sniffed righteously when the sword snorted at her doodles. He found the one of himself being thrown off a cliff particularly amusing.

To prove his maturity, he had begun etching into the wall as well. The god was the first person to come to mind.

Yes, he would do. How amusing would it be to make permanent someone who only wanted to be forgotten? Yes. Yes, it truly was the worst kind of punishment.

That’s for bringing me back to life, thought the sword, as he pressed into hard rock with fingers-turned-blades. That’s for forcing an awful duty upon me, thought the sword, as he flicked the god’s eyes a little colder, a little sharper than they ever were. That’s for having a pathetic girl step over me as my master, thought the sword, as he drew people in prayer before their radiant god, their heads kissing their ground with a fearful reverence every martyr despised.

That’s for being so foolish with your trust, thought the sword, as he made each flower bloom a little fuller. That’s for handling me like glass, thought the sword, as he ripped ridges into calloused fingers.

I hate you, thought the sword, and he stepped back to better see his creation unfold.

A deep, unsettling realization curled around his gut. I hate you, he repeated. I will watch you bleed in your sleep.

“You never said you were good at drawing,” the girl raged. She scuffed her shoes across the stone-paved ground.

“I doubt I told you anything,” the sword said.

“You didn’t,” the girl agreed, her voice and belly full of venom. “But I hid, and I heard you. I heard everything. You’re sick.”

She dragged the cold edge of her snowflake against the wall. It drew white sparks from its finest point, spitting glimmering snow that burned cold with well-aged hatred. It smelled of strong alcohol: dizzying and repugnant. Disgusting.

“I’m sick,” the sword echoed bitterly. “Oh, how sick I am. I’m dreadfully ill, and there’s no cure.” He sneered from the pool of hate in him that churned and swirled and blew scarlet, rainbow-hued bubbles. “I’m dead, little girl. I must’ve killed your father. Did he deserve to die? Was it because of you, little girl?”

The colour drained from the girl’s face. She fell silent.

Then, with a frostiness nobody could have possibly taught her, she said, “It was.”

She said, “You killed him, and you killed the one he loved, all because you couldn’t understand your
own twisted emotions, and you either mistook companionship for love or jealousy or hatred, or you somehow deluded yourself into believing that your idyllic life would last forever, and I hate you for it, and I’ll never stop hating you for it, and if it were up to me, I would have never let you live again.”

She said, “I killed you with my own hands.”

She said, “I would do it again.”

The wind blew from the north. It was a cold gale that carried the faint scent of snow, perhaps rain. It swept between buildings, through roads, into each nook and cranny, each turning street and dead end, every porous brick and cracked stone.

It traced the new scars on the wall before them. The god’s eyes seemed to glow for a moment.

Then they stopped, and the sword laughed.

“You killed me,” he said. His head was tilted back from his outburst; the girl held his manic gaze with a winter-cold fury that burned. “So you’re the one who killed me! What a revelation!”

“Shut up,” said the girl.

The sword would not be silenced. “What were my last words?” he asked. “Did I cry? Did I beg? Did I laugh? Did it feel good to kill, little girl?” His heart fluttered: two beating wings tried to carry it away, but he chained it down. “Is vengeance as sweet as nectar, and as sticky, too? Is it just delicious?”

“No,” said the girl.

“No? No, what?”

“You didn’t cry, or beg, or laugh,” she said, windsong in her words. “In the end, all you did was die.”

The sword was surprised, yet in his heart of hearts, he knew. Whatever memories belonged to him were gone, lost somewhere between the here that was now and the there that was the past. But he knew. He felt it pound.

He met his end, and there was nothing spectacular about it. He died with nothing but a name which he had never cared for and the hatred of the only people who could have ever loved him.

The world was wrong. He was in the right. Right and wrong hold little meaning in death. He was alive, he was dead, he was in between and everywhere all at once.

“It doesn’t feel good to kill,” she continued. “And vengeance doesn’t taste of anything.”

Of course it does, the sword wanted to say. Instead, he listened. What did it matter? She would die soon, anyway.

“Proper vengeance is soft and holds together,” she said confidently. “And it tastes almost like nothing. That’s the point.”

The sword blinked. “Like rice.”

“Like rice,” the girl agreed.
"You're a fool."

"Sure I am. I was weaker, and a lot more ignorant, but who's the one that pulled through?"

The sword laughed. "We'll see," he said.

The girl finally looked away. She heaved a weighty sigh that rumbled in her throat. Bending at the knees, she crouched down and rummaged through the pebbles by the road: round, smooth, and streaked with translucent cuts.

Past that, he said nothing.

Where he kept his words was a hole. His words, usually so sharp and cutting and capable of unimaginable acts of cruelty, were put somewhere else. They were so easy to catch and shape into knives. Where had they gone?

She took them, the sword thought.

Gaze flickering to the girl, fingers creeping over the pulsing gem embedded in his chest, he suddenly felt very powerless. And he did not like feeling powerless.

His words, his blade, his life—there was little he had left.

He would not be owned. He refused to even entertain the idea. He would not be controlled. He would be free, and the world would bend itself to fit his ideals.

The gem flickered under his fingers. Its apple-red light bled onto the wall under a sudden cover of clouds, and for a moment, the god’s image darkened, darkened, and turned to sunset-streaked night.

“Blind girl,” the sword said, and the girl hummed loudly in question. “Your god is dead too, isn’t he?”

She was quiet for a while. Cautiously, she answered, “Not anymore.” Her nose sniffed upward, and she tossed a pebble up in the air again and again. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothing at all,” the sword lied.

They lounged in the aftermath of their hatred, steeping in silence until both were full and sweet of silent anger. It spilled over the sword’s tongue like an overripe mandarin. Nobody likes overripe mandarins, and the sword hated them especially.

Afternoon sank into early night. The sun fell somewhere behind the mountains, and it dragged great streaks of red and orange and purple across the faint starlight.

From the bend of the corner, the god finally stepped into the small square. He was empty-handed, but his mood was leaps and bounds better than the girl or the sword’s. A faint song buzzed in his throat, but it died quickly when the girl did her best to bring about death by staring. It was not very effective. He cleared his throat.

He looked around, saw that neither was bloodied or in pieces, and smiled brightly. “Oh, good,” he said. “Shall we head out together, then?"

“Where are we going?” the girl asked.

“Dinner and food.”
“There’s more,” the girl stated, displeasure colouring her features. She threw the stone to the ground, where it skipped and caught itself against the wall. “What are you planning this time?”

The god beamed. “Nothing at all,” he said, without an ounce of shame.

The sword hated that face. He could feel that he had been one to use knowledge of unknown things to his advantage to torture or to kill; now, he was the ignorant party. It was dangerous to allow others to hold leverage over him. That was why children were so pathetic: their heads were tiny and empty, and their fingers were thin and snapped like cookies.

Snap, snap, leaving crumbs all over the floor. The sword felt quite like a crumb at the moment.

He followed because there was nothing he could do. The black blade on the girl’s back bound his form to her. The gem in his chest creaked and moaned whenever he tried to lift a hand against her.

You are duty-bound to protect her, a voice inside him whispered.

I’m not obligated to do anything, he thought viciously.

He followed because he did not know how to do anything else.

The streets of Yinhe only grew busier as the sun bade the clouds a pomegranate-mandarin-plum goodbye. Merchants raised their voices and sharpened their wits as people began to wander in search of a good price and a warm meal. Children, free from their chores, giggled and leered at each other behind laced fingers. The guard was changing among all the bustle; spear-wielding folk exchanged short conversation before waving each other off.

“Lively tonight,” said the god, walking pleasantly.

The girl eyed the sword out of the corner of her eye, where she thought he would not see her. “It’s alright.”

“Heathy crowds,” the god continued. When he turned to the sword, it was with a silent billow of his robes. He raised one hand up to his lips and rested the other against chest, taking his time to make a spectacle, to smile sweetly under the overripe sun. “Don’t do anything silly now,” he told the sword. “If you kill someone now, I won’t be able to protect you.”

A taunt. An obvious message: repeat your past sins, and I will see you are executed publicly.

Hatred stirred in the sword’s gut. He smiled, and the sharp end of a canine grazed his lip.

He thought of grabbing the girl and spilling her guts all over the well-worn roads. He thought of scratching her eyes out with his fingers. He thought of tearing a hole in the god, opening a cavity where his heart did not beat, tearing out his golden core and returning a second sun to the sky.

He thought nasty thoughts. They were varied and colourful, so much so that he could set up shop of incorporeal things like curses, death threats, murder plots, all the like and more, and he would not only have the nicest storefront around, but he would also be well off and enjoying life how most people desired: drowning in wealth.

Wealth was not what he wanted. His favourite pastime was imagining the horrible ends of all those who looked at him without fear. His snack of choice of snack was cruelty. It was bitter and smothered every other taste.

Oh, he hated them so much. He needed no memories to understand the nature of their partnership.
He was evil, and they were reignin his evil in.

An immortal soul cannot be born again. A bound soul cannot be summoned.

The gem in his chest ached. It pulled in every direction at once. For a moment, it felt as if he would die right there and then, which would have been a pleasant surprise to an otherwise awful day.

But he did not. He could not. He would live, and he would make them all bleed one day. He swore it to his bones, and the marrow that lay underneath, and especially to his blood, because it was metaphorical that way, and metaphors were powerful.

“Of course,” the sword rasped. “I am ever at your service.”

The girl sent him a warning glare but said nothing. Her silence had weight. It had substance and presence and teeth. It tried, rudely, to fill the empty place where his words once belonged.

He dug his fingers into the ridge between the pulsing gem and warm flesh. It hurt less than the aching. It hurt far more. The pain made him twitch and itch, like a thousand maggots had were crawling through his skin.

As they walked, the townspeople began to turn toward them. They gasped, whispered, and cheered as they walked by. Their reverence fell easily toward the god; their respect made the girl hold her head high; their curiosity wrapped oddly around the sword.

“A new one,” some said with hushed tones.

“A new disciple,” they decided quickly, which was not very much appreciated.

“Best of luck, new disciple,” they called after him, tossing flowers and fruits his way. The sword caught them in his arms, despising and enjoying their false assumptions at the same time. He bit into the fruits with as much violence as he could, then hurled the pits at the faces that annoyed him most.

He half-expected the girl to turn to him and hiss, don’t get your hopes up.

Instead, her milky eyes flickered to him once, twice, and never returned. She snatched flowers out of the air and tucked them in her hair with practiced ease. “Think really hard about what you are,” she said, her voice melodic in a way it should not have been. “And think really hard about what you want to be.”

What was that supposed to mean? And who did she think she was, trying to act wise beyond her tender years?

The sword had not the time to let her words settle into his heart, or whatever remained of it.

A shift in the wind heralded new tidings. When it blew past, it was in sharp notes of something akin to dried apricots: sweet and tart, musky in a sticky, fruity way, and it caught between the sword’s teeth and made his teeth ache.

The god began to sing. It was a lively, quick tune that sounded something like a children’s song.

Oh canopy, canopy, the words went, give me shade, make me cool under the weeping sun.

Oh canopy, canopy, the girl sang, rest my flesh, make whole my broken pieces again.

Oh canopy, canopy, the chorus of townspeople chanted back, whisper life and luck through blood and bone.
The god sang, and his voice turned to gold. The girl sang and summoned the wind. Flowers bloomed and gilded themselves. Fruits grew big and fat. The sword stood amidst it all and did not know what to think.

Everyone was singing.

Why were they singing?

The song ended soon enough. Another repetition of the chorus and the townspeople seemed full enough on their blind hopes to return to the violet, lantern-lit night.

“They have lanterns now,” said the girl, distaste obvious in her voice.

“Like all towns,” the sword said, almost astounded by her stupidity: what, do most townspeople wander around in the dark, putting their limbs through walls and guessing how tall or round their friends were, and if monsters had their hair done up too, or if their neighbours had bought nice hairpins that just so happened to look like glimmering yellow eyes, and they simply lacked the sense to understand that the veil of night was not, in fact, as romantic as poems made them sound, and that their flesh was highly desirable as a snack for most monsters?

Not that the sword was going to say anything. Let the fools walk themselves off cliffs if they want to die so badly. They were stupid things. Most certainly not worth his time.

“Huh,” was all the girl grumbled. She refused to elaborate, and the sword did not care enough to ask.

The inn they arrived at was a small but homely thing. Its proximity to the river had washed its walls in the clear scent of water. The walls were clean, but the tiles on the roof were rugged with age. It was warm, and the air tasted of rich wine and burning spice.

It was inconspicuous. It would not be remembered.

They sat to be served. The god exchanged lively conversation with the girl, who growled and furrowed her brows and threw back fire-quick quips. The sword felt tired in too many ways and wanted nothing to do with all this.

When the waitresses moved to take their order, the sword unfurled his lips and smiled with all his teeth.

Aren’t you scared? he thought, feeling satisfaction roll through his stomach when the woman flinched back, her eyes wide with sudden fear.

His pleasure quickly turned to irritation when she did nothing else. It darkened into anger, then an aching hatred when she narrowed her eyes, flipped her hair over one shoulder, and spoke to him like she would any common delinquent.

They held no fear for him.

They were no longer afraid. They saw the eyes of a killer, and they were nervous. But they were not scared. They had no reason to be, when both a god and his disciple were his handlers.

His stomach churned in disgust. How weak he must have been in his past life to be killed by a pathetic girl. Really, what was he doing?

“Mie Yu,” the god called to a woman in the back. “I brought them, unscathed and perfectly fine, because I am a responsible adult.”
The woman turned, and her stormy eyes met the god’s. Her lips curled up in a lopsided smile that sat uneasily on the sword’s tongue. It was sharp. It stung. It was like containing lightning between his teeth. It made the roots of his teeth ache, like they had so horribly when he had been a child breaking glazed candies in his mouth.

She met the sword’s devilish gaze with a mettle that frightened him. And it was not easy to frighten him.

“Fuxing,” said the woman, wandering over through a maze of tables. She navigated it with ease, fading into the energy of the restaurant as the master of her small kingdom and as one of the only sober denizens. “So,” she said, with all the confidence of someone who has juggled children between her two hands (which was never enough) for too many years. “Your children.”

“You know A-Qing,” the god said, gesturing to the nodding girl, “and this is her sword spirit, Jiangzai.”

“I don’t particularly like the possessive pronoun,” the sword sneered.

He meant to say, *I’ll flay you alive and leave you to the dogs.* But he could not. The woman’s unflinching gaze rested on him like a foot on his head, and he was choking on the sickened blood of all the fools he had so easily taken lives from.

It was horrible. Licking the blood of your enemies was both distasteful, literally, and very unsanitary. He suffered nobly, or as well as he could manage. His lips parted; he smiled and showed his canines. “What are you looking at?”

“You,” the woman answered, as if it was obvious. She crossed her arms, and despite her short stature, she seemed very, very tall. Her shadow fell coldly. The sword leaned back and hoped it passed for straightening his spine. “You’ve got blood on your hands, boy.”

“More than you would ever know,” the sword tried to coo, but he provided it helpfully instead.

The woman leaned against the edge of the table. With one hand, she pressed into the polished wood (calluses and scars broke the delicate skin of her hands), and with the other, she hooked something from underneath her sash.

“I know a lot,” she said, revealing a pendant of fine jade adorned with rolling clouds. Curling ones. Ones that looked like wilted petals and ushered in storms. They were not good clouds. They were bad clouds. She might as well have stuck a stick of sandalwood incense up his throat; that was how terrible it was. “My mother carries the name Lan, after all.”

The god startled. “What?” he cried, somewhere between nervous and offended. “You never told me!”

The woman settled into the only vacant spot around the table. She did so casually, plopping right down onto the cushion without bothering to fold her robes underneath her. The cushion let out a strangled wheeze. The sword did, too, and it was only a little more dignified that a mass of fabric and stuffing being squeezed beneath a scary woman’s bottom.

Anyway.

“It doesn’t matter too much,” said the woman, in a voice that demonstrated that she was done speaking about herself.
“I would very much like to know more,” the god stated, eyeing her pendant with shifty eyes. Shift, shift.

The woman ushered over a younger waitress. She gave her a Look, emphasis fully justified, and the waitress ran off and returned moments later with a few jars of good alcohol. The sloshing poison was poured into a few serving cups. The girl, notably, did not receive one and seemed perfectly content with tea. The sword did not receive one either, presumably because he was what common folks called a murderer and a monster of the highest calibre, and the woman was trying to make it explicitly clear that blood-stained hands were not allowed at the dinner table.

The sword smiled smugly.

Fine by him. Alcohol was nice every once in a while, but he struggled to understand why people would willingly clog up their minds and let their lips witter about all sorts of weaknesses they had. It made it exceedingly simple to do horrible things to them, and by the time they realized, they would be very dead.

“You,” the woman said, ignoring the god’s pleading gaze. She looked the sword in the eye. Her fingers tapped, one by one, like a creature stalking through the dark with too many legs. “Sword boy,” she called, then smiled sweetly. “How are you?”

Shivers ran up the sword’s spine. He licked his lips and found them honey-sweet. “Just fine, lady,” he answered. “I’ve been better, seeing as I’m dead.”

“Could be worse,” the woman said, without elaborating. “But you’re here now. Welcome to Yinhe. It’s nice here, isn’t it?”

“I’d rather be anywhere but with them,” the sword said. He did so with a smile. He always smiled, even when he was upset. It terrified people greatly, and their terror made for the most splendid of meals.

The woman was not impressed, but she was plenty amused. She leaned to one side as the waitress girl brought over their dishes.

The sword stared at them in horror he refused to admit. “That’s not food,” he accused, examining the tiny mounds of chilis, how they looked like all the demons in the nether regions would simultaneously cease to exist if those piping hot, otherwise normal meats and noodles and vegetables were hurled into their hidden abodes.

“Sure it is,” the god said, frowning. Disheartened, he pulled the hellish plates toward himself. “More for me, I suppose.”

“I don’t like murderers,” the woman commented absently.

The god dug into his rice awkwardly. “Alright then,” he said after swallowing.

Surprisingly, the girl was eating quietly. Rather, she was eating as quietly as she could, meaning her chopsticks scraped into her bowl with intention. She stared unabashedly, as if she had every right to eavesdrop.

Her eyes were annoying. The sword thought about gouging them out while she slept. The woman hummed, and he stopped thinking all together.

“I’m going to make the assumption that you don’t have many memories,” she said.
“What an accurate assumption,” the sword said, trying to grip onto his words and slipping every time.

“Runs in the family,” the woman sighed.

“Does murder run in the family, too?” asked the sword, his blank smile splitting into a vicious grin.

The god emptied his cup. “Sure does,” he said distantly. “Oh, but I was so much better at it than you. After all,” he declared, bitter victory smearing all over his golden tongue, “I was never persecuted for my crimes.”

Then he jolted with a sudden yelp, having most likely been kicked under the table.

“You have to deal with me,” the girl snapped. She brandished her chopsticks like tiny daggers. “No self-deprecation or not-so subtle jabs, or I open a new one in you.”

It was not clear who she was talking to, but the god seemed mighty scared, and the sword was plenty scared of the woman (who shared a knowing look with the girl before they both returned to enjoying their meal). In terms of physical strength, he knew he could overpower them, but the gem in his chest would explode him into pieces long before he could strangle the breath from their lungs.

“You don’t seem to work together too well,” the woman pointed out.

The girl lifted her chin. A grain of rice stuck to her cheek. “He killed Daozhang,” she said venomously.

“Oh,” said the woman, brows raising in surprise.

“He wants to gut me in his sleep, I bet.”

“That’s true,” the sword confirmed. He picked out a piece of tender chicken from a plate adorned, not smothered, with chilis. It burnt his tongue nonetheless, and he took a loud sip from the girl’s cup to dilute the taste of fire. “I have no idea why you brought me back,” he said to the god, words slurring a bit on numbness. “If you were there when I died, you must have been blind, deaf, and stupid.”

The god shook his head. “Just stupid. Blind—” he paused. “I sure was before. Deaf, well, that was only before death, and it certainly wasn’t a fun time.”

“Dying?” the sword asked, a single brow quirked high.

“No, that was a great time,” the god said.

“Why don’t you tell us all why you brought back one of Kuizhou’s most notorious delinquents?” said the woman.

The sword folded his hands underneath his chin. He felt very powerful that way. “Yes, please do.”

“I,” the god began, visibly uncomfortable under the scrutiny of all those around the table. “Had the ability to do so,” he continued.

Tap, tap. “And?” the woman prompted.

The god squirmed. “He was a sad thing,” he said, “and it seemed awfully ironic to have him serve pay his dues in death.”
“I’m not paying anything,” the sword said flatly.

“Not yet,” was all the woman said, and those few words struck him with a sense of dread unlike any other.

“I brought them to Yinhe because we needed a break,” the god admitted. He sighed, took a deep drink, and let the line of his shoulders fall. “Perhaps it’d be good to let them get used to each other,” he thought aloud.

The girl let out a scandalized sound from her throat.

Curious eyes swept from side to side, taking in the girl’s metaphorical raised hackles, the sword’s unrestrained bloodlust. (Well, a little restrained, given the fact that the woman’s very presence had him on edge like a particularly jumpy cat.)

“You killed someone very important to A-Qing,” the woman said to the sword.

“Apparently,” the sword snapped back. This was growing irritating very quickly: oh, how horrible, how tragic, now, what exactly did they all want, and how could he cut his way to freedom?

“Anyone else?”

“If you’ve forgotten, I have no memories.”

“He also killed Song Daozhang,” the girl added.

“Two men of the path,” the sword contemplated to himself. He smiled. Not bad; not bad at all. “I had taste.”

The girl breathed deeply in an attempt to calm herself. The chopsticks in her hands creaked ominously.

“So,” the woman said, in that same calm, amused tone, “countless innocents, two of A-Qing’s most precious people. You would’ve killed her too.”

He waited in suspense for her final judgement. “So?” he asked, equal parts curious and afraid, though he would never admit it.

A new round of rich, flower-scented alcohol went around. Plates were tidied, platters of fruit and red bean soup were set down, and the ear-grating clinking made the sword want the world to stop turning for a moment, if only to hear what came next.

A bowl of sweet soup was set in front of him. He eyed it with suspicion, stuck a spoon in it, and downed it as quickly as he could.

The woman nursed her cup. “Well,” she said absent-mindedly, “if you’re going to be a mass murderer, I suppose you might as well kill indiscriminately.”

It was not the most ethical thing to say, and it made the sword feel many strange emotions all at once. Confusion, relief, anger, and a whole slew of feel-good warm-fuzzies he kept under his foot by burying himself in his own cruelty. Without it, he felt strange, vacant, empty.

The red bean soup stirred warmly in his stomach. Something else did, too.

“Mie Yu,” the god gasped, stunned by her sudden lack of morality. “You can’t just say that!”
“I mean, she kind of has a point,” the girl admitted grudgingly. She set her fist down loudly. “But a murderer’s a murderer,” she declared, eyes burning with hatred. “And there’s no excuse.”

“Oh, I know,” said the woman. “I’m just trying to figure out what the best course of action is.”

Both the girl and the sword were silent for a long moment. There was something unsettling about the way she declared her intentions so clearly.

The woman held a hand to her chin, thinking deeply. After a period of fruitful contemplation, she said, “Since you’ll be here for a while, you’ll have to do your part in town.”

She said, “A-Qing. Fuxing. Why don’t you look for that special pendant that went missing so long ago?”

The god spat out his alcohol. Several tables peered over their shoulders, saw the woman, and nodded knowingly.

Wiping the dribble from his mouth, the god said, with plenty of emphasis, “The Stygian Tiger Amulet? How on earth do you know?” He paused, then reiterated, “What do you know?”

“I heard some strange things about Lanling Jin,” the woman said casually. “Something about a guest cultivator a few years back repairing an artefact.” She shrugged, and her robes shifted in a way as to allow the lanterns to colour her jade amulet a faint orange. “Who knows what it could’ve been?”

When the god turned to the sword, it was with eyes colder than death. “You fixed it?” he asked, quietly, the song in his voice a frigid river that pulled and froze and drowned.

“I don’t know,” the sword answered venomously. “Maybe you should have asked before you killed me.”

“I didn’t check his body,” the girl said. Her brows furrowed in worry. “Do you think he had it on him?” Then she added, “What happened to it?”

The woman cleared her throat. “Perhaps you should check the abyss south of town,” she suggested.

The girl’s brows furrowed even further. “What? Why?”

“Things that are lost tend to end in Yinhe one way or another,” said the woman.

The god thought over her words and nodded. “Fair enough,” he said as he rose. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll search the abyss.”

“And Jiangzai will help me in the kitchen,” spoke the woman.

“I’ll do what,” said the sword.

The god withdrew somewhat, slowly trying to make himself appear smaller than he really was. The girl was struggling to wrap her head around the notion that the murderer of her father figures would be allowed to handle knives in a place where many innocent, innocent civilians expected a warm meal and a good drink, not their entrails spilled all over the floor.

The sword had no idea where the crazy woman had found such an insane idea. He pressed his elbows into the slippery wood beneath him and directed as much venom toward her as sword-spiritly possible. “I won’t take any orders from you, woman,” he said in nasty sing-song. “What do you think I am? A cook?”
“Sure,” said the woman, utterly unfazed. She finished off the last of the alcohol, then spun the cup on the tip of her finger lazily. “You’ve got to do your part, and I’ve decided you’ll start paying back your sins by filling up the stomachs of good, hardworking folks.”

Fuming, the sword hissed, “I’ll slit your throat the first moment I get my hands on your knives.”

Spin, spin. The cup made wobbly circles atop her calloused finger. “Oh,” she laughed, truly amused. “You can try if you want.”

The lanterns flickered, and the tiny ridges of the raised, jade clouds dragged long shadows over her pendant.

“I can carve all kinds of meats,” she said. “Rotted cuts aren’t ideal, but the pigs will enjoy them. Besides,” she continued, eyeing the pulsing gem in the sword’s chest, “I don’t think your heart will let you kill again. Maybe you’ll even learn to make something to fill up at empty stomach of yours.” She looked at him, long and hard. “You can’t live off cruelty forever.”

“You,” the sword breathed, “don’t know anything.”

“Who’s the one with memories again?”

“I’ll find a way,” said the sword, thought he was unsure what he meant: find a way to what?

There was no arguing with the woman. She stated that she expected to see him at her inn, bright and early in the morning, before even the girl woke. Then she left, leaving the distinct taste of mandarins plastered all over his tongue.

Not even the wine could smother the acidity. That night, well after the god and the girl had fallen into deep slumbers, the sword climbed up to the roof.

With starlight as his guide, he cut open his palm. It dripped crimson onto the faded tiles.

There. He bled, his blood was red, and this was a part of himself he could still own. His words, his cruelty, his greatest weapons: all gone, taken by a life-giving god and broken by a powerless girl.

He had blood that flowed, muscles that pulled and fell lax, bones that shook and broke. He could find new ways to make the world bend.

“You want me to cook?” he sword said aloud, his lips shaping into a sharp grin. “I’ll cook. I’ll bloat you on your own arrogance.”

He spent the rest of the night beneath the stars, utterly satisfied with himself. He fell asleep for a short while and rose before sunrise.

And it is there, perhaps, where things began to shift into something almost unrecognizable.

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**The Thing With Cooking**

The sword learned three things that morning.

First, he was surprisingly adept with knives of all sorts. In his gut, he knew blades were pliable
things in his hands, but to see it in action was a strange feeling. He slit fish open and cut them up with a vengeance, intending to terrify as many people as possible by channeling his fury into every wide-eyed, scaled creature he prepared. All he earned was the admiration of several senior cooks.

Second, the woman's threats were backed up by a set of butcher knives that looked more like small sabers than anything that belonged in a kitchen. Every time the sharp end of her blades fell, it was accompanied by the sound of bone and cartilage broken under practiced, polished hands. It was frightening, but it was admirable, too.

Third, cooking was, irritatingly enough, almost enjoyable. Almost.

The sword spun knives in his hands, and they obeyed him eagerly. He almost forgot how much he missed the touch of his blade when he worked through meats and vegetables.

He even carved up a melon into a crude rendition of the god, which entertained the serving girls to no end.

Recipes slotted themselves into place. The sword worked off memory, not manuals.

It was like research. He was good at research, which meant he was excellent at cooking. No rules; just instinct and desire.

It made him feel full, or at least a little more full than before.

That’s right, he thought vindictively, glaring over the shoulder of an older chef as she showed him what to toss in for soup base. I’m a fast learner, and far more competent than any of you. Aren’t you jealous? Don’t you hate me?

“Your sense of taste is incredible,” one of the serving girls said.

“I know,” said the sword, smiling coldly.

“You’re pretty good at this,” she continued. To the sword’s shock, she gave him a reassuring pat on the back. “Keep it up,” she urged. “It makes my job easier!”

The sword was displeased. Perhaps she was just a strange one.

Humans were stupid. They made no sense.

The sword continued, toiling away in the kitchen, doing his best to avoid the woman. It was his way of being cruel when he had no cruelty. He would assert his dominance over her domain. It would be wonderful, he told himself.

Come afternoon, the sword’s sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. One of the girls had lent him a brooch to tie up the wing-shaped flaps to his sash, which he had grudgingly accepted.

The serving girl refused to stop bothering him. When he tried saying, “I’m a murderer,” she smiled with all her shiny, white teeth.

“Cool,” she said. “Me too. Killed my father. He was an awful father.” She made a stabbing gesture, smacking a closed fist against her palm. “Did him in by sticking a hairpin through his eye. What about you?”

For once, the sword was stunned into silence. When he came back to himself, he said, “I’m a mass murderer.”
The serving girl threw her hands in the air. “Okay, okay. No need to brag.”

“I killed indiscriminately,” he tried, recalling his unwilling owner’s rage.

“Then only pick off the bad ones from now on,” said the serving girl, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. She rolled her eyes, sauntering away to take another order. “Boys,” she huffed.

No. No, no, no, there was something very wrong with this kitchen.

“Have you killed anyone?” the sword asked the next chef he could get a hold of.

The chef blinked. “Sure I have,” he answered, to the sword’s great displeasure. “We all have.” Then he remembered that the sword was new, and quickly added, “But we don’t anymore! They’re past mistakes.” He peered into a vat of steaming broth. “No need to become violent ghosts and make things worse.”

“You weren’t prosecuted?”

“We were judged by Madam Mie,” said the chef. He put the lid back on. “She’s a fair judge. All our sentences are just right.”

The sword glanced around the kitchen. The cooks all seemed to be enjoying their work very much. None of them were weeping, or despairing, or loudly lamenting their sins. The waitresses tittered and laughed. They all seemed perfectly content.

“What a horrible sentence,” he finally said.

“Just terrible,” the chef agreed brightly.

When night fell, the sword conceded. But only once, and only today, for a single question.

He caught the woman as she began to make her dinner rounds. He asked, “Do you hire exclusively criminals because you’re batshit?”

She sat him down at a table in the corner and rolled him a mandarin across the shiny wood. “Call it foresight if you will,” she said, mirth crinkling the corners of her eyes. “Someone needs to cut down on the ghost population. Why not me?”

“I’ll call it insanity,” the sword said, digging his thumb into the peel.

“It runs in the family,” the woman sighed. “My mother’s Lan can’t cover up my father’s Nie.”

Today was just full of awful surprises. The sword tried to reign in his shock with little success, and a sharp burst of sour-sweetness splattered onto his sleeves. “You belong to Gusu Lan and Qinghe Nie?”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” said the woman.

“You’re lying.”

The woman raised a single brow. She crossed her arms, leaning across the counter separating them. “Interesting,” she said, her head tilted to one side. “You have good eyes.”

Not as good as hers, thought the sword. Her gaze was impenetrable. It stood as a bastion against every attack he had attempted. They were pitiful things, like a child wailing in the corner to be fed, but they were surely annoying, and the sword could not understand how anyone could retain such
composure in the face of such… childish tomfoolery.

“You belong to Yinhe,” the sword pressed. The patricide girl passed by and slid a cup onto the counter. She poured him—fruit juice?

Then she winked, flipped her hair over one shoulder, and merged back into the chaos of the restaurant floor like a shadow in the dark.

She walked very silently. Her father must never have seen it coming. Or maybe he did: fathers were all worthless.

“You must belong to Yinhe,” the sword repeated, when he found his words again. “I’ve seen the way people look at you. You’re their hero.”

“I’m one of them,” said the woman. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

Swish, swish. They both nursed their cups. Neither of them drank.

“You’ve been doing well in the kitchen,” the woman commented absently.

Now this was of interest. “Of course,” the sword said proudly, baring tiny knives in his smile. “Who do you think I am?”

The woman ignored his question. “You like cooking,” she stated.

“I like anything I’m good at.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve heard this before. No, don’t look at me like that: this is leading up into a spiel about how your hands are stained with the blood of innocents, how necromantic practices are oh-so-interesting, how you would slit my throat and hang me by meat hooks in the streets if you could—”

The woman thought for a moment. “Am I missing anything?”

The sword breathed out deeply through the nose. “Nothing worth mentioning,” he said through clenched teeth.

Cheerfully, with starlight dancing over her hair and teeth, the woman grinned. “Wonderful. Then let’s do away with the meaningless intimidation and get to work.”

“I hate you,” the sword spat venomously. And he meant it; he really did, he really did.

In one smooth motion, the woman lifted the cup to her lips and downed the alcohol in one go. She wiped her mouth, set the cup back on the table, and tossed something shiny across the table.

The sword caught the object. It glimmered gold under his thumb. It was cold to touch despite sitting in the woman’s sleeve for at least half a day. (She had not rolled up her sleeves since hacking apart a pig earlier in the afternoon.) It slid between his fingers easily, twinkling under the flickering of a thousand lanterns.

It was a single golden coin.

“Keep that on you,” said the woman. The sword met her eyes. They glistened with something that looked like tears. Like glass. “Keep it under your pillow, if you wish.”

“This,” said the sword, “looks like the coins Fuxing creates.”

“Does it?” asked the woman.
Honey slathered itself over the sword’s tongue. He nearly gagged on it.

“What are you playing at?” he said, eyes narrowed.

The woman pushed herself upright. She looked him in the eyes, caught eyes that flickered like little ladybugs—pomegranate blushed with speckles of ebony.

What she thought was this:

He looked very young for a sword spirit. He was furious, but had chained his fury to his cruelty too tightly to ever be unravelled, and now that his cruelty was nowhere to be found, he was simply upset.

He was a child, throwing a tantrum over toys he could no longer find. Someone had thrown them away, and his hands were empty.

Give him something new to hold, thought the woman. Put his violent energies to something less murderous.

Flowers bloom every spring. Children learn and grow. Dying, of course, is a rather unusual disruption, but so is losing your family, your innocence, your home, your siblings, your friends, your lover, your life, your gods, your throne, your divinity—

Well, life goes on. And it certainly has no patience to spare for anyone. Every day is a good day because there is a day to be had at all, and every tomorrow will be the first day of the rest of your life.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” said the woman. “It'll take at least a month for Fuxing and A-Qing to return.”

“I await them eagerly,” the sword muttered.

If only he knew.

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**Vandalism**

That night, the sword slept with a golden coin in his sleeves.

If he had placed it elsewhere, perhaps underneath his head, for example, he would have seen the happenings of his past. He would have learned of his sins, each and every faceless human he killed, the mortal enemies he made, the cursed artefact he had given new life to, the endings he had wrought for all the righteous people who deserved far better.

He did not. Instead, he tucked it comfortably against the crook of his arm.

That night, golden script twined itself up his arms and to his shoulders, where it curled in on itself like stubborn strands of hair tied too many times in a loose ponytail.

It was the language of creating. It was the script of an older world, where ten suns walked the skies alongside rolling clouds that bloomed every colour visible to man, and they got along just fine, thank you very much, and yes, the view was excellent up here, but the clouds were being too loud for their
own good and had made the youngest cry again; and the gods—oh, they were unbearable, with their bickering and their endless wars.

(It should be noted that the suns fell first, and the clouds cried every day until someone new chose to bear the burden of holding them up.

Her name was Fuxing, but that story is for another time.)

This is the story of how the gods fell, trailed up from the stump of his pinky.

I'm sorry, scored across his flesh again and again. I gave it my all. It wasn't enough.

I'll leave it for the next me, crawled up the boniest part of his elbow. The next soul that carries the name Fuxing will do better.

The sword slept on.

(The prophecy he carried would only be deciphered lifetimes later. By then, things had already passed on.)

A Month-Long Inquiry Into A Rather Pointless Question

A month, in the grand spectrum of all things temporal and slippery, is not a very long time at all.

The sword woke every day well before the sun rose. He liked watching the world start, counting the heads that stumbled out of each slumbering household, trying to keep track of which ones returned and which ones tripped on the boney ligaments of life. He liked getting to the kitchen early to set up things exactly how he liked.

One of those things took precedent over the other. He refused to admit which it was.

Cooking was easy. It was simple work up to a point, and the brain work combined with the physical exertion thrilled the sword, made him hunger for more, both metaphorically and literally.

He shared lunch with the patricide girl every day. No matter what he did, she would find him, and she would sit him down and attempt to deafen him with her endless tirade of nonsense.

Cooking, the sword discovered, was not about fulfilling your customers. It was about fulfilling yourself.

For the first time since being rudely awakened into the world, he felt full. He thought less about murder and more about how awful the broth chef’s plating skills were, and that he would have been the largest waste of flesh, bone, and air if not for his tremendous ability to steep anything into soup bases that made everyone salivate and whine pathetically.

The woman brought him out hunting on the fifth day.

“Good practice,” she said after bringing down five birds with five shots. “Works your muscles and makes you appreciate food a bit more.”

Killing animals was quick work. It tended to be simple when your body had the ability to morph into
blades at will.

He stood there uncomfortably as the woman clapped her hands together and closed her eyes.

“Thank you for providing,” she spoke, with an ethereal reverence that rang clear and far across the rugged mountains.

“Your prayers are useless,” the sword told her, once they had packed their spoils away. “Fuxing doesn’t provide you with food.”

“I know,” said the woman. She turned an amused face toward him. “But it’s a funny sentiment. Maybe he’s hearing me now, in that inky hell.”

“You don’t trust the gods,” noted the sword.

“I trust myself,” the woman said. “That’s enough.”

And that was the end of his not-so-subtle inquiry into the woman’s spiritual beliefs. Conclusion: she was far wiser than most humans, a whole lot stranger, and carried the burden of a thousand hopes and regrets welded into one spectacular belief.

The sword stopped asking about gods. It was of no consequence. The less anyone mentioned omnipotent powers playing with their lives with half their fingers lopped off and their eyes flowered with blindness, the better.

Gods. Selfish bastards, the lot of them.

On the sixth day, the sword finally noticed the strange marks creeping up his arms and around his shoulders.

(He did not notice the missing coin.)

He did not panic. He did not say, “How strange.” He would not have said “How strange” if the gem embedded in his chest grew eyes and a mouth and started pummelling at his insides. It was not the sort of thing a reasonable, slightly-reformed murderer said.

What he did say was, “Why am I shiny. I don’t want to be shiny.”

The broth chef was more than happy to offer him some advice on covering up very conspicuous markings. He taught the sword how to wrap up his arms with bandages tightly enough to keep the honey-gold trickle of light in, but comfortably enough as to allow him freedom of movement. It was a hassle to redo them every morning and night, but it was better than walking around as a sword-spirit turned lantern.

He conjured up the image of the god, snatching up his arm to aid his late-night readings. The probability (not possibility; it would happen sooner or later) was too horrible to imagine.

The sword kept the bandages wrapped tight beneath his robes. He watched as the symbols grew and grew from his shoulders to his neck, and from his neck to his back, and then from his back down to his feet.

They grew like bamboo shoots: frighteningly quickly, with a haste that was deaf to his hushed whispers for them to disappear, and if not that, then at the very least, to slow down.

They neither disappeared nor slowed down. They were working on another’s orders.
Time passed slowly in the moment and quickly by the day.

Every day at work chased away a bit more of whatever it was that remained in him. It was a strange feeling, to lose so readily and easily. The whatever-it-was slipped through his bandaged fingers like a particularly fine silk, soft and wispy against his rough skin, yet it was the kind of fine silk a vendor with a suspiciously wide smile sells to you for a fifth of its normal retail price and kindly offers you a rash that itches and burns after a few weeks of wear.

The point being that it was easy to forget and learn again. Learning, you see, is a long process made infinitely easier when taught by those who share aspects of your mind and heart.

So words like, *you shouldn’t kill* sounded like blasphemy when they came from the god’s mouth, but words like, *it’s kind of a dick move to go around murdering people when they haven’t done anything to piss you off* sounded far more genuine, especially when the patricide girl said them.

His cruelty felt less like a loss and more like an absence. It was fine. It was almost good.

On the fourteenth day, he had a dream.

In his dream, there was a monk in white robes. He looked like a fine man, with a spine held rigid by unbending morals. A blindfold covered his eyes, presumably because the knife-smiling boy sitting across from him had done a very clean job of shredding his loved one’s eyes. In other words, he looked like a boring man.

There was also a girl, and oh, that was a familiar face, and most certainly a familiar set of eyes, wasn’t it?

The dream was quite boring, as far as dreams go. The three of them talked. The girl and the knife-boy sneered at each other. The monk tried to placate them. Then the scene changed, and they were shopping, and then they were cooking, and eating, and talking around a hearth again.

It was almost disgusting in how mundane it was. The sword felt like falling asleep, and he was already in the clutches of a dream.

It went on and on. Suddenly, something more exciting happened.

An arrogant-looking monk in black robes—black and white, darkness and light, it was so romantic and narratively driven that it made the sword nauseous—sauntered into town with his lovelorn searching and a sword that, from a perfectly impartial viewpoint, would make for a nice set of carving knives if it was scrapped and melted down. The depressing monk wandered for a while, asking for a blind monk, before the girl popped her arrogant head up and boldly declared that she had seen him.

She was only a good actor when she wanted to be, apparently.

The next events happened quickly, and the sword struggled to keep track of everything, but it went something like this:

Alright. So the girl and the depressing monk made their way to the coffin house (living in house of death, thought the sword, was testing fate by throwing bricks at it every day and playing blaring music at ungodly times of night and engaging in explicit and amorous activities at ungodly times of day until it finally lost its patience and slapped you so hard you died in a painfully literally sense).

The two bumbled down the road. When they arrived, it was to the knife-boy and the monk, having a perfectly good chat about lying to blind people, because that was a normal thing to talk about.
The knife-boy left to buy some groceries. This was apparently a grievous sin to the depressing man, who must have developed a severe hatred against vegetables. The sword felt sorry for him. Of course he would hate vegetables if that was all he ate for the entirety of his sad, sad existence.

With a great feat of anger, the depressing monk, who was not so much depressed as enraged, threw off the veil of doom and gloom as a prepubescent child does their dignity. Then he leapt out of the woods in a heroic act of trying to get himself killed.

It worked wonders. He said some things, and the knife-boy said some things, but it was clear that the knife-boy was better at sharpening his words into blades that stick and twist, because the fight lasted a total of maybe all of five seconds after the pretty monk casually ran his closest friend through, effectively turning the enraged monk into the bleeding-to-death monk.

The sword considered the possibility of starting a career in acupuncture. He would be good at sticking tiny needles into people. Metaphorically, of course. Realistically, he would need to use words and instill emotions in just the right places.

(This would be called therapy in a few thousand years, and it is better for all of us that the sword was not the pioneer of such a practice. Could you imagine? As the kids say: wild.)

Things went a bit slower from then on. After the knife-boy packed up his vegetables and made for home with the blind monk, the girl ran out and wailed a while over the dead monk’s very dead body. She went through all the motions: the waterworks, the grieving, the spiteful oath for revenge and determined prayer for strength.

It must have been exceedingly awkward to sit around a dinner table, trying to pretend that the person you thought was just a weird and slightly psychopathic roommate turned out to be a serial killer. Regardless, the girl suffered the awkwardness with remarkably pride.

Blah, blah, something about shopping, blah, blah. A simple distraction. She booted the knife-boy out and spilled half-secrets to the monk.

He gasped prettily. His lips were very red. He grabbed the girl’s shoulders with slender, calloused fingers and demanded explanations. The girl hesitated, but gave the truth: um, well, you see, sir, I know we’ve been living together under the umbrella of blind camaraderie, and I really appreciate everything you’ve done, but I’ve been lying to save my sorry behind for a while now, and you ate it up kind of pathetically, and now I feel pretty bad about it all, but mister smiles-a-lot just killed this depressing guy a few hours ago, and I’d feel far more comfortable seeing his head removed from the rest of his body than the opposite way around.

The monk settled for trying to talk it out instead.

Oh, that painfully pretty man was painfully stupid. He was sadly unaware of the fact that the knife-boy had used him as a life-sized puppet to slaughter some innocent civilians every few nights, and he was most definitely unaware of the dead monk’s being turned dead.

Metaphorically speaking, he was dancing right into the knife-boy’s hands. You see, good people are also foolish people, and that is exactly how the monk was talked into slit his own throat.

The knife-boy refused to accept it. The sword understood, feeling sorry for the boy as he raged and punched at walls until his knuckles bled. Imagine killing a pretty man, and then realizing that his soul decided to phase out of existence.

What a tragic waste. A maggoty face was nowhere near as appealing as a frozen-in-death image of
an immaculate, snow-still face.

Things sped up again after that.

With both halves of a heart dead, the girl was next to go. She was a tricky thing, fleeing on feet that moved faster than her little body could handle. The knife-boy searched, and when he found her, it was like reaching under the bed to pick up a dropped comb, only to pull out a snake.

Except the snake was the hammer of the gods, and the comb was a handful of dead people, and the result was a whole lot of dismemberment and dying on the knife-boy's part.

Then he woke up.

What an informative dream, the sword thought, flipping back through the still images he remembered as he cut through meats.

Some deliberation would be required.

The days went by. The sword thought about why he did what he did. He came up with an itemized list of reasons which all could be summarized as, “I do what I want, the world hates me and I hate it in equal measure; therefore, I will make it my life’s goal to make everyone and everything as miserable as possible. Also, cruelty is fun, and I think I might be a sadist.”

It was not a good list. The sword thought of his end, and if he really deserved it.

Yes, he eventually decided, as reluctantly as he came to that conclusion.

Work came and went. Meals were prepared. Breaks were had. Conversations were exchanged.

“What did you do your father?” the sword asked the patricide girl, on a particularly good day.

She sat with her legs crossed over each other, taking loud bites out of a firm peach. “Weird question,” she said through wet crunches.

“Is it?”

“Sure it is. It’s like saying, why’d you break your leg? to someone who fell off a cliff.” She gestured dramatically with her half-eaten peach. “It’s not why. It just is.”

The sword thought of the monks, a terrified girl, and a family torn apart. “Not always,” he said.

The patricide girl took a massive bite. She crunched through it. “Reflected a bit, have you?”

“I remembered a bit,” said the sword.

“Congratulations,” the patricide girl said, as honestly as she could muster.

They sat in silence for a bit. Somewhere in the kitchen, a cup smashed, courtesy of a waitress who believed herself far better at juggling than she really was.

“Well,” the patricide girl began, “I guess you could say I killed my father because he deserved it.” She pushed the dishes closer to the sword. “And eat your food. It’ll go cold otherwise.”

The sword shovelled a hearty serving of rice, vegetables covered in oyster sauce, and stir-fry chicken and chilis (hold most of the chilis) into his mouth. “He offended you,” he guessed.
“He hit me and he wouldn’t stop,” the patricide girl said in the same tone one would tell the weather.

“And your life was at risk,” said the sword.

“Maybe, but even if it wasn’t, it definitely hurt,” the girl answered.

“You could’ve killed him the first time he hit you.”

“Of course. Sometimes I wonder why I didn’t. What, was I waiting for him to hit me again?” She shook her head, slapping a hand on her knee good-naturedly. “I was testing him, I guess. To see if he would do it again.”

“He did,” the sword answered unhelpfully. “They always do.”

That was the thing with people who had power. A little taste is alright: for most, it was impossible to tell what it really was the first time around, and whatever taste lingered on their tongue was foreign and too complex to understand, which meant it left their memory as most obscure foods do.

Then there were the others, who got a serving too large for their own good, and made people miserable because it was fun.

Introspection was a very fickle thing.

“Some advice for you,” the patricide girl said. She had finished her peach and was rolling the core around on a plate. “Don’t bother with why you killed someone. Just know that you did, and since you lived, you have debts that need to be paid.”

“But why?” the sword demanded. “Don’t waste my time. Kill me and be done with it.”

“You can’t take a gift back once it’s been given,” said the patricide girl. “Especially not when it’s a life. We did, and then we were given another chance, so it’s our job to make it equivalent.”

She made a funny motion with her hands, presumably trying to act out a pair of shoddy scales. The sword tried to understand.

Equivalency. What did it even mean?

It meant taking responsibility, according to the patricide girl. She spoke as if second chances were humbling, and that was how bad people reformed themselves.

It suddenly occurred to the sword that he was unable to understand because they were all fundamentally normal people.

“There’s no such thing as normal,” the patricide girl laughed when the sword brought this up. “There’s just want.”

The sword narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“I wanted to kill my father, sure, and since then, I’ve wanted to kill a lot of people,” the patricide girl said. “But Madam Mie wouldn’t want that. And,” she declared with all the pride in her small, rugged, semi-murderous body, “I want to make Madam Mie proud.”

It suddenly occurred to the sword that his standards of normal deviated greatly from hers, and most likely everyone else who found a home under this tall, tall roof.

By the time their break was over, the sword had thoughts buzzing in his head like stubborn flies, and
no matter how hard he swatted at them, they were always a bit too quick for him.

“Find someone that makes you want to be a better person,” the patricide girl suggested, before rejoining the rest of the servers.

Her footsteps fell silently against the well-worn floor.

Practiced, thought the sword.

Distantly, he wondered what else the girl did outside of serving.

The days passed. The sword thought long and hard about who he was, what he was doing, and if gutting people was a good solution to any sort of problem.

On the twenty-third day, he decided: probably not. It was a convenient solution, obviously, and if someone tried to gut him, then they were making the decision to die swiftly and possibly painfully right there and then, but it clearly had not done him any good in his last life, and he was physically incapable of attempting acts of notorious violence in this one by a gem in his chest that made his limbs spasm in pain and handlers that had very twitchy sword hands.

And that was the thing. Living had somehow grown somewhat enjoyable.

The sword found this to be very upsetting. He was a man of his word, until he lost his words and someone gave him words that tasted pleasant on his tongue.

Maybe, thought the sword. Just maybe.

On the thirty-first day, the god and the girl returned.

The sword would have tacked on “in all their radiant glory” for purposes of sarcasm and spite, but even he recognized that they looked as if they had seen hell, declared war against the entirety of it and all its devilish inhabitants, kept up the fight for thirty-one days straight (thirty of those days being fought with their bare hands), and beat a tiny portion of that inky darkness into submission before turning around and hightailing it back home.

Not that the sword blamed him. The girl was bleeding from places he was not aware could bleed. The god was limping. Both would have been mistaken for demons had they not been familiar faces in town.

The woman and the sword greeted them as they hobbled toward the city gates. A small crowd of healers rushed out to receive them, supporting them with nothing more than a couple of furtive glances, hushed murmuring, and strong arms.

“Mind the step,” said the woman, as the two were carted away to her inn.

Obligated to stalk after his unwilling masters, the sword slid in easily beside the carts, smiling with all his teeth.

“You look positively famished,” he cooed to the girl, who was glaring at him with two milky, furious eyes. They were a bit fatter than those he saw on fish that had been sitting out for too long. “Tell you what. I’ll cook you up a nice, hearty meal, because I am a kind and generous individual with a heart of gold.”

The girl would have most likely screamed if not for the deep gash across her stomach. She did, however, attempt to spit a wad of blood in the sword’s face. She almost choked on it. The sword
took this as a good sign, and proceeded to tell her all about his fun-filled days.

“Madam Yu collects criminals; did you know that?” he said. “Patricide girl is far more charming than you.”

The cart went over a bump in the road. The girl held back a whine, and it turned into an aborted wheeze. The sword smiled gleefully and bore the full force of another acerbic glare.

“Don’t rile her up too much,” said the god, who had been strangely silent for a while now. He sighed from where he was splayed over the cart, one arm resting on the bridge of his nose. Wicked headache, that one would bring.

“Why, what a pleasure to see you in one piece,” the sword said sourly. He rested a hand on the edge of the cart as he walked. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Another sigh. “No thanks to you,” the god muttered.

Then he passed out.

A trickle of blood dripped onto the sword’s shoe. He informed the healers of this, who panicked as calmly as they could and sped up noticeably.

To the sword’s displeasure, one of the healers had mistaken his constant presence as a willingness to see his two tormentors whole and healthy again. He would have made an effort to correct them if the woman had been elsewhere.

He was thereby put in charge of holding the bandages while they were snipped and plastered against clean wounds. The cleanliness of the medicine house bothered him greatly: there was no dust anywhere, no tepid air. Even the scent of herbs and flowers carried the faint tones of metallic tools. The only consolation was a bowl of hard honey candies that the sword had immediately claimed as his own.

He sat there impatiently, testing out all the annoyed, exasperated, and venomous looks in his arsenal. None of the healers even bothered to look in his direction.

“This seal must be very powerful,” the sword said once the god regained consciousness.

“Of course,” said the god. He winced as a healer dabbed at the cut that ran from his temple to his cheek. “Oh, that stings. But yes. It’s very powerful, given the fact it almost killed me on several occasions.”

“And,” the sword continued, “I fixed it.”

“You certainly did,” said the god, though he seemed very displeased about it.

The sword raised the roll of bandages up for a healer to snip. “I didn’t know you before you died,” he noted. “Either you were unforgivingly careless, or I had some very sticky fingers.”

“Somebody must have given you the seal,” the god said. Urged, more accurately.

He might as well have been pushing at air. “Maybe,” was all the sword could offer.

The healers shooed him out soon enough. He refused to part with the candies, carrying the bowl in his arms as he found his next victim.

“Sweet, sweet A-Qing,” sang the sword, the name stuttering off his tongue for a moment. He
crushed the candy under his teeth. “How was your vacation into hell? Comfortable, I hope.”

“I hope you die,” the girl spat.

She would have been much more threatening if not for the cast around her right arm, the swathe of bandages covering half her face, and the splint tied tight against her left leg. She looked somewhat like a cat whose owner, in an act of tremendous stupidity and self-haughtiness, tossed their precious pet off a cliffside to prove its acrobatic prowess.

It was clear she had not landed on her feet. The girl bristled when the sword laid a candy in the crook of her arm, atop the thick cast.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve learned some things in the time you were gone.”

“What a miracle,” the girl said blandly.

“Hmm,” said the sword. He stood, bringing the candies up with him. “I suppose you don’t want to hear about how I might be considering the possibility that murder is not always, in fact, the best route, and how travelling the world doesn’t seem like too horrible a prospect if and only if I get to be the cook.”

The girl was silent. The healers were trying their best not to look invested.

“What,” she said slowly, “do you mean?”

The sword tried his best to honestly explain. It would do them no good if he kept putting on an act of someone he could barely remember.

By the end, one of the healers was dabbing tears out of his eyes, and the others were sniffing. They were muttering something about the tragedy of it all, the injustice of life, the manner in which time creeps forward with its petty pace, bringing tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, and by the time the healers were done despairing about the helplessness of humankind and the relentless happenings of fate, the sword was convinced they had burned through half the poems in all of existence.

He was rightfully horrified. Thank goodness his ability to feel empathy and sadness were diminished. Emotions looked awful, and he wanted none of it.

The girl appeared to not want any of it, either. “You’re lying,” she accused.

“I don’t think so,” said the sword. “You know what they say about the malleability of the soul and all.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll melt you down and make hairpins out of you,” the girl threatened.

The sword thought of the patricide girl. He thought of a metal hairpin through the eye and how utterly painful it would be.

“Deal,” he said, stunning the girl into infuriated sputtering.

Then, to his word, he left for the kitchen. He took the stairs casually, one slow step at a time, and relished in the sound of his shoes scuffing against the familiar, rugged floor.

He crossed paths with the woman in the middle of the dining hall.

“You’ll be leaving with them as soon as they’re healed,” she said.
“Is that an order or a statement?” the sword asked, feeling very uncomfortable all of a sudden.

The woman blinked. Once, twice, three times, and her blue eyes seemed to flash gold between two heartbeats. It was gone in an even shorter time, which most likely meant it was a trick of the afternoon sun.

The sword swallowed. The candy rolled to bulge out his cheek like a greedy squirrel, or maybe a guilty child. “I’ll take it as an order, then.”

“Not that it would mean anything from me,” said the woman.

He considered this. “No,” he decided, realizing something very powerful about the freedom of the human spirit right there and then.

Not that he was a human. Schematics.

With the instruction of a junior healer (who had been told to tag along for experience, but was ultimately too nervous and too green to be allowed to do anything more than clean the tools and put in a few stitches here and there), the sword scrapped up two identical servings of a light, herby soup, crisp vegetables tossed with a bit of seasoning, fish laid overtop slices of ginger, and a round mound of rice.

The god ate without any questions. He did, however, look at the sword like the stars had been pulled from the sky and conglomerated into the godlike being that was a competent cook.

The girl was less trusting. She poked and prodded at the dishes with the fat end of her chopsticks, only caving because she knew she would otherwise lose her energy, then her appetite, and soon enough, vital signs.

They showed their approval in different ways. For the god, it was a loud, “You know what, Xue Yang, if you keep cooking like this, I might just forget about the part where you murdered A-Qing’s adoptive father.”

“And the part where you killed me,” said the sword.

“Let bygones be bygones,” the god declared, inhaling the rest of his food like a drowning man. The metaphor being that the god wanted very badly to die immediately, but was enough of a masochist and a self-deprecator to choose one of the more painful ways to go.

The girl was less obvious. Poking petulantly at the fish (thought not petulantly enough to stop her from cramming portions of vegetable-wrapped fish into her mouth), she eventually said, “I guess you can come along if you don’t try to stab anyone.”

“I swear on my right arm,” the sword swore, because everyone had right arms, and how hard could it be to perform a little sleight of hand if need be?

The god and the girl healed frighteningly quickly. The sword barely had a week to get his affairs in order and celebrate his hasty departure with a sizeable party, half of whose food came from his hands.

The townspeople were just happy to celebrate. They wished the best for their god’s newest disciple, hoped that he would grow and mature as a beautiful soul, and maybe he could come back one day and cook for them again, because that black sesame beef was just so tender and savoury and just the right amount of spicy, and if he happened to expand his inventory of recipes, especially if he happened to visit the so-called gourmet village Yamei of Lanling, then he should most certainly visit
as soon as possible; all he needed to worry about was his own creative expertise as a cook.

For the first time in a very long while, the sword felt flattered. Being needed was a good feeling, he decided, but being wanted made him feel disgustingly warm and fuzzy inside.

Anyway.

The three of them set out the morning after the healers had deemed the divine part of their entourage fit for travel.

“Take care,” said the woman, double-checking to make sure they had all their belongings.

“We’ll do our best,” the god promised.

“I’ll try my best,” the girl said.

“No promises,” sang the sword.

The sun was still young in the sky. It streaked across the endless blues and blacks in apple-mandarin-plum, colouring the black of the sword’s robes with a faint golden gossamer. By the time the townsfolk had finished saying their goodbyes and bestowing their gifts, the ethereal magic of early morning had given way to the gentle heat of early afternoon.

The sword shoved another satchel of candies into his pouch. Not that he disliked it; rather, he very much appreciated the gesture. He was, however, lamenting the hell that awaited him. Between the god and the girl, he would certainly need something to comfort him when their nonsensical bickering cracked holes in his patience.

They were halfway down the road when the patricide girl tossed him a peach.

He caught it easily. It was paler and firmer than anything he had seen her eat before. He rolled it around between his palms, then looked up at a face that was blooming with a smile like a knife.

“Try not to get yourself killed,” she shouted after him. “And look long and hard while you’re out there!”

The sword snorted. He turned, ignoring the god and the girl’s confused looks, and marched onward.

He lifted an arm and waved to the crowd behind him. His sleeve slipped down, bleeding the tiniest hint of golden light.

He said nothing. He was, after all, a man out of time and out of words. No matter when or how he returned, the most important thing was himself, what he had seen, and the life he decided to choose for himself this time around.

Tomorrow would be the first day of the rest of his life, and it could crawl in with as petty of a pace as it desired.

Fuxing is trying to figure out a safe way to destroy the Stygian Tiger Seal.

It was very hard to find it, and I don’t think he wants to go through the pain of finding it again.
Somehow, after Xue Yang (WHO IS NOW TRAVELLING WITH US AND NOT NEARLY AS PSYCHOTIC AS BEFORE, WHAT THE HELL) died, the seal fell into the Other Side, and since it’s such a horrible artefact, it fell into a very bad place.

I never want to go to that bad place ever again. I would tell Fuxing to just get it over with, but neither of us want any more of that.

Xue Yang doesn’t remember anything about fixing the Stygian Tiger Seal. I think he’ll remember eventually, since he’s been slowly remembering things recently.

I don’t know why he’s so different. Mie Yu must have done something. I don’t want to complain, but I hate that I can’t be angry at him for a good reason anymore.

What should I do, Daozhang?

________________________

FINE.

I’LL ADMIT IT.

XUE YANG IS REALLY, REALLY GOOD AT COOKING.

BETTER THAN I AM.

BY A LOT.

AT LEAST I HAVE A GOOD REASON TO HATE HIM NOW. HOW DARE HE TAKE MY POSITION AS THE COMPETENT COOK!!

________________________

Hanguang-Jun,

I’m very sorry I didn’t reply to your letter earlier. We ran into some trouble recently. I don’t know how much I’m allowed to say, since I think a lot of it is personal, but to be blunt, we had to take care of a dangerous object and it was awful.

I’m not sure if you’ve heard of this person called Xue Yang. He’s a real asshole. I know he definitely murdered a lot of people, but I’m not sure how many, and I’m not sure how many of them deserved it.

Execution doesn’t sound a whole lot better than murderer, in my opinion. And punishment isn’t the right word to use, either. Personally, I think that the only sensible thing is for people to know that if they kill a person, they’ve got a dead person.

Anyway, this Xue Yang guy is travelling with us now. I don’t think we’ll get rid of him anytime soon.

But enough about that bastard! Fuxing and I are just fine. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten stabbed
through the stomach before, so that was kind of cool. I think Fuxing has gotten stabbed through the stomach before, but he still whined like a baby, which is dumb.

I’m not sure where we’re headed to next. We don’t really have a destination in mind. I think we’ll head north and try to find a few temples along the way.

There are weird things in those temples. If you ever come across an abandoned temple, ESPECIALLY ONE THAT HAS A PEDESTAL, just turn around and pretend you never saw anything. I promise you it’s for the best.

How’s Zewu-Jun doing? I know he must be really busy. I’ve never met him, but he seems like a very respectable and very friendly person. I’d like to meet him somebody.

Actually, I’d like everyone to meet each other one day, and then we can go and get a nice dinner and have some nice fruit and then we’d talk about everything we’ve seen and done and the lessons we’ve learned, and after we’re tired, we can go our own ways and plan to see each other soon.

Also! I hope your son is doing really well! I’m sure he’ll grow up to be a great person if he’s raised by you. It must be a common thing for all kids named A-Yuan to be precious.

I’ll ask Fuxing if we can go to the Cloud Recesses one day. Feel free to tell me if you want me to ask!!

Talk to you soon,
Wei Chengfeng

If It Sits

Mornings are best spent doing one of three things:

First and foremost, for many common folks, they are invaluable for setting up shop in that narrow frame between acceptable wakefulness and the rising of the sun. By the time the stars dull into somewhat greyish, somewhat reddish obscurity, the sun is already up; he is simply enjoying a peaceful breakfast and airing out the thick scent of stardust. (Which, if you happen to be curious, smells of soot, a little bit of cedar, plenty of musky nothingness, and, depending on the time of day, maybe the faintest tickle of apple blossoms or rust. Strange things, those stars. You can never truly predict them.)

Once the sun has risen, it is perfectly acceptable to seek out services. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for all sorts of merchants to polish their goods, set up their tables, scrub clean their cutlery, and brace themselves for a tough day of smiling and bartering and serving.

Training is also a very respectable sun-greeting activity. For aspiring cultivators, it is more of a necessity, in all honesty, and for a particular group of purple-clad, lotus flower-brandishing disciples, it is a ritual born of silent promises and finely aged grief. More importantly, it is also a competition that nurtured fearsome rivalries.

The last one is a tad more obscure and really only useful for travellers.

This is because the last activity is replenishing the spoils of nature before the sun realizes that it
should really be doing its job and beams down all its energy in the afternoon hours.

“And this,” said the sword, plucking out another herb by the roots, “is also edible. Tastes like poison, might start acting like poison if you eat too much, but it’s perfectly respectable and fine for a nibble or two.” He stuck a leaf between his teeth and began to chew. His expression soured immediately. “Work as a sadist’s dream test of strength, as well.”

“You certainly know a lot,” said the god, who was genuinely marvelled.

The girl scowled. She etched methodical criss-crosses into the wall of the valley, making sure to drag the blade as ear-piercingly as possible. “What good does that do,” she spat.

“Don’t be like that,” the god scolded. He understood how troublesome it was to make food in places where nature itself was terrified of the earth it grew upon. “That’s very interesting, Xue Yang. Did Mie Yu teach you that?”

“I can learn things by myself,” said the sword, slightly offended.

They spent the remainder of the afternoon hunched over knee-height grass, digging through coarse leaves in search for knobbly roots that made for extremely effective pain relievers when ground up with a few choice herbs and clays.

If anything, the sword had said, it would make for an excellent preventative. That rub smelled like something had crawled into a pile of rotting wood, set itself on fire, and died twice over. The irony delighted the sword, whose wounds healed incorporeally, but was not as amusing to the very much corporeal girl and god.

Their endeavours came to an end after the girl scaled high into a tree growing horizontally off the cliffside and began to pelt the sword with rocks. The sword responded in kind by cleaving the trunk clean off the sun-bleached stone, sending the entire length of the tree hurtling toward a frigid river.

It took a great deal of panic and strings to secure the girl. She howled with fury the entire duration of ordeal. The sword laughed, and then laughed some more as the god picked her out of the branches like an unsteady toddler.

He stopped laughing and started screeching when she leapt onto him with all her nails and teeth bared. They tumbled into the river. The god started screaming too. He took off after them, sprinting so quickly his robes slapped around him like a golden flap of fabric left out too long to air-dry and accidentally caught in the next storm.

The girl continued pummelling the sword until she realized that he was foaming at the mouth. It was a surprising way to learn that he had never learned how to swim.

That day, they travelled what a caravan would normally have travelled in a week, thanks in part to the river.

Before they knew it, lotus flowers began dotting the waters. The god dragged the unconscious sword out of warm waters.

And Lotus Pier was just upstream.
I GOT A LETTER FROM DAOZHANG!!

One of Mie Yu’s workers delivered it all the way to us! She really knows how to hire the best people. I’m kind of sad I didn’t get to see Daozhang and Song Daozhang in Yinhe, but they wouldn’t have been happy to see Xue Yang, so it’s probably for the best.

They just finished negotiating some deals with neighbouring sects, and apparently they want to try running a sect that doesn’t rely on blood! How cool is that? Who cares about blood, anyway? It’s all red and sticky in the end!

I hope they stay safe and healthy.

Actually.

Now that I think of it.

Fuxing’s been really good with miracles lately, hasn’t he?

I wonder what he could do with someone who has a perfectly good soul and just needs a better body. And someone who just needs a new pair of eyes.

We made it to Lotus Pier!!

Fuxing didn’t notice until we were in the town just south of it, and when he noticed, he started sweating like crazy. I don’t blame him, but at the same time, I think it’s stupid that he’s trying to avoid a problem that’s been bothering him for so long.

He’s your brother!! You’re both in denial!! Will somebody please act like an adult and just talk about their feelings!!

Maybe we’ll see that Jiang Muai girl again. She looked strong. I wonder if all of Fuxing’s disciples are all sort of crazy.

Tea and Peanuts

It would take a very brave disciple who could stand before the sect leader of Yunmeng Jiang and say the words, “The god Fuxing has returned!”

It would an even braver disciple who could say the words, “The god Fuxing has returned, and it looks a little like he’s, uh, adopted two kids, and one of them, the really scary one who looks like she’s blind but isn’t, is asking to see you in a tone of voice that implies she’s about two minutes away from breaking in and introducing herself, but nobody wants to tell her what to do, because that would basically be telling off someone who works directly beneath a god, and everyone’s a little terrified of being smote out of existence, because, and let’s be blunt here, the great beyond sounds like the longest, most tedious wait for paperwork to be processed, and the infernal burning sounds positively dreadful, which is a very complicated but very fair reason for our perfectly justified
paranoia, so we’re just going to let her in and let her say whatever she likes because we’re terrified she’ll run us through otherwise.”

The reason being that sentence was glorious but also a bit insensitive. And it was not wise to be insensitive before Sect Leader Jiang.

He had an electrifying personality. It was the sort of electrifying that stopped your heart, and not in a romantic way.

Luckily, or perhaps unfortunately, nobody was brave (foolish) or insensitive (arrogant) enough to even consider approaching Sect Leader Jiang with such words.

A very large portion of Yunmeng Jiang’s disciples were simply thinking it.

The proprietress, a woman of very respectable standing with enough emotional intelligence to bury half of Yunmeng’s angst, was thinking something along the same lines.

What she thought was this: Thank the heavens that Fuxing finally has a voice of common sense.

She had dark hair, and high cheekbones, and she was wearing long purple robes with a silver bell tied around her sash, which wrapped around the length of her waist. She carried a short dagger made of bone in her sleeves, and when she felt like it, she could do incredible things with it, like stab people. It was great.

She was exceedingly normal, and that was just how she liked it. People tended to underestimate her.

The proprietress knocked politely on the sect leader’s door. She did so in her usual pattern of tap-tap-tap, followed by a brief pause, finished with another tap-tap.

In one hand, she held an oak wood tray, glazed with preservative paints and etched with a panoramic view of the river during rainy season, topped with the sect leader’s favourite tea (brewed with dying lotus flowers that were heavy with their own sugars, accented by a fat dollop of honey and served alongside savoury peanuts).

In her other hand was a small note. It was splattered with wet ink, courtesy of an unpracticed hand, and read something along the lines of I hope you are doing well, now if you are good and healthy please come meet me because I have some things I would like to say, and I also carry the name Wei, and I think that might mean something to you.

The proprietress was greatly amused. She had not read the note, but it was difficult not to take a few glances every now and then.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” she called, trying to keep the smile out of her voice. “I have a fairly urgent note for you.”

Then she pushed the door wide open and strolled in. She set the tray onto the table and smiled winningly.

The sect leader did not look amused. To be fair, he never looked amused. A storm would only ever be described as sad or angry, and he was the perfect embodiment of said storm; recently, however, especially over the last few years, he had mellowed somewhat.

A typhoon to a heavy rainfall that could kill you if you prodded it the wrong way: that was the young Yunmeng Jiang Sect Leader. And he was busy.
“What is it now?” he demanded, reading over the latest peace treaties from upstart clans. “Another merchant?”

The note was placed on the table. The ink was still wet. The sect leader’s nose wrinkled at the smell of an unpracticed hand.

“It’s fairly urgent,” the proprietress repeated.

The sect leader developed a crick in his neck. “Unless they’re breaking down the doors to see me,” he said, in that perpetually angry voice of his, “point them to the nearest inn and tell them to learn their place.”

Leaning back a little to peer out of the room, the proprietress met eyes with a disciple who looked like he was close to tears. He shook his head desperately, voicing the word please over his trembling lips.

The proprietress stepped back in.

“Why don’t you take a look,” she insisted, sliding the note closer.

The sect leader caved, only because he was itching for his tea, and his hand just so happened to take the same route. “Let me see,” he snapped, pulling the half-wet parchment toward himself.

He read it. When he finished reading, he read it again. And then a third time.

After he read it a fourth time, he crushed the paper in his fist and set it ablaze using a brilliant reaction of heat, light, and dense, foul-smelling air, and also a fair share of pure willpower.

“Yufeng-Zhe,” he said, with impressive control, “is a child?”

The proprietress considered this. Her establishment saw many interesting characters walk in and out of its halls. Her establishment, being located in the heart of Yunmeng, heard many stories of a certain golden god skirting the edges of the province, almost like he was intentionally avoiding them.

She found it to be rather rude, but gods were known for being mercurial. So she overlooked it, certain that he had good reason to stray so far, a little less certain when rumours mentioned a blind girl who was quick to brandish a sword that was almost as tall as she was.

Needless to say, she was terribly curious. By the devilish look in the sect leader’s eyes, it seemed he was eager to meet the infamous Yufeng-Zhe as well.

“I’ll tell the servants to expect visitors,” said the proprietress, following after the sect leader’s stormy steps.

“Don’t waste your time on them,” he snarled.

“I’ll prepare some tea,” the proprietress continued. She waved the sect leader a cheerful goodbye as she split off for the kitchens. “And maybe some spicy peanuts for Fuxing; he always liked them.”

The sect leader was too elegant for stomping, but he made his way to the great hall with weight and purpose. “Give the girl normal peanuts,” he said, with venom. “Children shouldn’t suffer that man’s hellish tastes.”

The proprietress beamed. “The savoury ones or the sweet ones?”

“It doesn’t make a difference,” snapped the sect leader.
“Oh, of course it does,” the proprietress said seriously. “We toast the savoury ones with a bit of salt, pepper, and assorted dried herbs, but the sweet ones—those ones are a real treat.” She raised her chin, confident in all things regarding tea and snacks. “We glaze them with the sugar and our finest honeycomb over a low flame from morning well into the afternoon, and when it forms into a delicious, syrupy coating, we toss toasted sesame over them to give them an even nicer crunch—”

“The sweet ones are fine,” said the sect leader.

“Of course they are,” the proprietress agreed easily. “They’re better than fine.”

She hurried off to the kitchens. The servants were bustling around with slightly excited energy, more curious than anxious, and they whispered and brushed arms to be as cordial as possible while also being very, very obvious.

The proprietress was a very hands-on woman. She picked out the best-looking peanuts, plus a few cheerfully deformed ones as well, and then she laid them in lavender trays. For artistry’s sake, she garnished them with little flowers. A lotus pastry would go a long way, she decided, cutting a little piece for each of their guests.

As she was preparing the tea, a senior disciple hurried past the kitchen. He was almost in tears.

“…And that bastard,” he wailed, using awfully crass language for a disciple from a highly respected cultivation sect. “I knew about the girl, but what was up with him? He nearly cut off my fingers! I need my fingers! Do you know what I can do with my fingers?”

“Please appreciate the gift of context,” his shimei begged, her face in her hands.

The two scampered off, discussing something about how people normally did not possess the ability to transform their limbs into blades, or phase into swords, or hone metaphorical venom into not-so-metaphorical words that dug like knives and stuck like briars.

The proprietress thought for a brief moment.

Then she turned back to the trays. She prepared another sweet peanut dish, poured four cups of the sect leader’s favourite tea, and made her way to the great hall with a great, wide smile on her face.

Two servants flanked her on either side. They carried rolls of parchment, brushes, inkstones, and assorted stationary in the case of any sudden agreements, which was far more common the proprietress had ever imagined.

“Pardon me,” said the proprietress as she stepped into the situation at hand.

The situation looked something like this:

There was a boy whose face belonged either on a snake or a delinquent, possibly both, maybe on a snake delinquent, and he sat silently (though improperly) at his table, with an expression that was exasperation manifested in physical form. He looked as if he would happily leave his consciousness in another room if it meant escaping the conversation.

His blush-red eyes met the proprietress’ for a moment. His brow quirked up, and the corners of his lips followed soon after. He smiled like a knife and smelled faintly of pepper.

Beside him, the girl had abandoned her cushion and was standing to her full, unimpressive height, which only made the volume of her voice more impressive. The gold flowers in her hair shook as she gestured with youthful energy, and the furrow of her brows could split mountains if you dropped her
face-first into them.

Her eyes were milky white. They were honed with a focus grown men had yet to find and could not bear.

And, of course, there was the god, who was in the process of attempting to sink into the ground and never see the light of day again. His shoulders were hunched in, and his head was bowed down strangely low, too.

The proprietress set down the serving dishes and cups. She skillfully navigated the choppy waters, which were really a mad cesspool of profanities at this point. It was almost impressive.

“You arrogant child,” the sect leader was finishing. His blood pressure could probably shake mountains, but it would most likely slap his arteries shut and strike him with some sort of cardiac event well before any hills starting trembling. “Brandishing that name like it’s something to be proud of—are you mad?”

“Oh, I’m mad,” the girl raged, about two seconds from kicking the table into the ceiling. “I’m fucking pissed!”

Then she planted her foot on the table with enough force to snap it in half. This would have been a tragedy if not for the sword, who skillfully snatched both the peanuts and the tea just before the girl transformed a perfectly good oak table into splinters.

“I might not know everything, but I sure know more than jack shit!” the girl said.

Lightning flickered across the sect leader’s fingers. “You could never understand,” he snarled, with all the certainty in the world.

The god raised his hand meekly. “Actually,” he tried, “I think—”

“You stay out of this,” the girl and the sect leader both roared at once.

The god looked close to tears. The sword did too, although it was for a very different reason.

The proprietress decided it was a good time to put her emotional intelligence (which the girl had in leaps and strides; however, the quality of outsiderness is invaluable in all fields) to use.

She slid quietly beside the sword. The sword turned to look at her with a single raised brow.

“Hello,” he greeted, crunching through sweet peanuts. “You’re one of Sect Leader Jiang’s little birds, I assume.”

“Jiang Chenyi,” the proprietress said simply. “And yourself?”

Worryingly, the sword thought for a long, unsure moment. “Jiangzai,” he decided, after much deliberation.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said the proprietress, trying to reign in her curiosity. Fuxing really did like travelling with people who had many names.

“Your sect leader’s an interesting character.”

That was a perfectly valid conclusion to make. Currently, the sect leader was in a fierce competition with a girl half her height to see whose curses and booming voice could not only terrify the disciples into fleeing, but make them trot back in petrified fear to make a final stand; it was the sort of terror
that struck you so hard and fast that it slapped you silly and made you into a bumbling mess. And it was a tight race.

There was a very important conversation happening in that cacophony, something about family and lessons learned and coming back from the dead and lying-but-not-really, and it was a total mess, but the proprietress let it be for now.

“Do you like the peanuts?” she asked the sword eagerly.

“They’re wonderful,” said the sword, much to her relief and great pleasure. “Back home we make honey candies. It’s similar.”

“Home?”

The sword’s expression twisted, like he just bit down on something horribly and surprisingly sour. “Home,” he repeated grudgingly. “Yinhe. City down south.”

Ah. Of course. The city of fearless merchants. The ones known for, according to the juniors, having a startlingly high probability of running into mythical and cursed creatures despite no evidence of any such beings lurking in the area beforehand, and, even more shockingly, banishing said creatures themselves with weapons of their own choosing, sometimes swords, sometimes knives, sometimes talismans bleeding gold.

“Oh, we’re not cultivators,” they would all say, quite abashed and embarrassed. “We just know how to breathe right.”

Whatever that meant, it certainly made them a force to be reckoned with.

They drove a hard bargain as well, the proprietress thought. Their fruits and herbs were especially notable, luxurious and resplendent and sometimes literally shining, and they refused to give the secrets of their trade away, although it seemed at times that they themselves had no idea how they were doing so well.

They smiled at you and beckoned you over with their array of colourful produce, then faced you like you were both on a battlefield and happened to be on opposite sides, and those sides happened to be wielding very sharp and dangerous weapons.

The proprietress was an intelligent woman. She could recognize a blessing when she saw one.

“It’s a nice city,” she said.

“Sure,” muttered the sword, as if he was embarrassed to admit it. “Could do without that abyss, though. All those late-night strolls ruined by the cries of the damned. It’s a shame.”

Okay, the proprietress thought. That, in fact, is a rather unique cultural difference.

“The peaches there are splendid,” she tried.

“I’m half-convinced Fuxing goes around personally and sneezes on them,” said the sword.

A pause. “And… that’s a good thing, yes?”

“Hmm,” was all the sword could offer.

They sat in silence for a while. The silence between them, that is; the sect leader and the girl continued screaming at each other with such unbridled venom that any lesser person could have
thought they had murdered each other’s families, and quite recently, at that. The irony was that they were indeed arguing over families, and had reached the unfortunate but not completely ungrounded conclusion that they were, as the malleability of the human heart and pangs of the vicious past decided, extended family.

It would be rather pleasant that way, the proprietress thought. They were very similar in temperament, meaning that if they yelled loud enough, the very fabric of reality would attempt to fold itself into something pretty if it meant shutting them up.

“So,” began the sword, shoving another handful of sweet peanuts in his mouth, “I hear Fuxing has a reputation here.”

The proprietress beamed. This was more familiar ground. “He certainly does,” she answered. “Though I’d say he has a reputation everywhere he goes.”

It was true, and they both knew it. The proprietress could hardly go a day without someone commenting on the beauty of The Teapot, which she displayed proudly behind her counter for a while out of simple appreciation for fine things. Later on, however, she decided to rotate it back into use, partly because she was tired of starry-eyed customers huddling around her counter, mostly because the magic of The Teapot had become mundane; one of the juniors was incredibly skilled with the erhu and made customers weep just as much as The Teapot did.

“How has he been?” asked the proprietress, eyeing the god out of the corner of her eye. He looked as if his body had just evicted his consciousness from his semi-immortal form. It was worrying.

“He’ll be fine,” the sword answered casually. “He’s always fine in the end. It’s so annoying.”

“You know his history with Sect Leader Jiang?”

“Of course. I’m not stupid.”

That was a bit disappointing. The proprietress rather liked telling travellers about the wild and wacky adventures of their local god, who happened to be absent for the moment, but he said he would be back, and it would be awfully unprofessional of him to break that promise: now, if you were looking for souvenirs, the humble Lotus Pier Teahouse carries a variety of teas and snacks, but the cakes are the cutest and the tastiest, and we do gift wrapping, too, if you were interested, and we can even draw a little sketch of the His Honourable Lord Fuxing, too.

The sword yawned. The recently-discovered distant relatives kept screaming. The god focused all his energy into projecting into another plane of existence.

“They’re good friends,” said the proprietress, rather peevied. Oh well. It was much more exciting to wait out the storm with someone than without. “They trained the juniors together, and they did a very good job.”

The sword was unimpressed. “Did it involve tripping them into the Other Side?”

“The Other Side of what?”

“Never mind,” he sighed. He downed the rest of his tea in one go, then finished off most of the girl’s as well.

Then he turned to the god. In one practiced motion, he splashed the rest of the tea on the vacant body while maintaining perfect monotony.
“Wake up,” he said, rather rudely.

The god blinked once. Twice. He sighed, as if he could expel all the air in his lungs and deflate into a little blanket. That would be nice. “Please stop throwing tea on me,” he said, using his sleeve to wipe his face.

“Get them to shut up,” the sword said, “and then we’ll talk.”

The god gave him the long look of someone who has been awake for a few weeks too many. “I,” he began, “don’t think I would be able to hold a normal conversation even if A-Qing wasn’t here.”

“That’s because you’re emotionally incompetent,” the sword accused.

“Pot, kettle, black,” the god responded bitterly, which might as well have been an admission of guilt.

The proprietress decided that it was probably time to relieve everyone of their pains. The god would be sporting a headache for the rest of the day, and so would the sword; the girl and the sect leader would be needing warm milk and honey to soothe their poor, ravaged throats.

She cleared her throat.

“Pardon me,” she said.

The sword yawned again. The god shuffled nervously. The girl and the sect leader were beginning to lose topics to get angry about, which only made them angrier.

Every respectable businesswoman had a no-nonsense voice. It was the only logical way to silence a crowd, really. Oh, they got frightened when you yelled at them, but everyone gets yelled at least once or twice in their life, and men have the annoying habit or sticking their noses up and pretending they know every single trade route you manage, every deal you have closed in the past two weeks, and, of course, every unwomanly act that would cost you points off their brain-addled Marriage Prospects Meter, which the proprietress suspected was the male mind’s subconscious defense to being very, very lonely.

As a young, decently attractive, and most definitely wealthy young woman, she had a very distinct no-nonsense voice. It was the sort of voice your mother would use when you had broken a precious family heirloom and you knew she was going to use it against you for the rest of your childhood. It was also the sort of voice demons used before they ate your soul, but she was blissfully unaware of that.

“Excuse me,” said the proprietress, in her no-nonsense voice.

The temperature in the room dropped to freezing. This was not an exaggeration, as the god peered at his cup in shock as he noticed frosty flowers dance over dried flowers.

The sword was looking at her like he had discovered she was her long-lost sister or a ruthless serial killer. Recognition never looked so terrifying.

“—And your voice sounds funny,” the girl finished lamely. She coughed into her hand. “Sorry,” she apologized, to the proprietress and nobody else.

The sect leader sat down petulantly. He hated the no-nonsense voice. It made him question his authority, and worst of all, it made him question his marriage prospects, which made him feel very lonely and insecure.
The proprietress smiled. “There,” she said, cheerfully. “Was that so hard?”

Nobody answered. The sword gave a little grunt, but that was it.

“Now,” she began, clapping her hands together in a way that heralded a sort of dreadful doom, “let’s all enjoy our tea, snack on some lovely peanuts, and talk about our feelings like good, civilized people.”

The god jabbed weakly at his tea. This would, unbeknownst to the proprietress, be the beginning of a worldwide phenomenon known as iced tea, thought not as drastic, and flavoured with so many artificial sweeteners it would make her cry for foodstuffs justice.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Jiang Chenyi,” the god said.

“The pleasure’s all mine,” she answered honestly. “So, what are we angry about today?” Hastily, she added, “Because we’re all a little angry all the time, and it’s nice to speak honestly and opening about matters of the heart.”

“Fuxing’s past life was Wei Wuxian,” the sword said, picking at his fingernails with great tension. He settled for rubbing them instead. “Put anyone with the name Wei and Sect Leader Jiang in a room, and I imagine the end of the world will come a few hours later.”

“You won’t even give me a day?” the god whined.

“Minutes,” the sword corrected venomously.

“That’s not really my name,” the girl said. When the god sulked, she quickly elaborated, “I mean, it’s me, but not the original me. If you really want to know, my last name’s actually—”

“It doesn’t matter,” the sect leader hissed. Lightning was dancing on his fingertips again, and not in the fun, energetic way.

A miniature storm was collecting in the room. It smelled sharply of a sweetness, maybe a bitterness, that would later be classified as ozone, but to the proprietress, who relied on her nose and her tongue every day, it smelled like a fresh summer storm, the kind that drowned the lotus flowers under rains that lasted for days and had people grumbling about out-of-season showers and how bad for business they were.

“What matters,” said the sect leader, “is that you lied to me.” His gaze pierced like a spear, and was just as easy to break in the middle, too.

“That’s a strong word,” muttered the god.

“Do you take me for a fool?”

“Ask the me of a year and a half ago, and I’m sure he’d say something along the lines of, sorry, amnesiac god here, what’s your name again?”

It was not a heartfelt response. The sect leader’s metaphorical hackles raised. “You have the audacity,” he roared, “to return and think you have a place here?”

The god was silent. His eyes said I should hope so, given that I trained the juniors while you built your sect up from the ground, and I babysat young Jin Ling so often he calls me uncle, and I know that I’ve done horrible things, and that our relationship will never be the same, but I hoped that we could learn how to be brothers again in this life by inheriting a home we lost and making it a better
place for the children that come after us.

What left his lips was, “I don’t know.”

The girl’s expression showed she took much offense to this. “Yes you do,” she urged. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have come here, or to Yiling, or to Yinhe!”

“Yiling?” the sect leader repeated, with great suspicion.

“It’s none of your business,” the girl snapped, which did nothing to resolve the tension.

The proprietress cleared her throat again. The room quieted.

She sat, and she thought.

This was an interesting situation. And by interesting, she meant confusing, but not entirely unexpected.

There was always something in the way the god carried himself that leant to her speculating on things that made no sense. What would have happened if he had stayed for longer? What would have happened if he had come sooner? What would have happened if he and the sect leader had been brothers?

Those ponderings were answered, now. Not in the way she liked, but answers were answers, no matter how awful they were.

“I don’t like being ignored,” she said, and the temperature dropped even further. The sword hugged his arms, throwing furtive glances at her, like she would sprout horns and cook them all up for dinner.

The sect leader’s shoulders dropped. He sighed, a deep, terrible thing, and held his breath for a moment.

The proprietress paused for just long enough to watch him start breathing again. “The way I see it,” she said, “is that both of you knew the truth a long time ago, most likely from the first moment you met eyes, and you’ve been living in denial ever since.”

Silence. You could have heard the girl whisper, in a notably awe-stricken voice, “Oh, shit, she said it.”

And they did. Everyone did. Even the two poor servants, who had been standing outside the door with scrolls and inkstones and brushes in their trembling arms, who had been expecting yet another conversation about the latest conflicts, or troublesome monsters, or maybe even a marriage proposal.

They were hoping for a marriage proposal. Bets had been going around like a particularly bad case of the runs, and the pool was so incredibly grand that whoever won could start a small country and buy a couple of perfectly respectable trade deals.

They got something very, very different, and they were beginning to think that they had gotten themselves in too deep this time around.

The god spluttered. The sect leader gaped in outrage.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” they said at the same time. They turned to each other and exchanged the silent but universal look of you fucking idiot, you blew it, good job.
“Pot,” said the sword.

“Kettle,” said the girl.

“Black,” finished the proprietress.

The two most powerful cultivators in Yunmeng, reduced to bumbling messes, who were trying their best to deny the truth. But that was the thing with the truth: it held its breath for as long as it could, and then just when it seemed like it was gone and dead, it bobbed up to the surface like a bloated corpse. Which was what the whole metaphor revolved around, really.

This would take work. It would take weeks, most likely months, and it would test her patience as well as the girl’s (who seemed like the most emotionally competent out of the entire group—rather, the only emotionally competent one).

The proprietress breathed.

She could do this. She had to do this. It was for the good of humanity, she thought. It would be better for everyone if the two lords of Lotus Pier were not, in fact, always at each other’s throats.

Perhaps a dog would help.

And Young Master Jin.

And the girl, who had been looking at the proprietress with undying respect for a while now.

Having gone over her available pieces, she felt better about this cosmic game of chess.

“Young Master Wei,” she called. “Sect Leader Jiang.”

The two guilty parties turned to look her way. They suffered her gaze with dignity and a little bit of fear.

“Let’s talk a little about where we’ll go from here on, shall we?”

The disciples in Yunmeng are very strong.

The older ones are kind of stupid. They’re boring, and they don’t let you have much fun. The juniors are the fun ones. They can fly on swords super fast and know about the Other Side. Sometimes they even sneak out to buy wine.

I like the juniors. I also like Jiang Chenyi. They’re the smart ones. They like Fuxing even if he’s an idiot with the emotional intelligence of a brick.

Sect Leader Jiang IS A DUMBASS. He’s so proud it makes my teeth ache, and when my teeth ache, it makes me want to punch out HIS teeth, but apparently that’s rude and disgraceful and bad for my image, so I shouldn’t do it or something stupid like that.

SAME TACTIC AS SECT LEADER NIE. KILL HIM WITH KINDNESS, EXCEPT NOT THE SAME KIND, BECAUSE APPARENTLY THAT REMINDS HIM OF HIS DEAD SISTER, AND THAT IS SORT OF A SORE SPOT.
Jiang Chenyi told me he likes dogs. That’s convenient, because I happen to know someone who has dogs that can’t die even if you tried to kill them. I think Sect Leader Jiang could do with something that doesn’t die. Like Fuxing, but a dog, and also a skeleton, that kind of talks and would make you run for a change of pants if you ran into it in the middle of the night.

The next full moon is in two nights. Hopefully, I can get away from Fuxing and make some sort of deal with the Trader.

I wonder what she wants.

Dog acquired!!

And all I needed to do was cut my hair short!!

I don’t know what she wants with my hair and frankly I don’t want to know!! But!! I have a dog now and his name is Yue!!

Here, Boy

There was screaming, and then there was wailing. Then, even beyond that, there was crying hysterically and begging for the gods above to save you from this mortal hell, and a tiny bit after that was the horrible realization that you were a god and could do nothing about the hellspawn that was snarling and yapping and glowering at you like it was considering where to bury the bones once it was done with you.

“Get it away!” the god cried hysterically and literally. He scrambled up the tree. His heart dropped through his toes when he, for a terrifying moment, lost his footing and slid downward. He screamed even louder.

It may help to understand that dogs adopted from the Trader retain their appearances for the most part. Chattering teeth, dry-as-death bones, glowing ember eyes: the whole package deal, wrapped neatly in repeated mantras of a language of chaos that shaped itself into existence by listening intently to the stars and the earliest gravestones, and then slapping a system called grammar over it.

The Trader trained them well.

Normally, they were wild beings, but the Trader could domesticate stars if she put her mind to it (and she had; her favourite celestial body was the moon, which had rolled happily after her from the beginning of its short life).

Still, wild things were wild. The dogs surveyed people like they were cuts of meat, and also happened to growl with a rumbling, clattering thing that started in the back of one throat and ended in someone else’s.

Yue was not one of those dogs. He was a well-behaved dog, one of the Trader’s Good Boys, who
had been given the honour of guarding the Honoured Successor’s Good Friend from all harm. And he would do so with pride and dignity.

He pawed cheerfully after his new master from the very start.

Ominous chanting and frighteningly human intelligence aside, they still behaved like dogs. They were, in the girl’s humble opinion, many times better.

They had no stomachs to fill, so you never needed to feed them. When you told them to fetch, they could travel the distance between Lotus Pier and Yinhe in a few strides and trot out of the shadows quite happily. They liked ear scratches. They rolled on the ground because they liked the sound of rocks against their hollow bones.

They were endearing. Perhaps the Trader had some taste after all. It was just highly questionable.

Sect Leader Jiang had taken to Yue very nicely. Yes, he did try to whip the poor boy out of existence at first, but upon realizing he was no different than a very intelligent, undead dog, he opened up.

Meaning he immediately had a collar fashioned for Yue (a sturdy, thick purple thing embedded with shiny stones recovered from the river floor, adorned with a crescent moon that cupped around a lotus flower) and starting cooing at the precious boy.

It was almost disturbing. The girl had never heard the sect leader coo, and she never wanted to hear it again.

The god, to be curt, did not take to Yue so well.

His fear of all things resembling canines was well-known to the girl. Childhood trauma, she had guessed, and been spot-on. She had hoped that Yue’s skeletal appearance would spark the necromantic flair in the god’s sorry excuse of a brain. Alas, all hopes are dashed against the great stone of childhood trauma, or something like that.

Yue did not take to the god well, either. The strange god smelled like death and peppers, which made Yue’s nose itch in all the wrong ways.

Their dislike was mutual. The girl desperately hoped they could come to an agreement.

“Get that horrid thing away!” the god screeched.

“He doesn’t bite,” the girl lied. She had seen Yue bite a water ghoul the other day. It had disintegrated into tiny bits of ash and flown off with the wind.

“Yes he does,” the god said. Yue barked. The god let out a girlish scream. “Oh my god, yes he does, he definitely does, I see death in those eyes and those teeth!”

The sword watched peacefully, finding adequate entertainment in the suffering of the high-and-mighty. “I like Yue,” he said lightly.

“I don’t,” sobbed the god. “No, no, no—is he climbing up? Oh god, is he climbing up?”

“No,” said the girl.

“Just end me now! It’s kinder!” Yue scratched the trunk of the tree with his lethal claws. Hysteria made the god look very young and very scared, which he was. “No! No, no, no!”
The girl massaged her temples.

This would take a while. Maybe it was time to yell at Sect Leader Jiang some more. He briefly mentioned something about a promise, protecting the god-before-he-became-a-god from dogs and the like.

Or she could go get Jiang Chenyi, and they could sit him down calmly and talk about his feelings, his regrets, and all that fun stuff.

It was like teaching a child shapes and colours. And that, they would try to explain, is what regret becomes after years of steeping in loneliness and anger.

Jiang Chenyi said that determination and insistence was the path to success, after all. And she was a smart person, with all her emotions in the right places.

Fuxing has a nephew??

I knew about Young Master Jin, and how it sucked that his parents both died before he got to know them, but I didn’t know it until today.

He’s cute. He’s a tiny, cute baby, with little hands and feet and everything, and he reminds me of A-Yuan, and A-Yuan was a very good boy.

He also likes Yue, which means he has good taste. But he also likes Fuxing, and I don’t know what that says about a person.

He likes Fuxing a lot. So much that he calls him uncle. I don’t know how Sect Leader Jiang feels about it, but Jiang Chenyi got him to admit that he wanted his family to be whole again, and he knew it was impossible to fix everything, but any family is better than no family.

I think Young Master Jin is very smart and has a lot of potential. The juniors love him, and sometimes they train him, which is nice. I tried to teach him how to breathe properly the other day, and he didn’t even say it was weird or dumb.

Fuxing has a nephew, and he is very cute.

When we come back, I hope we’ll all get along better, so I can hurry up and plan that big dinner I told Hanguang-Jun about. It would be embarrassing if I went back on my word.

Hanguang-Jun,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I learned that phrase from Jiang Chenyi, who said it was the proper way to start a letter. But I really do hope you’re doing well, and your brother, too, and your son.

I don’t know if you heard, but we went to Lotus Pier recently. It was sort of a mess. Sect Leader
Jiang gets angry really easily, and I do too, so most of our conversations were arguments. I don’t want to make any assumptions, but I think he might be scared of me. I think he’s just scared of anyone who understands emotions, which I imagine would be most people. But he doesn’t seem scared of much.

He’s weird. He thinks one way, then acts another. Why is he so dumb? Why is Fuxing so dumb? No offense to you, Hanguang-Jun. It’s a real question.

I don’t know if you know, but if you can tell me, please do: why do people never stay true to their hearts? Doesn’t it tire you out? Why not do what you want to do and have it that way?

The world is a stupid place, I guess. But I’m doing what I want, and it’s turned out mostly fine for me. I guess someone has to give you the chance to be yourself first.

I have sent some sweet peanuts with this letter. Jiang Chenyi made them, and she also taught Xue Yang how to make them, which is better for me. If you want the spicy peanuts too, let me know, and I’ll send them next time. I thought the sweet ones would be better for Gusu people, since you guys have pretty neutral palettes.

And if you can, could you send some erhu music over? One of the juniors here really wants some harder pieces, because he’s a nerd like that.

Say hello to your son for me! Young Master Jin also says hello, and that you’re welcome to bring him over any time, because he’d like some more friends his age.

Oh, and now that I think of it, I should also tell you to be wary of the Chief Cultivator, Jin Guangyao. He’s done some bad things. Unforgivable things, some would say.

Please don’t tell Zewu-Jun. I don’t think it’s time yet. We’re going to investigate a bit more (we’re headed back to Qinghe now to talk with Sect Leader Nie again) and I’d like to get more information before going around accusing people of murder. If you can, please watch out for Zewu-Jun!! I know he’s a good person, but that can really suck when people take advantage of you!!

Best of luck,
Wei Chengfeng

Today, on the road back to Qinghe, we saw another temple.

Guess what??

THIRD TRIAL!!

I just love the trials. I love them so much. If I could, I would go and hug the person who thought they were a good idea, except instead of using my arms, I would use my hands, and I would hug their neck so tight until it snapped.

What sort of monsters know how to use the bow? And what sort of monsters have arrows that set things on fire?? WHO CAME UP WITH THIS??

Whoever the lady in the light is, she makes me SO ANGRY. She won’t answer any of my
questions, and she tries to sound all fancy and old-fashioned. Why doesn’t anyone just say things straight? Is it really so hard to be honest?

The good thing is I finished the trial, and I think I’m all done. Three trials for three gods. I can guess who the gods are. I just think they might all be dead. Or maybe they’re sleeping. One of them definitely isn’t, and another one of them is definitely dead, but the last one is a mystery. Maybe I’ll meet them soon. Then I can yell at them and tell them their friends were idiots.

Jiangzai is as powerful as it’s going to get. Xue Yang sort of glows in the dark now, and he hates it, because it doesn’t work with his whole edgy bastard theme, and I think it’s great. Take that, asshole! Now all of China knows you’re here!!

Oh, and Fuxing also found another book of legends. I don’t remember if I’ve mentioned them before. They never seemed important until the case of the man-eating sun, and even then, we didn’t have that many. Now we have a huge stack.

I have a feeling they might tell us something about the gods. What they did, how it ended, and where they are now.

If they’re anything like Shouxing and Ying Huohua, it’s probably good that Fuxing died before his hell could become an eternity. As morbid as that sounds. No offense, Fuxing, but a thousand years is a long time.

ANYWAY.

Back to Qinghe it is. We’ll surprise Sect Leader Nie with a very alive Xue Yang, and then I think I’ll try to get him to learn how to fan dance! If he doesn’t have any hobbies, I’ll give him some!!

Fuxing got dragged off by the Trader to fix up some miracles in Yinhe!!

I’m so glad I sold him out while I could!! No need to thank me, Daozhang and Song Daozhang!! Live long and well and happy!!

Counterattack

The study of sword spirits is not truly a study. In fact, it could more accurately be called an art.

All existing cases of blades manifesting distinct personalities have been poorly documented, and are therefore riddled with contradictions and outlandish stories of said personalities adopting a body of flesh and blood, ascending to godhood, or tag-teaming with their wielders in a manner so indescribably epic that they developed a style that, to be frank, was so utterly badass and incredible that even the most straight-laced of masters would swallow their pride, sniff petulantly, and say, “It’s not bad,” before quickly adding, “But it’s far from good!”

Only one of the three is historically accurate.
As a wise man once said, all matters lead to and happen in Qinghe. This is because the wise man was Sect Leader Nie, and history is written by the victors.

It was a bright and sunny day in Qinghe, which, by the region’s standards, meant that it was only snowing enough to wet your shoes if you happened to go out unprepared, and the wind was only cold enough to make your fingers burn with heat when you warmed them with your breath.

It was also early in the morning, which meant it was very possible to walk directly off the face of the mountain if you were unfamiliar with the path. This is why the girl decided to choose an empty square just outside the quarters they were staying in to train in rather than the formal training grounds.

She had clapped a few lanterns out of the cracks between things and had set them just high enough to light the snow-dusted ground, but not high enough to incur the wrath of any light sleepers.

“You,” the sword began, his words still slurred by sleep, “are the dumbest fucker I’ve ever met.”

“It’s training,” the girl snapped.

“It’s fuck-all in the morning.”

“You’re fuck-all in the morning,” the girl said, raising her chin. “I just got you all sharp and polished, and now you’re complaining like a little bitch.” She paused, then, for emphasis, she repeated, “Teensy, tiny, whiny bitch.”

“Fuck you,” the sword grumbled, very aware that there was no way he was turning down such a taunt and was thereby obligated to join in.

They might have hated each other, but they were both rogue cultivators in their own right. While training might have been a regimen for prim-and-proper cultivators that wore blazing sigils on their backs, the girl and the sword were in that uncanny valley between delinquent, super-powered traveller, and godly disciple.

It was a very unique valley. It was the sort of valley that that housed brambles and briars and all sorts of sharp, thorny plants that looked like they could kill you and actually could. It had sloping cliffs that could and would trip you over its edges, and if you were lucky, or if you happened to be particularly skilled at inventing life-saving techniques on the fly, you could perhaps propel yourself over the infinite chasm of insanity-fueled endeavours. Then you could take a nice rest by the metaphorical stream of consciousness, which was not so much a stream as much as a raging river of unanswered whys and hows and the like.

It was a pleasant place if you were crazy.

“You always wake up early,” said the girl. She stretched out her limbs like the god had taught her, frowning in disapproval as she watched the sword dance his own vessel from hand to hand. “And then you just pass out here.”

“Snow is an abomination,” the sword declared. “Dark early, dark late, dark all the time. How’s anyone supposed to tell what time of day it is?”

“Determination,” the girl answered, determinedly.

“Bull-headed dumbass,” muttered the sword, who was genuinely upset.

They trained separately for a while. The girl practiced breathing, which truly sounds like an excellent
use of time out of context, while the sword handled his vessel absentmindedly.

In and out. Swish, swish.

The girl lost her patience quickly. “Stop that,” she snapped to the sword, who looked at her with all the ease of someone who has never taken any seriously, and who had no plans of starting now. “If you’re going to hog the sword, at least do it properly.”

“Oh, so we’re forgetting whose sword it was originally,” said the sword.

“And we’re forgetting who sucked so bad they got shanked on their own sword,” the girl fired back.

The sword harrumphed. “If you’re going to be such a bitch about it, then have fun watching me twirl this fancy hunk of metal.” Then he made a show of juggling the blade between his fingers, dancing it early-gratingly across his own ebony-turned skin, all while smiling like a thousand knives.

It might have been frightening if the girl had not killed him once before. “Pass it here,” she demanded.

“But I’m having so much fun.”

“I said, pass it here.”

“If you insist,” the sword said, quite nastily, “then go ahead and catch.”

In one swift motion, he hurled the sword at the girl with intention, and said intention was to skewer her. However, a common trait shared by all things made of meat and bone that could potentially fit on wooden sticks between flavourful and colourful vegetables is that nobody really wants to be the food. They would much rather appreciate it.

As such, the girl stepped to the side in a motion equally as swift. She performed a maneuver that we will call the Step-And-Grab for clarity’s sake. The real name is four ancient characters long, takes too long to write, and alludes to a myth about a hero with eight arms wieldling eight blades or something just as dramatic.

The Step-And-Grab consists of three steps:

One: wait for the sword to be thrown at you. This first step typically removes the Step-And-grab from most combat situations, as normal people with normal critical thinking skills will realize that throwing is a synonym for disarming yourself, which, as you might be able to tell, is not a good idea when your opponent has given you reason to draw a pointy stick in the first place.

Two: step to the side. Be quick about it. Try not to dilly-dally. Speed is very important, as the alternative will have you dead, which you will want to avoid.

Three: grab. Preferably the hilt and not the blade, but depending on how good your hand-eye coordination is, the luxury of choice is mostly lost.

There is no fourth step, but the girl found that she was exceptionally skilled at the Step-And-grab. Her small figure meant less to aim at, her temper meant whoever had the audacity to throw any sharp objects at her would be shaking or at least hesitant, and her prowess at spotting the cracks between things meant it was child’s play to watch the air fracture, predict where it was going to break next, and stick out a single calloused hand to snap it shut.

She caught the hilt, spun it around, and executed Fourth Step: Flourish with all the vigor and pride of
a young disciple.

“Sucks to suck,” she said smugly, fitting the palm of her hand snugly against the guard.

The sword narrowed his eyes. “What a cute trick,” he said. “It must be oh so difficult to catch a sword.”

“Not for me,” said the girl. “Would be for you.”

“Would not,” said the sword, because the rebuttal of no you transcends both space and time.

Something you must understand about children, especially rivals who toe the line between ally and enemy, is that provocation is a declaration of war. Look them in the eye and swear to stitch their words to their lips, or plaster it over their face.

“You want to test that?” the girl asked, already cranking her arm back.

Magic tricks are a wonder to behold, especially when the objects move fast. Cards, daggers, people; no matter how substantial the subjects are, sleight of hand works faster.

It is speculated that first performing magicians were failed apprentices of swordsmen. Rather than lacking in stamina or skill, they excelled in wit and mischief, which garnered a fair amount of suspicion simply because their smiles were sharper than others.

The girl, unfortunately, would not make a good magician simply because she lacks patience. The sword might be a good candidate, but all the hired hands who had been strapped to a spinning wheel complained that the glint in his eyes was just as terrifying as the daggers that embedded themselves mere hairs away from opening up cuts.

They both, however, were terrific swordsmen, in the archaic sense of the word.

The girl’s hands were quick. She learned from one of the best. Her hands were small and toughened by crushing rocks beneath her knuckles. Crack, crack, went the world, and she happily told them, “Thank you very much; now, if you could make this arrogant bastard bleed a bit, I’d appreciate it very much.”

And the cracks really did try their best. They splintered in just the right way, with no wasted effort, in order to guide the blade along the right trajectory.

The sword, however, had golden sentences that crept up his arms and down his legs and wrapped around his neck like an unfortunate collar of sorts. His body had been honed by reflexes of taking on far more than he could chew and somehow getting away with it, and The Truth also wanted to avoid being shattered to pieces if possible.

So if he moved faster, or if little flashes of light accompanied his shuffling feet, then you know exactly who to blame.

Watch closely, now. See that black blade currently being manhandled? Its name is Jiangzai, and it was beginning to get awfully confused.

“Open a new one in him,” his shorter master said.

“Gut her,” said his other master.

Whatever spiritual powers it originally possessed had been sucked out and shaped into an individual
who shared its name. All that remained were a few basic functions, such as obeying simple commands in the absence of its spirit, and burning the hands of any unworthy wielders.

It was like a house that had been outfitted with every sort of fancy, smart device that would be invented in a few thousand years. And the girl and the sword were running around the halls, pressing every button in different ways.

So the blade was getting fed up. It refused to be the only one in the group who contributed anything useful.

“Fine,” it decided, reaching the end of its rope. “How about we compromise? Instead of killing anyone, we invent a new style of wielding that involves the synchronizing of emotions and intentions, thereby making everyone happy and powerful.”

It came out more like: “I’m fed up with you idiots and you don’t have a choice. It’s this or the naughty corner, and I don’t have a naughty corner available, so you’re working together if it’s the last thing I do.”

And it was the last thing it did. The lingering spiritual energy that tickled at both their hands grabbed their wrists with a grip that would never let go, thereby tying them together for the rest of eternity.

It sounded very romantic. Neither of them thought it was romantic in the slightest.

But that thought would come later: currently, they were too busy reining in a rain of orbs of inky darkness that were all too happy to slash and burn like acid, and that was new, Jiangzai never had that sort of ability, did it?

There was screaming involved. There was a great deal of panic. Fortunately, the only collateral damage was a shoddy cart that was going to be dismantled fashioned into little stools. The disciples of the Unclean Realm certainly noticed a few white splotches were shadows had eaten up all the colour, but they wisely remained silent.

The girl and the sword were confused. This meant more experimentation, because that was a cool thing that just happened, and it was a separate strand from spiritual energy or anything of the like, which warranted their undivided attention.

This style would be called Empathy Assimilation in a few centuries. Its official name was never used by the founders, who simply defaulted to calling out, “Time to die!”

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A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO DOING THAT WEIRD THING THAT MAKES ALL THE SHADOWS GO CRAZY

1. Find a blade. Develop its spirit. I don’t know how to really do that, but maybe if you ask a god or a really powerful cultivator, they can do it for you.
2. Focus really hard on what you want to do. Your sword spirit needs to think the same thoughts. Obviously, it kind of sucks if they’re an asshole, but chances are you’ll be fighting someone and both of you don’t want to die, so just focus on not dying. Or murder. It’s two sides of the same coin.
3. Make the shadows do weird things. Just do it. I don’t know how. Yelling out catchphrases seems to work? Or maybe if you just scream really loud.
4. Make the shadows do weird things again, but this time, even crazier. It gets more powerful every time you use it, I think.

5. WIN. Nobody else knows how to do it, so that means you win!!

Hanguang-Jun,

Sorry for the sudden letter, but I really wanted to tell you that I think I might’ve come up with a new sword form!!

I’m not sure how many people would be able to use it, since you need a sword spirit and a pretty special sword. But you sort of toss the sword around and fight together, and when you really get into it, you can drop shadows on people and suck all their energy out! Even Fuxing had to sleep for three days to get all his energy back.

I don’t think it’s a cultivation technique, so there’s no spiritual energy required. In fact, I think all you really need to start is a special gem, probably a core of some sort, and if you forge it into a sword, you might be able to get some pretty cool results.

That’s all I wanted to say! We’re in the Unclean Realm right now, and Sect Leader Nie has some things to tell us. It’s about Jin Guanyao. I’ll get back to you once I’ve figured out exactly what’s going on.

Stay safe,
Wei Chengfeng

JIN GUANGYAO IS A ROYAL ASSHOLE.

I mean, we talked about him before, but Sect Leader Nie gave us more details today. I don’t trust everything he said, considering Jin Guanyao killed Chifeng-Zun, but a liar is a liar, and a murderer is a murderer, and sure, there are a lot of sides to a story, but if the overall message is I AM A MURDERER, then it’s not a good story.

Xue Yang has been remembering some things, which is actually kind of good. He pointed out a lot of Sect Leader Nie’s lies about Jin Guanyao’s personality. Out of those three—Jin Guanyao, Nie Huaisang, and Xue Yang—none of them are trustworthy, but Xue Yang’s at least the most trustworthy.

What the hell!! What has the world come to!!

Anyway.

Apparently Xue Yang got is courtesy name, Chengmei, from Jin Guanyao. And Jin Guanyao wanted him to stay out of trouble and do all his evil things quietly. Which is obviously evil, because then all the evil stuff happens while everyone’s unaware, but also sort of nice, because if they had both tried a bit harder, maybe they wouldn’t be so evil.
Evil originates from the heart. So does good. The heart’s a dumb thing. But it’s good to have one, anyway.

I think Zewu-Jun might be in danger, but I can’t be sure. If there’s one person who Jin Guangyao has a chance at genuinely trusting, it’s Zewu-Jun. Then again, there’s no guessing what a chronic liar would do if he’s backed into a corner.

So basically, we’re working with Sect Leader Nie now. He really is a snake, with his ends-justify-the-means thing and his helpless act. We can all see through it, so he doesn’t bother around us, but wow, is it annoying.

Tomorrow, I’ll try to get him to learn how to fan dance!! NO IS NOT AN ANSWER, YOU SNAKE.

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**A Dance To Victory And New Hobbies**

The phrase that started the conversation was a surprisingly restrained, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

And the reply, which was fashioned out of nothing but determination and self-taught steps, was a curt, “Doesn’t matter.”

The girl was, as previously mentioned, a self-taught in fan dancing. She had suddenly gained the ability to summon them out of the cracks between things after the case of the night-eating sun, but she had never found it to be particularly interesting.

She clapped them open. She clapped them shut. They made gurgling noises, like the tight bend of a river.

“Now then,” she said to the sect leader, who was beginning to look very dismayed, “let’s figure this out. You brought your fans, right?”

“Of course,” said the sect leader.

He made no move to reach for them.

“Then let’s figure this out,” the girl repeated, with emphasis.

The sect leader got the hint. Despairingly, he retrieved two of his favourite fans from his sleeves. They were both green, adorned with black and gold, and flaunted cheerful imagery of death and decay. He had always found the concept of death to be peaceful in art and terrifying in reality.

There was no reason for him to do anything she said, he thought to himself. Who was she to give him orders? Who did she think she was, strolling into the Unclean Realm and presenting herself as a paragon of virtue? Who did she think she was, to overcome all her struggles so nobly?

She even had the audacity to declare that he had no hobbies. No hobbies! How rude! True, but rude!

He had seriously considered having her killed when nobody was looking. That was before he learned that she was an incredibly competent cultivator with a strict sect of rules for morals. It
reminded him of a brother he had once.

So he entertained her. They were allies, he told himself. And all allies are disposable if you play them well enough. When everything was said and done, if needed, he could do away with her then.

He was beginning to grow less and less sure of himself. When the girl returned with a notorious criminal in tow, well on her way to finding forgiveness, he realized that she was too good of a person for him to ever comprehend. All he could do was throw her bait and hoped that she chased it.

Unfortunately, the girl had her own plans. Her life was a universe of its own. Everything seemed to spin around her in some way, and she latched on with such ferocity that things could only fall into her orbit.

“I’ve never fan danced before,” the sect leader tried.

“Cool,” said the girl. “First time for everything.”

He sputtered. “No, but—I don’t even know how to begin!”

“You got fans and feet,” the girl pointed out. “That’s how you begin.”

What she was unable to understand was his hesitance. Hesitance toward what, you may ask?

Well, in broad terms, it was a hesitance toward everything. A suspicion, if you wanted to call it that. It was the sort of feeling you get when you enroll yourself in a dance class, only to realize that everyone has years’ worth of experience, and that the only one making a fool of themselves is the bumbling idiot who can never manage to get the steps right.

Take that feeling and multiply it by a thousand. Then spread it evenly over a lifetime.

That was the sort of life the sect leader lived. There was a reason he was so cautious, and it was because he could not bear the thought of wandering through life blind.

Fan dancing had never entered his field of view. He was very much out of his depth, and he girl kept dragging him deeper.

“It’s fun,” she tried to convince him. “See, most people don’t know how to dance, especially with fans, so no matter how bad you are, they’ll think it’s impressive.”

“But,” said the sect leader. “I don’t have time.”

“Yes you do,” said the girl.

He would have continued arguing if not for the fact that she was giving him A Look. This strange, very weird look that he was not fond of. It was a look vacant of any ill intent, that was cocked to one side with innocent curiosity, that said, “Are you coming?”

Being left behind was almost as awful as dying.

The sect leader breathed. He felt his chest rise and fall, which was a very mundane but very real way of reminding him that life is something that must be lived.

There was nothing poetic about it. It was a fact. Not a kind fact, mind you, but all facts are written in reality, which makes them all cruel to begin with.

So he nodded. That was all.
It was enough. The girl beamed, light casting over her smile like the afternoon sun, which rained down from above and onto the glistening snow. It was blinding, and not just the snow. “Alright!” said the girl, victoriously. “Alright. Alright,” she repeated. “Okay. It’s going to be great. Just you wait. Just you fucking wait.”

The sect leader could wait. He had been waiting for a long time.

And, well, maybe it would be worth it. He certainly hoped so. Maybe brighter, too, if the girl insisted on being so brilliant and good all the time.

Only time would tell. And it did—but that, I’m afraid, is a story for another time.

The Other Side is a really, really weird place.

Today we met a lady of spring, or the Lady of Spring, or something like that. And the Maiden of Flowers, too. They were pretty, but they had the kind of eyes you see on people who know everything about you and might eat you if they were really, really hungry.

But they seemed nice enough. They really like me, which is kind of weird and making an uncomfortable pattern, but whatever. They were fine with Fuxing and Xue Yang, which is questionable taste, but it can’t be worse than mine, I guess.

I don’t like how they talk to me like they’ve met me before, because it doesn’t make sense. I’ve never met them! I don’t know what they want! Maybe I remind them of someone.

I think I know who.

PEPPERCORN IS EVIL!! PEPPERCORN IS SO EVIL!! IT MUST DIE IMMEDIATELY!! I WILL ERADICATE IT FROM THE FACE OF THE PLANET MYSELF!!

My tongue still burns. I can’t taste anything. This is all Xue Yang’s fault, and he knows it.

I will make him regret the day he was born.
“A-Qing?”

“A-Qing?”

“There’s Xue Yang?”

“I threw him in the river.”

“He... can’t swim.”

“Yeah, no shit. Why do you think I threw him in?”

“Is this about the peppercorn? It is, isn’t it? Look, it was my idea. I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would be so bad for your, er, tastes. Xue Yang’s just trying his best.”

“Whatever. Where is he?”

“I mean, I imagine he’s in the river. Downstream. Most likely unconscious.”

“Fine. Let’s go haul his ass back here.”

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I can’t tell how much Xue Yang remembers anymore.

Before, it was kind of obvious because he didn’t remember much, but he’s changed so much that I don’t know what he knows and doesn’t know anymore.

I think he might remember everything, or at least close to everything, but he isn’t acting like it. Is that even a good thing? I guess it has to be, since he hasn’t killed anyone since he woke up. That has to mean something, right?

Fuxing seems to think so. Speaking of Fuxing, he’s also been getting better since back then. I don’t know how to explain it, but he seems a bit more relaxed. At peace, maybe, or it could just be that he’s gotten used to this whole god thing.

I guess I’ll just have to wait and see.

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WEN QING-JIE IS BACK!!

It’s been so long since I saw her! I think it was at least two years ago? But it doesn’t matter because she’s back, and this time, she’s back for good!!

Fuxing told us that the reason she took so long was because her soul fractured after she died. I think he tried to fix it, but something went wrong, and all the pieces flew apart.

But we’re all stronger now! As soon as she managed to put herself together, we stitched her together and sang a few songs, and now she’s as good as new!! Without a body and as a spirit, but she’s here
for as long as she wants to be!!

I think she was happy to see Fuxing again. I sure hope she was proud of him. I know I am.

She stayed for a while, but then they started talking about the Ghost General, and then she said she needed to take care of some business. I don’t know what she’s planning, but I think it might involve explosions.

Wen Qing-jie said she was proud of me, too.

She said, “Thank you for taking care of him.”

And I said something like, “I didn’t take care of him. I just made sure he didn’t get killed. He took care of himself.”

Oh, and Xue Yang was there, too. He’s scared of Wen Qing-jie for some reason. I think he’s just scared of competent women. He must be scared half the time, travelling with us. He’s stupid that way.

But today was a good day! Fuxing even read us stories! He told us about the gods, and then about Lotus Pier and all the dumb things he did as a child.

I hope Wen Qing-jie comes back soon. I would like to speak with her again.

So.

I heard that the dungeons in Koi Tower exploded.

Nobody knows what happened, but people are blaming it on old talismans that were misplaced and accidentally activated.

I mean, it’s not like anyone’s going to blame it on the spirit of a lady who’s been dead for seven years now.

I think we’ll be seeing the Ghost General soon.

Wen Qionglin is such a nice person!!

I think I’ll call him Qionglin-gege. He won’t mind, right? He’s nice like that. He’s the polar opposite of his sister, but that just makes them even more powerful. Killing you with kindness and support! The Wen siblings! Hell yeah!

We went out for dinner, and nobody seemed to mind. It was one of those cities we’ve been to before, so they were perfectly fine with serving a ghost and a fierce corpse if Fuxing was the one hosting.

Xue Yang and I didn’t really say much. It didn’t feel right. It was their moment, you know? It
would’ve been rude to take it away from them.

I don’t know where they plan to go next, but they said they would definitely cross paths with us. I think they’re going to explore the world on their own terms, check out all the places they left behind, and settle down once everything’s alright again.

I wonder how they’ll react when they see the Burial Mounds.

Hanguang-Jun,

Let me get this one out right away: Wen Qing-jie and Wen Qionglin are okay!

I heard that you tried defending them all those years ago, but people killed them anyway. It turns out Wen Qing-jie can live pretty normally as a ghost now, and Wen Qionglin wasn’t actually dead! The Lanling Jin Sect was keeping him in their dungeons, probably to try and make him into their personal pet.

Lots of things wrong with Lanling Jin, I swear. Be careful around their people. We’ve met some of them, and some of them aren’t nice at all.

We came up with a plan to take Jin Guangyao down. I’ll write it on a separate talisman that’ll destroy this entire letter if it ends up in the wrong hands, so please reference that one for the details.

We’re not killing him. I don’t care what Sect Leader Nie says. Zewu-Jun doesn’t deserve that.

On a happier note, I really hope Zewu-Jun is doing well! Please tell him to get lots of sleep and drink lots of water. Xue Yang made a herbal remedy that might be relaxing for him, so I’ve attached it to this letter. I also added more peanuts, so feel free to share them however you like.

And to answer your question, I think Fuxing’s all good now, or at least as good as he’s going to get. Do you want to meet him? I think he’s ready. I think he’ll be okay. If that’s okay with you, I mean.

Please respond with an answer, and I’ll tell him then.

Best of luck,
Wei Chengfeng

If You’re Curious

The one and only time the girl forgot to read a letter was on the way to Mo Village.

It was an accident, and nothing more. She forgot. We all forget. What can you do?

You might be expecting something dramatic or awful to have come from it. In reality, the only thing that happened was the somewhat surprise entrance of a man we shall call the luminary.
Mundane, boring, mostly irrelevant, you might say.

“Well,” the girl would say, rather offended, “isn’t that all of life?”

Xue Yang asked a favour from us today.

He said something like, “There’s this person I want you to save.”

And then he said something like, “Life’s been a real bitch to him.”

And then he said, “Also, he knows about Jin Guangyao, so we should probably go help him out.”

I think Xue Yang has lost his mind.

It’s not a bad thing.

We’re headed to a place called Mo Village with some intel Sect Leader Nie gave us.

Hang on, Mo Xuanyu.

We’re coming.

MO XUANYU ACQUIRED!!

Back to Qinghe again, and this time, we’re putting things right!

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for your patience this last month! this chapter is uh. a bit longer than normal. so it took a while to write. i shuffled some stuff around, so current timeline shenanigans will be next chapter instead! thank you for understanding!

in case you couldn’t tell, breath of the wild was a huge inspiration was this chapter. there’s something about travelling the world, just doing whatever you want, knowing there’s some important duty you have to fulfill, but just having fun along the way regardless, that gets me every time. my brother’s failed attempts at trial of the sword on master mode were also fun to watch and served as good creative fodder.

also, the quote, “but being brave did not mean you were not scared. being brave meant you were scared, really scared, badly scared, and you did the right thing anyway” is from neil gaiman’s coraline, one of my favourite books of all time.
AND!!! more fanart!! here's beautiful dumb god fuxing being all pretty and shiny and desperately praying that everything will turn out alright! thank you so much!!

if you have any questions, feel free to throw them at me at my curiouscat!

and as always, here's my twitter!
"Perhaps, by forgiving them, you can come to forgive yourself."

"But if I forgive them... what does that make everything I've done up to now?"

"The first step toward moving on."

— *The House in Fata Morgana*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’ll catch you.”

“Um, not to be rude or anything, but I can barely hear you from up here, and I’m a little worried that you just said, ‘I’ll catch you’ when I’m pretty sure the impact of my landing on anything will result in the gruesome and painful deaths for all parties involved, and you know, things gain speed when they fall, and even though I’m not very fast, well, the nature of the world rules us all, and I’m certainly not exempt from that rule, and, um, I know you’re very strong and very capable, but neither are you, or Fuxing, or even Hanguang-Jun, for the matter, but I think Xue Yang might actually be an exception since he isn’t corporeal, and—”

“I’ll catch you.”

“Oh,” says Mo Xuanyu, rather weakly, “I heard right.”

Currently, the situation looks something like this:

The Other Side is a very strange place. That’s been well established through their brief yet, uh, highly varied adventure through planes of existence that are so utterly nonsensical that it’s a miracle reality somehow pulled itself together to make a road surrounded by wisteria that never ends, a forest that goes incredibly far out of its way to kill you, another forest that can’t seem to make up its mind about what season it is, and on and on the list goes.

This waterfall is the most normal thing they’ve come across by far. In fact, it almost looks entirely normal. Clear waters that cascade down into crushing darkness, two moons in the sky, glass fracturing all around them, as if the world can’t hold onto itself anymore—very normal.
Yufeng-Zhe waves her hands from the bottom. “It’ll be fine,” she yells, her voice barely audible over the thrum of pounding water. “Things like reality don’t work too well here,” she says. “I’ll catch you! Promise!”

And, well, when Yufeng-Zhe makes promises, they don’t ever break, do they?

Mo Xuanyu breathes in deeply. He holds his hands over his chest. “Then,” he says, voice cracking, “I’m jumping!”

“Yup,” Yufeng-Zhe agrees, which is a kind way of saying, okay, sure, so get on with it.

Shift, shift. That’s what Mo Xuanyu’s feet do. He peers down, goes a bit paler when he hears glass fracture even further, and jumps.

He doesn’t close his eyes because he wants to. It’s a bit difficult to keep them open when the wind’s hurtling past you so quickly your arms feel like they want to detach from your body. That’s probably a common feeling with throwing yourself off cliffs and whatnot.

For a few solid seconds, he falls. He’s been falling for a long time, now, and he isn’t particularly scared of what could happen.

Before, it was because nobody was there to catch him, and life was beginning to feel like more trouble than it was worth; now, he knows that Yufeng-Zhe couldn’t care less about reality or rules or fate, and if she says she’ll do something, then the very world will twist to make it true.

Mo Xuanyu falls, and suddenly, the wind that’s rushing past him just... stops.

Then it flips itself around, as if realizing it’s been going the wrong way, and pillows beneath his robes like a cloud of sorts. When he opens his eyes, his feet have just barely touched the ground, and Yufeng-Zhe’s giving him a half-proud, half-satisfied look, the one that cocks one brow up and puts her hands on her hips.

“There we go,” she says, patting his shoulder for good measure. “That wasn’t so bad, right?”
“Not as bad as I expected,” Mo Xuanyu admits.

Yufeng-Zhe beams. She keeps smiling as she leads Mo Xuanyu over to the edge of the water, which looks far less intimidating up close than from a realm and a half away, and grins cheerfully when she pushes him through the barrier.

It’s not long of a trip. In fact, once Mo Xuanyu stumbles underneath the water, it’s only a short walk back through a mirror world of sorts, where the ground is wet with water so clear they reflect the sky perfectly.

There’s a beam of light in the distance, wobbly and waving like a noodle. Or a flag. It’s more entertaining to imagine it as a noodle, though.

During that short walk, though, he fidgets. His feet slap the water beneath him, and he can’t help but notice how firmly but quietly Yufeng-Zhe walks.

“So,” he begins, “do you. Um. Come here often?”

And then he immediately wants to shove his fist in his mouth, because wow, Mo Xuanyu, you can write thousand page-long theories on harnessing the flow of the universe and nature in a method separate from cultivation that could revolutionize the study of talismans and arrays, but when you open your mouth, you spout the kind of stuff that gets you rightfully clocked in the face?

Luckily, Yufeng-Zhe takes the question in stride. “Sure I do,” she answers. “We have some allies here that we discuss plans with. Xue Yang likes restocking his stash here since everything grows everywhere if you look hard enough.”

“Um, his stash?”

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“Um, his stash?”

“Of the good stuff,” Yufeng-Zhe helpfully elaborates.

Yufeng-Zhe nods. “Makes stuff real flavourful without trying to burn your entire tongue off, which is nice.” Venomously, she adds, “Fucking Fuxing.”

Right. This is the part where Yufeng-Zhe starts muttering about all those times she’s had to suffer the tragedy that is their resident god’s highly questionable tastes (or lack thereof), and—yes, there it is, there she goes.

“Have I told you about the time with the peppercorn?” Yufeng-Zhe asks heatedly.

“I don’t think so,” Mo Xuanyu lies.

“So we all know Xue Yang’s a little bitch,” says Yufeng-Zhe.

“Um, you’ve mentioned that, I think.”

“Yeah? Good. Because this one time, we had just finished talks with Sect Leader Nie, and we were travelling to Lanling to make some noise to cover up the fact that he was feeding rumours about Jin Guangyao to the public, right, and I said, wow, I’m tired, and hungry, and I think I could use something warm now.” She pauses, then elaborates, “because it’s kind of cold up there during winter.”

“I see,” says Mo Xuanyu, because it’s polite.

“Then,” Yufeng-Zhe continues, visibly agitated, “Fuxing slaps on this bitch-ass smile and goes, how nice, great minds think alike, you know what, I’m in the mood for some warm stuff too, whatever. And he turns to Xue Yang, whispers something, and they both smile—you know the smile? The kind that makes you want to punch a person?”

Mo Xuanyu typically runs, but he thinks he gets the point. “Sure,” he supplies.

“Right! So Xue Yang runs off, and when he comes back, it’s with this big pot from god knows where, and he pours water in it, gets it boiling, cuts up some nice slices of meat and vegetables, you know, like lamb and beef and bok choy and napa cabbage, and I know it sounds really weird, but you have to trust me on this; it’s actually incredible, and you can split the pot into two halves, so obviously we shoved all the spicy stuff to Fuxing because he has a tongue that could kill demons, and we started throwing stuff in, and we even had these little bowls for sauces, and it’s really nice if
you throw some chopped spring onion to top off all that soy sauce and peanut sauce and vinegar, and —” She pauses again. “Where was I?”

“The pot,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“Oh, right! Thanks. So we split it up, and we’re having a grand old time, and Xue Yang goes, why don’t you go check on the jerky?” Another pause, then Yufeng-Zhe says, “I was drying jerky at the time. It’s a hobby.”


Yufeng-Zhe nods. “Flame talisman, actually. First one I made.”

Mo Xuanyu quickly tucks that into his brain for later. It’s obvious that Yufeng-Zhe’s incredibly talented with talismans, considering she’s the disciple of the cultivation world’s leading expert on talismans.

“So I go check on my jerky.” Yufeng-Zhe says. “And it’s drying just fine. I go back. I was gone for all of twenty seconds, and my asshole sword has this dumb smile on his face, so I say, the fuck did you do, and he goes, nothing, just stretching my cheeks a bit.”

“Cheeks don’t need much stretching,” Mo Xuanyu points out, trying to be helpful.

“Exactly!” agrees Yufeng-Zhe, rather viciously, though she could just be happy to have an ally, since Fuxing would’ve had to have seen this all happen. “So I go back to eating, because I can handle Xue Yang’s bullshit, and I find this nice piece of lamb, and I dip it in my sauce because I like a good punch of savoury stuff, and I put it all in my mouth, and everything just starts burning.”

Mo Xuanyu winces. “Um,” he begins, meek beyond measure, “metaphorically or literally?”

“Both,” spits Yufeng-Zhe, whose eyes are beginning to glint ominously considering they’re glossed over. “Because my tongue just implodes, and then I chase Xue Yang all the way to the river and throw him in.”
“So the burning was because of...”

“Collateral damage.”

Collateral damage doesn’t usually start fires unless someone happens to have something that had start said fires, he doesn’t say. Like, oh, maybe flame talismans. That would probably do it.

But Mo Xuanyu values what little of his dignity he’s managed to reclaim, so he just nods understandingly and keeps walking.

“You get along well with Xue Yang,” he eventually says, after Yufeng-Zhe’s worked out all the frustration in her system by cracking her knuckles. Yikes.

Yufeng-Zhe turns to him with a look of surprise. “You can tell?” she asks.

It’s an uncomfortable look to have directed his way, because it’s so different from all the scorn and hatred he’s received aplenty over the years. It makes him squirm, and before he knows it, he’s wringing his hands again.

“Um, a little,” he manages to say. “I only talked with Xue Yang a bit back in the day. Um, in Lanling. And he seemed pretty closed off. You know,” he finishes pathetically.

“I get it,” Yufeng-Zhe admits, which is even more surprising. She can’t seem to put it in words to start with, so she gestures in that lively way of hers, saying, “He tries to be so dramatic sometimes, but it’s just exhausting.”

“Oh, yes,” Mo Xuanyu agrees eagerly. “It’s much easier to just enjoy your hobbies and get on with life.”

They nod at each other, revelling in each other’s support and like-mindedness. The very fact that Mo Xuanyu can even do such a thing without being thrown back into that awful, awful shed is a miracle and a half.

From there on out, the walk is short. He almost misses the point where the boundary breaks, and they
stumble back home onto ground that doesn’t shift and skies that roll peacefully.

He rests his hand on the trunk of the tree they happily walked out of. It pulses warmly beneath his touch, almost like a knowing wink, before cooling and returning to its tree-like duties.

Curious. How do boundaries work, anyway? Could arrays open or close them?

Mo Xuanyu folds up that idea and stores it next to his reminder to ask about the flame array at a better time.

“Um, back to normal, I guess,” he declares, turning to face Yufeng-Zhe once more.

It’s nice to see Yufeng-Zhe back to her normal self, with her spring-green robes and golden flowers instead of bleeding eyes and shadow briars. She stretches, bringing her arms over her head both ways, and breathes out a deep sigh.

“No place like home,” she says, which is very fair.

They trot ahead and out of the trees. It’s colder here, in this place Mo Xuanyu can only assume to be Qinghe. It’s further north than he’s ever travelled.

He follows closely after Yufeng-Zhe, who greets the rest of their group with a huff. “There you are,” she says.

Xue Yang yawns. “Had me falling asleep waiting,” he says. Yufeng-Zhe glares at him, and he smiles like a knife.

Mo Xuanyu doesn’t think he’s really tired, but then again, this entire group is so strange and varied that it’s impossible to be sure of anything.

“We didn’t want to stress you out,” Fuxing explains, looking as divine and beautiful as always. “Everyone’s always comfortable around A-Qing, so we thought she’d be best.”
He puts on this little grin, and the entire world explodes into gold stars, and Mo Xuanyu needs to get a hold of himself now, before his traitorous tongue rambles on and makes him want to fall into a coma immediately.

Yufeng-Zhe grumbles something about how everyone else has the emotional intelligence of a brick. Xue Yang shrugs, probably understanding that he’s never cared much for emotions and isn’t going to start any time soon.

Hanguang-Jun retains the exact same expression as always. The only thing that differentiates him from a statue is the fact that he blinks, and there’s no way any mortal would be able to make someone look so damningly pretty.

Emotions, Mo Xuanyu, your stupid, stupid emotions!

“Thank you for waiting,” he says, as honestly as possible. He bows a bit before reminding himself that nobody here likes it when he prostrates himself, so he rights himself and settles for shuffling his feet.

“Of course,” says Fuxing, and in a shocking display of attempting to expel Mo Xuanyu’s soul from his sad, sad body, the god ruffles through his hair, laughing when he flushes all the way to his ears.

They turn to leave soon after, which is just great, because Mo Xuanyu can quietly keen at the very back of their jolly group and suffer Xue Yang’s pitiful glances with all the dignity he’s just lost.

Anyway.

They travel quickly and lightly. It’s always shocking to see how subtle their group can be when they aren’t, you know, singing songs to the heavens and declaring to the entire world that justice has come, the dawn has broken, everything will be alright if you just close your eyes...

It’s a nice feeling, though.

But Sect Leader Nie has apparently been working in secrecy for the past eight years, and Mo Xuanyu’s steps just don’t fall as lightly as the other’s.
“Um, about Sect Leader Nie,” he says, “how have you been working with him these past few years?”

Hanguang-Jun’s eyes slide silently to study Fuxing’s expression as the god brightens. It’s always a relief to know that even someone as powerful and good as the light-bearer can get lost in the face of, uh, all this. Which is a lot.

“Well,” begins Fuxing, rather cheerfully at that, “we haven’t done anything drastic yet. It’s just been setting up the groundwork, really.”

“Sect Leader Nie doesn’t like telling us what we’re doing,” Xue Yang adds.

“It’s because he’s scared we’ll tell on him,” says Yufeng-Zhe, brows furrowed in that eternally frustrated expression. “So he says, well, you could go here and do this, which is just an innocent request, because I’m capable of that.”

The next branch Yufeng-Zhe steps on meets the unfortunate fate of being crushed into tiny, sad splinters.

Mo Xuanyu stares at it for a while, feeling a powerful kind of camaraderie with the poor stick. Then he gathers his wits and asks, “What—what sort of requests?”

“Miracle-granting and processions to cover up clandestine meetings,” says Fuxing.

“A bit of prodding around to get allies and close off escape routes,” says Yufeng-Zhe.

“Night-hunts where some unfortunate cultivators disappear into thin air,” says Xue Yang.

That last one has Mo Xuanyu and Hanguang-Jun frowning, though it’s more gaping on the former’s part.

That doesn’t sound very impartial, or godlike, or any of the other adjectives that would normally describe a divine being.
Then again, Fuxing is anything but normal. He sighs a bit at Xue Yang’s blunt answer, which is actually a really bad way of putting it, since every single time Xue Yang shapes up an answer, it’s in the shape of a blade and accompanied by the sound of slicing.

Fun slicing, to be exact. Jokingly. Like the sort of stabbing that a semi-unhinged serial killer would throw at you, teasingly, to get you to loosen up.

“What Xue Yang means to say,” Fuxing elaborates helpfully, “is that it’s much easier to get answers out of people who are willing to answer.”

“We toss them into the Other Side, slap a metaphysical window between them and the Spectral Lady, and grab the answers off the ground once they’ve been reduced into terrified meat sacks,” Yufeng-Zhe elaborates even further.

That’s certainly a way to do things.

“Um,” says Mo Xuanyu, “I guess that’s fair enough.”

Yufeng-Zhe beams, then turns to declare that her actions had been perfectly sensible and logical, and that he’s just overreacting; what, so they can’t even take on the Winter Witch? How are they ever supposed to take down Jin Guangyao without any of the answers?

Then Xue Yang joins in, saying something about a recent mystery they’ve uncovered about dismembered body parts, which sounds positively dreadful but will most likely be a problem they’ll have to face soon.

And then the three of them—god, girl, and sword—are bickering away at where the other parts could be, and how they could be sealed, and how they could get them back without incurring the wrath of Jin Guangyao, which Mo Xuanyu is beginning to realize isn’t that big of a problem for them; it’s just that they’re not fond of the possibility of collateral damage.

It’s the equivalent of saying, “Yes, we’re perfectly fine with blowing up Koi Tower, but goodness. The debris. The shrapnel. The fire. Could you image the cleanup?”
That, Mo Xuanyu decides, is an accurate but horrifying train of thought for a group of semi-divine beings.

With nothing else to lose, Mo Xuanyu turns to Hanguang-Jun and tries on a smile. It curls a bit too much on one end and falls at the other. Great.

And, oh. He’s a handsome man, isn’t he? The embodiment of light and good and purity and all those virtues humans strive so desperately to achieve yet always fall flat in searching for—it’s all there, and it’s right here, in the form of a cultivator that apparently exchanges frequent correspondence with Yufeng-Zhe.

Mo Xuanyu takes a peek at Yufeng-Zhe. She doesn’t seem like the most eloquent penpal.

She would be a fun penpal to have, Mo Xuanyu thinks, a little sadly. If only their paths crossed sooner. Or, or… if only she was there at Koi Tower when things went wobbly.

Competence is a scary thing. But it doesn’t hurt to have competent friends.

“Um,” he starts, a chill run down his spine as honey-gold eyes turn to him, “What do you make of this situation, Hanguang-Jun?”

Hanguang-Jun studies him for a moment. What he finds, or what he comes to see, Mo Xuanyu will never know. All he can do is stand as straight as his spine will let him, brave these foreign waters, and pray that everything will end up alright.

“Troubling times are best faced together,” is all the revered light-bearer says.

“Of course,” Mo Xuanyu agrees quickly. Fidget, fidget. Make a good impression. “We have to stick together and build off each other’s strengths, and look after each other’s weaknesses, and when all’s said and done, I guess we could... have a nice dinner, um, with some good fruit and tea, and then we could talk about everything we’ve done and everywhere we’ve been, and oh no, I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

Hanguang-Jun blinks. It’s a gesture worth a thousand words, except saying that is a great disservice to him, because words and actions are two very different but very powerful things, and Hanguang-Jun is an entity made of actions that have no translation to people who don’t know his heart.

The whole package deal, and Mo Xuanyu just blurted the equivalent of foot-in-mouth to him.

“Oh no,” he says aloud, mourning his reputation, or whatever’s left of it.

“You,” Hanguang-Jun begins, startling Mo Xuanyu so bad he flinches into a tree, “are very similar to Yufeng-Zhe.”

Mo Xuanyu tries to get his mouth to cooperate. Unfortunately, his brain has officially turned in for the day, which is some awful luck considering it isn’t even noon yet.

What he manages to say is this: “Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

And that answer seems to satisfy the both of them.

It doesn’t take long for the godly trio to stop arguing. To be exact, it takes the whole of fifteen seconds, because that’s how long it takes for Hanguang-Jun to say, “We should make the best of daylight,” and for Fuxing to agree and separate Yufeng-Zhe’s hands from Xue Yang’s cheeks.

And they’re off again. This time, Yufeng-Zhe leads the way, and Xue Yang trots behind, undoubtedly because of some disagreement.

The trees pass. The clouds do, too. Distantly, the sound of crunching leaves repeats again, and again, and again. It’s a sound, despite its connotations, is soothing.

The fresh crinkle of fallen leaves. The reddening of the canopy above, and the shedding that follows after, making way for snows that will soon have to fall. So many sounds ringing out, clean and unbroken, heralding the way for a tomorrow that sounds much better than yesterday.

“Are we meeting with someone?” asks Mo Xuanyu.
“One of Huaisang’s disciples,” Fuxing answers curtly.

Said disciple is as unassuming as can be, and not in an insulting way.

Long black hair tied in a bun, a single gold hairpin, neat robes, a faint scar running from her ear to her jaw: all very normal.

It’s just surprising, to see a woman so bright and cheerful and average, who can slip in and out of shadows in a heartbeat, whose sleeves are weighed down with concealed weapons, all while a brilliant saber hangs by her side.

The only time her mask breaks is when she meets Hanguang-Jun’s icy gaze. She freezes, shock colouring her features, before clearing her throat and doing her best to avoid eye contact with their resident light-bearer for the duration of the trip.

“I would like to remind you that your cooperation is of great importance,” she says, respectfully but with an undeniable edge. She smiles, and it’s the kind of expression a butcher makes before chopping up some nice, fresh, high-quality meats to be sold at the local market.

Mo Xuanyu tries not to curl up into himself too much. He doesn’t want to be sold by the pound.

“Oh course,” Fuxing says, with the same sort of expression, but this one’s something a particularly sadistic healer who doesn’t care for numbing agents before stitching up bleeding gashes. “I’m sure we’ll be able to come to an excellent compromise.”

The word *compromise* makes the woman’s smile and hand twitch. Mo Xuanyu tries to sink into the ground with little success.

From there on out, the woman acts like a normal guide, nodding to the disciples who guard the main gate to the Unclean Realm, laughing good-naturedly when Mo Xuanyu pales at the sight of an entire cultivation sect built into the face of an enormous mountain, expertly reciting the history of this square, and those steps, and this market, and those buildings over there.

It’s actually very interesting. Mo Xuanyu listens intently while the others mutter among themselves, eyeing the disciples and how they move methodically to set up a festival that’ll only happen once both god and sect leader come to an agreement.
“Also,” the woman says, once they’ve all reached the doors to the Nie manor, “most of your companions have already arrived. They should be resting in their accommodations.”

With that, she smiles, bows, and turns around with a whip of her robes, something severe writing itself onto her face as her small figure disappears into the manor.

It’s almost as terrifying as the ghost that casually pops its head out of the ground before Mo Xuanyu’s feet. He swallows a scream and immediately feels faint.

“As about time,” says Wen Qing, rising out of the cobblestone path. “You just love taking your time, don’t you?”

“We were just having some fun,” Fuxing says, whining when Wen Qing grabs him by the ear and tugs. “Ow, ow! Really! The Spectral Lady was a horrible host!”

It’s a bit horrifying, watching a ghost and a god interact so casually without one trying to erase the other one from existence. Actually, now that Mo Xuanyu looks at Wen Qing a bit closer, she really doesn’t seem much like a ghost at all. Or even a spirit, for that matter.

Oh, she’s floating off the ground and has the ability to pass through physical things, but she can also speak by herself, give perfectly coherent answers, and muster up the power to lead Fuxing around by the ear and into the manor.

Is it a blessing or an anomaly? Regardless of what it is, it’s interesting, and Mo Xuanyu tucks yet another reminder at the back of his mind. Hopefully, he’ll actually get to them one day.

“Mo Xuanyu,” greets Wen Qing, with a nod of her head. “I hope Fuxing wasn’t too much of a brat to handle.”

Mo Xuanyu musters up half a brain to bow. He makes sure it’s nice and long and respectful, because Wen Qing is like Yufeng-Zhe but older and more experienced in the ways of the world, and that sort of competency is truly commendable, but also frightening.

“He kept me safe,” Mo Xuanyu answers honestly. “He has my thanks.”
Fuxing beams. “See?” he says to Wen Qing. “I can handle things just fine!”

“Thank you for keeping Fuxing safe,” Wen Qing immediately says to Hanguang-Jun. She ignores the god’s offended gasp. “I’ll be counting on you from now on.”

“Mn,” is Hanguang-Jun’s curt reply.

The two stare at each other for a short moment. Then they nod, having come to a silent agreement, invoking a cry of despair from Fuxing.

Mo Xuanyu feels that in his heart of hearts. How troubling it must be to be watched so carefully by such competent people. He can barely stand being watched by anyone, and now he’s surrounded by people who are all very kind and very supportive, but also capable of destroying the entire world and all the planes of existence that reside within it by accident if they all got a bit too excited, and, well, you know, it’s sort of like sleeping next to a knife all the time.

It’s a relief to be able to trot next to Xue Yang, who, not to be rude or anything, seems like the least capable in the group. Rather, it seems he harbours the same anxiety toward capable people as Mo Xuanyu. The camaraderie is a nice feeling.

“Has Wen Qing been travelling with you often?” he asks.

“I’ve seen her once before this,” answers the sword.

“Oh,” says Mo Xuanyu. “She must be busy, I suppose.”

Xue Yang mutters something like, “Busy blowing up Koi Tower’s dungeons and galavanting across Lanling,” but it’s too quiet to make out clearly. Mo Xuanyu happily speeds off, content to be ignorant in at least these violent, violent acts of, um, demolition.

The interior of the Nie manor is, for the most part, unassuming. It’s big and imposing and decorated with epics of past sect leaders and heroes and relics from wars long past, but in comparison to Koi Tower, it’s far less straining on the eyes.
Distantly, Mo Xuanyu wonders if they have a research department. That would be nice. If Sect Leader Nie truly covets intelligence as much as everyone says he does, then perhaps Mo Xuanyu can add himself to the list of competent people.

The halls are emptier, too. Quieter. It seems that most of the disciples are running their daily errands and duties, training and going on night-hunts and the such.

It’s nice to hear all the different steps from all the different people. There’s Yufeng-Zhe, who leads the group in strides as wide as her short stature will allow her, with the heavy landing of confident feet. There’s Xue Yang, who travels in long strides as well; he stalks quietly, carefully, but with all the confidence that the neck bleeds just as fine on one person as the next.

Then there’s Hanguang-Jun, who just... glides, sort of, and it’s an ethereal thing, to see a man molded by discipline and morals and moonlight. And, of course, there’s Fuxing, who keeps a surprisingly casual pace alongside the revered light-bearer, with half a skip in his step as he speaks to Wen Qing, like he knows very well that he’s a god, and his simple reaction is, “What about it?”

Oh, and Mo Xuanyu can hear the faint, almost imperceptible shuffling of people in the shadows, too.

Nobody’s foolish enough to leap out with a saber and try to do harm to any of them, since picking the wrong target could end in a rather spectacular splatter on the wall or entrails tossed all across this perfectly good hall, and that would be a waste of everyone’s time and a rude way to introduce them all to the insides of an unfortunate and headstrong disciple, right?

So it would be really, really bad if anyone tried to pick a fight right now.

“Um,” says Mo Xuanyu, because this really needs to be asked, “are all of you good friends with Sect Leader Nie?”

“Sure,” says Fuxing, cheerfully.

“I tolerate him because he has good food,” says Xue Yang.

“I’m not a huge fan of how he’s willing to lead people around to their deaths if it means getting his
revenge, but he’s kind of a nerd when you crack his shell, and he likes fans and good books, which makes for nice conversation, I guess,” says Yufeng-Zhe.

Silence. Fuxing’s expression twitches into something between surprised and exasperated, and his face can’t seem to decide what to do with itself.

“A-Qing,” he says, straining to keep his voice in sing-song, “you never told me you were that close with Huaisang.”

“It’s whatever,” is Yufeng-Zhe’s response.

Then she sniffs righteously and continues marching down the hall, leaving all of them to scurry after her, except for Wen Qing, who heaves a deep sigh and keeps pace beside her.

It’s a rather long walk to the main hall, which is unusual, but in character for the Qinghe Nie Sect. If anything, the stroll would be anything but relaxing when you have disciples smiling at you like they’re imagining what your head would look like rolling on the ground, and unseen figures whose shadows flicker in and out of your vision.

Sect Leader Nie has some, um, peculiar tastes when it comes to welcoming visitors, it seems.

“You’d better head in,” says Wen Qing, once they’ve reached a pair of tall, solid oak doors emblazoned with the golden beast sigil that looks like it could do a fine job of keeping all the whispers shut tight.

Or, you know. Screams. And it wouldn’t be difficult to wash away some blood of the cold, sleek tiles if need be.

Fuxing frowns. “You aren’t coming?” he asks.

“I’m not the one who’s been working with him for the past three years,” Wen Qing points out blandly. “Besides,” she continues, gesturing to a pair of servants who smile a bit too sharply to not be carrying concealed weapons, “while you’re rambling away in there, somebody needs to build up a divine celebration in Qinghe, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be any of you.”
“Wen Qing-jie will be just fine,” Yufeng-Zhe agrees, drawing out her words in a picture perfect display of exasperation. She exchanges a look with Wen Qing, who smiles something knowing and vicious, and the two turn their backs to each other to get done the duties they’ve chosen to shoulder. “Let’s just get this over with quickly so we can go eat.”

“If anything,” Wen Qing calls from over her shoulder, “A-Qing will surely bring things around.”

In a stunning display of power so immense that Mo Xuanyu feels his eyebrows singe, Yufeng-Zhe kicks opens the doors of the great hall at the same time Wen Qing summons a howling gale to thrust open a pair of equally as large doors leading to the courtyard.

All the disciples in the vicinity jump. Even the ones in the shadows. For a fleeting, stunning moment, everyone’s blood stops pumping, and all eyes flicker between two people who could bring the world to their knees with words alone.

Needless to say, the combined sound of doors being disrespected and women destroying emotional boundaries that keep men at bay almost convinces Mo Xuanyu that the stars would fall out of the sky if the combined voices of Wen Qing and Yufeng-Zhe told them to.

(Then again, Fuxing’s sort of living proof of that, so…)

“Oh god, what a headache,” Xue Yang grumbles.

“I think they’re very,” Mo Xuanyu begins, trying to find suitable synonyms for terrifying and powerful and incredible to aptly sum up his confused mind, which of course backfires dramatically and leads to his saying, “um, very cool.”

Xue Yang stares at him with all the fervor of someone who knows when the battle is lost and just wants to sleep. “That makes one of us,” he says.

“Oh,” Mo Xuanyu says weakly.

Fortunately, the rest of their doomed conversation is lost when a couple of disciples welcome them to the great hall, and it’s a pleasure to serve all of you, even if there are two more in your company than we were anticipating, and is that Hanguang-Jun, oh, well, I suppose we’ll just make do, I mean, welcome to Qinghe, Second Master Lan, we sincerely hope you enjoy your stay as we celebrate the
blessings of his divine majesty Fuxing, the god of prosperity and fortune, and don’t mind us, we’re just going to run and grab a few things, and then we can get started on our war council, which, uh, we sincerely hope you didn’t know about beforehand, because this makes things very awkward, and, just, you know, give us a moment.

Mo Xuanyu’s heart goes out to those disciples who have to deliver the news to Sect Leader Nie. Imagine planning out a clandestine meeting with your most powerful allies with the intention of usurping the most powerful cultivator in the land, only to have uninvited guests squirm their way in and happily declare themselves as in on it, too.

If your hands are already full, then it doesn’t help much to have another slew of swords dumped into them. In fact, that sounds rather dangerous, with all those sharp edges and all.

Once the disciples return, it’s with renewed smiles and eager beckoning.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” they say, serving tea with incredible steadiness given their previous dispositions. “Sect Leader Nie will be with you shortly. He sends his apologies for the delay.”

“Didn’t Wen Qing say he was waiting for us?” says Xue Yang, snorting into his cup.

“I think Hanguang-Jun might have scared him a bit,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“It’s not like he’s going to get stabbed,” Xue Yang retorts, flippantly gesturing to the sect leader’s vacant seat. “People with power are so paranoid,” he continues. “Control freaks, all of them. They fear the possibility of slipping so badly that they don’t realize all they’re doing by playing in the shadows is tripping into a long, long fall.”

Mo Xuanyu swallows. “Speaking from experience?” he asks.

“Oh, I never had power,” Xue Yang answers. His lips split into a cutting grin that curls upon a pointed canine, somewhat like a knife. Very similar to a knife. “And neither does Sect Leader Nie. It’s all about the illusion of power, and how you can play it up or down to your advantage.”

A convoluted game of chess, then. That’s what this is.
Mo Xuanyu doesn’t like chess too much. He’d rather spend his time working on his notes, or testing out some of his talismans, or tightening up that flame array, because fire is only helpful when it’s not burning you alive.

Surely he can put his skills to use. Then he won’t just be another well-worn piece on the board. He can be one of those slender fingers moving said pieces, though he would very much prefer to polish up everything before the tacticians make things into a complicated mess.

It’s just... so strange, even being here.

Lonely halls don’t mean much when you’ve got four of the world’s strongest people sitting a few paces away from you. Hidden blades don’t mean much when the boy next to you is cutting edges personified. Cold winds don’t mean much when you know they’re unravelling in the hands of a girl who could bring the world to a halt. Heavy silence doesn’t mean much when you know the man bearing winter on his shoulders could save the world ten times over without saying a word. Prophecies of destruction don’t mean much when there’s a god who smudges them out over good drink and food.

Tragedies don’t mean much when you’ve all been living one for a while, but things turned out alright, and now you’re just the you the world could’ve made you out to be if everyone had been a bit kinder a bit earlier.

Mo Xuanyu sits a little taller as the disciples usher in what sounds like wind chimes in early summer rain.

“Welcome,” says Sect Leader Nie, smiling thinly from behind a boundary of wood and paper painted with decay. “I’ve been waiting eagerly for this day.”

—So he says, but A-Qing is far from stupid.

Look at the dumb, tight smile on his face. That isn’t the expression of someone who knows he’s won and just needs to set the record straight. That’s the expression of someone who’s come prepared for a fight with the intention to win at all costs, and it’s so foolish and paranoid that it takes every fiber of A-Qing’s being not to yell for all of them to calm down immediately.
“Sect Leader Nie,” Fuxing greets, standing and bowing. The rest of them follow, with no shortage of exaggerated drama on Xue Yang’s part and nervous energy on Mo Xuanyu’s part, but it’s good to get the pleasantries out of the way.

Sect Leader Nie bows back, his fan clapped closed between his hands. “Hanguang-Jun,” he says. “What a surprise it is to see you here.”

“Surely extra strength doesn’t hurt,” says Fuxing, holding Sect Leader Nie’s icy smile with all the dignity of a god.

There’s a snake in that cold, cold smile. Luckily, A-Qing doesn’t give a shit about snakes, because no matter what her gut tells her, Sect Leader Nie isn’t a snake because snakes can’t talk, and A-Qing fears no enemy that speaks.

Before another passive-aggressive argument can spring forth from white teeth and perfect lips, A-Qing says, with all the intention in the world, “I told Hanguang-Jun about our plans.”

As expected, that drags Sect Leader Nie’s undivided attention onto herself. He tries for that empty, soul-crushing gaze for a short moment before reminding himself that A-Qing could literally not care less, and instead settles for a simple exhale.

Yeah, you idiot. Breathe. You feel that air in your lungs? That means you’re alive, and you’ll still be alive after Jin Guangyao gets thrown in prison, so if you’re really as good at planning ahead as you think you are, then take those perfectly good eyes of yours and look!

“Then I’ll trust in Wei Chengfeng’s ability,” he concedes, seating himself and flipping his fan open. “But,” he continues, and this part is obviously targeted toward a certain somebody, which is stupid, just call her out if you’re going to be so transparent, “please be cautious with your correspondence. If Jin Guangyao is to hear of our plans—”

“Yufeng-Zhe’s letters are equipped with talismans that will destroy all the contents of her writings if they should be intercepted,” says Hanguang-Jun.

A-Qing beams. That’s awfully kind of Hanguang-Jun to back her up so readily, and she really hopes they’ll be able to trust each other’s backs and Fuxing to each other going on from now on.
“I’m not stupid,” she says simply, falling back onto her seat with a huff. “I can manage an immolation talisman just fine.”

“A what talisman,” says Fuxing.

“None of your business,” A-Qing snaps, because she can experiment with talismans on her own without needing any supervision. She’s a goddamn capable adult, and she’ll be damned if she doesn’t help these idiots get their heads out of their asses.

“No matter,” says Sect Leader Nie, brushing up his knowing smile. “If that matter’s sorted, then we should move on to today’s topic at hand.”

That’s a neat way to say can we just decide to make Jin Guangyao’s death slow and painful and miserable because I hate him very, very much.

“Let’s come to an agreement,” he says, “on how to eliminate the Chief Cultivator from the equation.”

A-Qing frowns. Eliminate. That’s a bad word. He might as well have said murder. In fact, she’s kind of angry he didn’t, because that is exactly what’s written all over his face.

This is also what she voices, because somebody here needs to speak their mind, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be anyone else.

Sect Leader Nie’s expression stays as crisp and as clean as usual. He almost preens, which is an unfortunate reaction to wanting to lop off someone’s fingers one by one and stare disapprovingly as they bleed.

“Then I’ll be blunt,” he says. “It’s quite obvious that once Jin Guangyao’s secrets are spilled, he’ll retaliate in a fashion we can only describe as desperate.” A nasty edge crawls into his smile, pulling up a little too sharply at the edges. “Like a wailing child, if you will,” he muses to himself. “Killing him would be, as you can imagine, the most productive way forward.”

Those words sound so familiar that A-Qing can’t help but peek at Xue Yang in the corner of her eye. He meets her gaze with a single brow raised in amusement.
What sort of bad luck does it take for the exact same introspective piece to have to hit two people A-Qing knows?

“Now, hang on a moment,” says Fuxing, as the ringleader of their jolly group. The god’s putting on a valiant effort to combat Sect Leader Nie’s snake-ness with his own sweet, honey-gold demeanor, and it’s so sticky and sickly that A-Qing’s nose wrinkles. “I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” he points out, which is fair. “We’ve been laying out the groundwork for a few years now. How do we build off of it?”

In classic mastermind fashion, Sect Leader Nie says, “I’m so glad you asked.”

And then he proceeds to lay down what sounds like the most fun A-Qing’s going to have in ages.

It works.

I just—works. It’s a good thing he has so many outlandishly powerful people at his disposal, because otherwise this plan would be way more convoluted and involve way more innocent, unaware bystanders who deserve to live life without getting dragged into one of the cultivation world’s greatest scandals.

It’s a good thing A-Qing spent all that time telling Sect Leader Nie about all their adventures, because it’s hard for any master puppeteer to hear the words and then we saw a dragon and not think, wow, a dragon followed immediately by hey, that’s pretty handy.

The whole plan is definitely on another tier of crazy, and it might just work, because that’s the thing with people who are clearly and utterly out of their minds: everyone else is so stuck inside their own minds that they couldn’t possibly fathom anything as reckless as this.

There are a few things that A-Qing doesn’t get, or doesn’t totally agree with. It’s almost impossible to imagine that Sect Leader Nie wants to wait another five years—five years! Five! That’s a whole hand’s worth of fingers, and one hand can do a lot, like stab someone!

But A-Qing has long since known that he’s a paranoid person who puts as much trust in himself as he does others, which, well, isn’t saying too much. Then again, it’s his strategy. A-Qing has to at least admit that the one with the best shot at winning the day is the one who’s been studying the board the longest and hardest.
Five years. What can they all do in five years?

A lot, A-Qing knows. And Sect Leader Nie agrees. Because A-Qing’s making a list in her head right now, and it’s looking something crazy.

- Dragons. How do you even convince a dragon to do anything? Talk to it in the most respectful voice you can muster and pray that it can’t smell your lies? And how do you convince a dragon to “benignly terrify” some innocent civilians? That’s a long way to go just to spread some rumours. Then again, it sounds fun, so it’s worth a try.
- Of course Jiang Chenyi has contacts. She has contacts for as far as the earth stretches, and then her influence starts sprinting across water and over ravines. She could destroy a small country by ruining its economy and whispering in the ears of some braindead men to get them to throw themselves against each other’s swords.
- And of course Mie Yu knows Sect Leader Nie. Her father probably raised hell here in the Unclean Realm. She has an accidental group of murder-hardened mercenaries at her beck and call, and who knows where her skewed moral compass will lead her? Probably to cooperate with Sect Leader Nie in exchange for forgiving her underlings’ crimes and letting them train as cultivators, but whatever.
- The entire world’s hard to change, and it won’t do for it to only start changing once the most prominent cultivator gets tossed down the metaphorical stairs. There are foundations that need to be built, people that need to be convinced, checks and balances that need to be put into place. It sounds like one hell of a political nightmare, and Sect Leader Nie can go crazy with that kind of stuff, because A-Qing’s always hated politics, and Fuxing’s smart enough to read between the lines.
- Five. Years. Five years! That’s so long! Anything can happen in five years. People die, people betray each other, and all that awful business. Sect Leader Nie’s taking one hell of a gamble.
- Five years. It doesn’t make sense, not with all the allies they have. Maybe one or two years, but not five.
- He’s just nervous.
- He’s anxious, and paranoid, and trusts nobody, not even himself. He says five years because he’s planned for three at maximum and needs another two to figure himself out and where he’ll be in the power vacuum that’ll be left in Gold Snake Man’s place. He could out himself as the brilliant mastermind, or he could sink back into his helpless persona and smile meekly for the rest of his life.
- God, that sounds like hell. Sect Leader Nie, you idiot.

“I think you’re underestimating dragons,” is what A-Qing decides to say.

She’ll have the chance to talk to him later and pry open all his troubles later.

Sect Leader Nie raises a single brow. “No,” he says. “I think I’m estimating your abilities quite right.”
It’s flattering to know that he believes A-Qing could tie knots out of a dragon, but reality’s kind of a dick, and fire-breathing serpents the length of valleys don’t take too well to tiny meat sacks thumping their way into their nice, private walks.

“Dragons are picky things,” A-Qing says.

“Aren’t we all?” is Sect Leader Nie’s response.

“You’ve got some serious guts, picking a dragon of all things.”

“I think you’re a little too caught up on the dragon.”

“That’s because it’s a dragon,” A-Qing tries to explain. She looks to Fuxing for support and instead finds him deep in thought, or as deep into his mess of a brain he can manage. “They breathe fire, which reacts like water but burns all the same, except when they get angry, it’s more like they rain down devastation upon mortals who dare challenge their almighty grace.”

Silence from the peanut gallery.

“Fuxing,” she prompts.

Fuxing blinks, then looks up. He doesn’t bother taking his hand away from his chin, presumably because he’s busy breaking down each and every part of Sect Leader Nie’s plan that sounds a bit too unethical or manipulative or just balls to the wall crazy.

Actually, that last part is A-Qing’s. Whatever.

“It’s doable,” he says. Unhelpfully, A-Qing might add. Then he hums to himself as if validating the point, and promptly returns to wandering the recesses of his mind.

“Your god believes it possible,” Sect Leader Nie says. “That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“Believes it possible doesn’t mean it’s actually possible,” Mo Xuanyu points out, from where he’s
sitting awkwardly next to Xue Yang. The boy flushes when everyone turns to look at him, and bless his heart, because he wrings his hands and squirms but manages to stutter out, “I—I just think that, um, there are better ways to... to seal things away. Other than talismans, that is.” For good measure, he adds a quiet, “Um.”

“Do the impossible,” Sect Leader Nie says.

“Oh, I defected from Yunmeng Jiang a while ago,” Fuxing says, casual and carefree as ever. “So it’s more of a motto for me than a mantra.”

“I’d like to get back to the dragon,” A-Qing says loudly.

“I have some arrays that might be able to seal away tremendous evil,” says Mo Xuanyu.

It’s a rapid-fire back-and-forth, that’s what it is. Even Mo Xuanyu has gotten caught up in their nonsense, and he’s holding his ground.

Sect Leader Nie’s raises an eyebrow. “You’ll have to be more specific,” he says.

“I mean,” Mo Xuanyu begins, wincing a little under Sect Leader Nie’s frosty stare, “I heard something about body parts, and if they’re that dangerous, it’ll be awful when you reunite them.”

“Yes,” says Sect Leader Nie.

“Okay,” is Mo Xuanyu’s response, a little hesitant and a lot confused, presumably because nobody should be that calm when told about reassembled limbs that won’t be in the best of moods once you slap them together. “So,” Mo Xuanyu begins again, “if the parts are so resentful to be dangerous on their own, wouldn’t it be much safer to expel the soul out of all of them individually?”

Which would be a good idea, except that’s a weird look on Sect Leader Nie’s face, and he’s gripping his fan a tad too hard, and he should really learn how to honestly say yes or no, because A-Qing’s had to deal with men who can’t make heads or tails of their feelings for what feels like a life and a half and she doesn’t think she’ll ever be done.
“I would prefer not to,” says Sect Leader Nie, because he’s stupid like that.

Mo Xuanyu’s brain works hard to put the pieces together. Whatever conclusion he arrives at, his brows furrow, and he crosses his arms. “Okay,” he says, slowly. “Then... you can keep them subdued as you collect them, and then—”

He cuts off mid-sentence. What he says next makes A-Qing start appealing to the heavens for more friends like Mo Xuanyu, who know their emotions well enough to say what they mean when they think it.

“Could the goal be to interrogate the corpse?” he asks.

Sect Leader Nie is silent for a while. “Yes,” he says, and it’s like he’s scraping all the bone off his teeth and leaving the dangly bits of nerve left to bite the neck of the man who wronged his family.

Newsflash: that doesn’t work too well when you don’t have anything to bite down with. Sect Leader Nie’s kind of dumb that way. He wants to hurt, he wants to be hurt, and he doesn’t want to be hurt at all. He’s hurting, he’s hurt, he’s all over the place and nowhere at once.

“Oh,” says Mo Xuanyu, a little surprised. “That isn’t too hard, is it? I, um... I heard Fuxing returned consciousness to a fierce corpse, once.”

“It’s a whole other level of resentful energy we’re dealing with,” says Fuxing.

“You could smite it out,” A-Qing suggests.

“Might be a bit difficult to talk to a pile of ash,” says Fuxing.

“You can’t save someone who’s already gone,” Xue Yang finishes, on a wonderfully positive note. “He’s got to go.”

Sect Leader Nie looks like he wants to say something. It really isn’t surprising at all when he doesn’t say anything.
And it turns out it doesn’t even matter, because Mo Xuanyu is a godsend and a bona fide genius who’s better than all of them combined. “Well,” he starts, in a tone of voice that silently says that they’re all wrong, “I’ve been working on a circuitous array that, with some more research, could potentially rearrange things how they were at a previous point in time.”

Silence. It takes a moment for all of them to process what just came out of his mouth, and then holy shit, is he talking about time travel?

Surprising, Hanguang-Jun is the first to speak up. “An array based off the serpent that consumes its own tail,” he says.

Mo Xuanyu brightens. “That’s right,” he confirms. “All is One, and One is All. Time isn’t linear; it’s a cycle that begins and ends at the same point.”

“That’s a very niche belief,” says Fuxing.

“The point is,” Mo Xuanyu continues, “it’s possible to force the cycle forward, where it begins again, and then push it to a certain point from there.”

Sect Leader Nie sits in silence. Then he sits in silence some more, and some more, until A-Qing wants to throttle the words out of him. It’s only then that he says, “You can bring him back?”

Mo Xuanyu winces. “Um,” he says, a bit awkwardly, “the body’s really easy to bring back, since death is just a physical ailment.”

That has to be the weirdest way of saying anything, ever. Then again, dragons. So he’s all clear.

“But,” Mo Xuanyu continues, and that’s never a promising way to continue anything, “the soul... it’s fragile. Um.” He eyes Fuxing nervously. “The more it gets thrown around, the more it breaks,” he says, delicately. “You see, time may not be linear, but the soul is embedded in space. You can turn back time, force it forward, but the damage remains. I think it’s a safety measure. You know. So when you’re reborn, you don’t make the same mistakes as last time.”

Silence falls, except this time, it’s a knife that cuts all their tongues clean off.
A-Qing really has no idea what to say. She’s seen some crazy bullshit in all her days of being a god’s disciple, but this definitely wins in terms of okay, divine intervention is weird but clearly a thing, since there’s this one guy in your party who’s divine intervention personified, also there might’ve been an entire pantheon of gods that existed some undisclosed time ago who really messed up and had to be wiped from existence, so it’s better to just go with the flow and fix things up even with all these things that don’t make sense in mortal eyes.

Fuxing nods, not nearly as solemnly as A-Qing expected. “That’s a very good way of putting it,” he says. “The body is a vessel for the soul, and the soul is a tether to your next life.”

“On the bright side,” says Mo Xuanyu, “a healthier body could heal the soul. It’d be slow, but it’s possible.”

This conversation is getting all shades of weird.

Personally, A-Qing doesn’t really like relying on incorporeal things like spirits and souls. You can’t just say, “Oh, well, I’ll do better in my next life” while there’s a whole pile of bodies behind you. People say that kind of stuff because they think that next life is later, and surely they’ll do better later, but then when later comes and becomes now, they don’t change at all.

So A-Qing says, as blandly as possible, “We’re going to bedrest a fierce corpse back to sanity.”

“When you put it like that,” Fuxing says, and stops, because there’s really nothing he can say.

Well, that’s a headache and a half. To be honest, A-Qing’s still skeptical about this whole bring a murder zombie back to life thing, but it would be insensitive to say that right in front of said murder zombie’s younger brother, so she tucks that thought away with the rest of her snarky comments and clears her throat.

“So the Trader,” she begins, and Xue Yang sighs.

As expected, their conversation about that one weird lady who walks in and out between realms whenever she feels like it goes nowhere. Nobody knows enough about her, but everyone knows something about her, and all those component parts are so wildly unrelated that it’s like they’re talking about five different people.
Obviously A-Qing’s words are the most convincing, given the fact that the Trader’s strangely attached to her. She says that dragging things from the Other Side to mess with reality is like asking a typhoon to only destroy specific plots of land and then go on its merry way. Xue Yang agrees, pointing out that the Trader’s dogs would love to bite the hand that feeds them, and the Trader doesn’t feed them since they’re undead, and they’d have to be idiots of the highest calibre to think that they can fool the being who’s been playing all of them for fools this entire time.

Fuxing says that hey, that’s a rather rude way of putting things, she’s been very honest and fair in all our transactions, and you can’t blame her for showing her hospitality in her own unique way.

Mo Xuanyu makes a comment along the lines of, well, now that you mention it, I remember reading something a bit strange at Lanling about a strange fable about the moon, and it talked about The Lady Who Walks the Moon and her Moonlit Hounds, and it also talked about how she was the main character in a heartbreaking tale of unrequited love and tragedy, and what the hell, that’s a lot to process all at once.

Sect Leader Nie continues and says that he’s done some research, and it seems that The Lady Who Walks the Moon isn’t too fond of divine beings with the exception of one curious goddess, except said goddess disappeared even earlier than the rest of the gods due to some feud of something.

“Okay, hang on,” A-Qing demands, viciously confused. “The Trader has a history with a god, and this history might be a tragic love story, and I’m supposed to be the one who pieces her heart back together because she happens to like me best?”

“When you put it like that,” says Sect Leader Nie, and nothing else.

Great. Wonderful.

The first thing A-Qing’s doing when all this blows over is set up a therapy office, because if this is the kind of nonsense she has to deal with for the rest of her life, she’d better be getting paid for it.

The conclusion is this: the Trader is all sorts of messed up, but at least she’s always willing to sign herself onto some contract work, so as long as they approach the situation really delicately and shove A-Qing in front as a meat shield should the Trader decide all their existences small and insignificant and null, everything should be just fine.
So everything’s going great, and by great, A-Qing means that nobody’s dead, dismembered, on fire, or permanently disfigured. They hammer the plan to pieces and build it up, looking for cracks wherever Sect Leader Nie has purposely left them.

He doesn’t so much as twitch when they point out oversights he made. They know that he knows that they know that he’s a slippery little snake. It’s a battle of intellect, though if you walked in on them all and tried to follow the conversation, you’d think they were running on two hours of sleep and spouting absolute gibberish.

Who needs codes when nobody understands what you’re talking about anyway? That’s a real brain play right there.

So when everything turns to shit the moment they start discussing what to do with Jin Guangyao, A-Qing braces herself for impact and downs the rest of her tea as she would alcohol, if she actually bothered to pour that poison into her body to begin with.

If she were four years younger and had the patience of a saint, she would most likely talk things through slowly but firmly, like Jiang Chenyi had taught her.

However.

“There’s no real benefit to killing him,” says Fuxing, his smile held rigidly in place. “If anything, we should imprison him and interrogate him once his allies all leave his side.”

“It’s rather bold to assume he won’t be plotting anything nefarious during that time,” says Sect Leader Nie, with a smile equally as rigid and ten times as cold. “He doesn’t deserve mercy, in my humble opinion.”

“And what exactly are you planning to do about the ensuing power vacuum?”

“Why, support Young Master Jin when he takes over as Sect Leader, of course. I would be more than willing to offer him some advice.”

“So you’ll finally show your face to the world, Huaisang?” says Fuxing, in a use of Sect Leader Nie’s first name that has all the wrong connotations.
“Everything in its own time, Wei-xiong,” says Sect Leader Nie, from behind his fan.

Fuxing and Sect Leader Nie hold that rapid-fire back and forth of conflicting wills for an impressively long time. A-Qing isn’t a fan of politics and all that garbage, but she can see a genius when she sees one. Or two. Whatever.

What matters is that Hanguang-Jun, who’s been an incredibly patient guest, says, “Those who seek vengeance drink a fatal poison, believing it to be closure.”

Sect Leader Nie’s smile twitches a little.

And then he says, “What could you possibly be implying, Hanguang-Jun?”

The conversation gets pretty nasty from there on out.

Fuxing says everything he means. He isn’t too hot about killing Jin Guangyao because he doesn’t want to be played as a puppet, but also because he doesn’t want to leave his nephew alone to deal with the crushing politics of the cultivation world. And it’s obvious why Hanguang-Jun doesn’t fancy the idea either; Zewu-Jun would be devastated, and the kindest hearts collapse in on themselves the easiest, especially when they’re so good at turning other people’s problems into a convoluted, nonsensical chain of cause-and-effect leading all the way back to themselves.

Interestingly enough, both Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun would probably kill Jin Guangyao if things took a turn for the worse. But hey: we’ve got to raise these kids into respectable adults, and if they have the ability to end it all without running someone through, why not do it?

That’s probably kind of what they’re thinking. Maybe. Who knows.

Meanwhile, Sect Leader Nie has to defend his stance, because if he doesn’t, all these years will have been for nothing, and then he’ll be a man of nothing, sitting on a throne of nothing, with absolutely nothing to live for and nothing to look forward to.

It kind of sucks for everyone.
A-Qing can’t say anything now. She knows their history, but she hasn’t lived it. What does she know about protecting the only remnants of a family she killed, being lost and alone in the world only to seek closure in the actions her hands can bring, or suffering under the weight of her own helplessness for years and years all because of the ambition of one man?

Xue Yang and Mo Xuanyu are silent. They definitely get the hint; they don’t have a place in this conversation, but they’re judging it anyway.

You see, there’s a phrase A-Qing really hates.

It goes something like, “You wouldn’t understand!”

And A-Qing would say: “Well, no shit, idiot!”

Nobody’s going to go through the exact same hell as someone else. That’s why the world sucks. It throws personalized demons at each and every person, and then it fucks off to have fun with its next victim. Life is hard, it’s awful if you’re alone, but the undeniable fact is that everyone still lives life, and just because they didn’t get cut in the exact same places doesn’t mean they don’t know how much it hurts to be cut.

So A-Qing, Xue Yang, and Mo Xuanyu might not understand, but empathy is something you feel when the pieces click because they’re similar.

Empathy wins, sympathy’s good too, and A-Qing’s going to destroy these idiots when she finds them alone.

The conference comes to a halt for the day. It doesn’t end on a high note, which both sides know isn’t good news, and Fuxing and Sect Leader Nie are probably spinning the wheels as fast as their intellectual, emotionally incompetent brains can manage.

Fuxing waves as he saunters off with Hanguang-Jun. He looks tired, but in a disappointed, exasperated sense.

“Don’t blow anything up,” Fuxing tells them, and then he’s gone to probably have a heart-to-heart
with the man all three of them want to tell him to just confess his undying feelings to.

Anyway.

A-Qing turns to Xue Yang and Mo Xuanyu.

“That sucked,” she says, and Xue Yang hums in agreement.

“I didn’t know it would get,” Mo Xuanyu begins, winces, and finishes, “um, so personal.”

“This entire mess is the mess it is because everybody took things personally,” Xue Yang blandly states. It’s just as unfortunate as it is honest.

They all agree to go find some lunch. Most of the disciples tiptoe around them. Apparently everyone’s in on it to some degree, or maybe they all know that Sect Leader Nie treats them delicately, and that’s bad news.

Fortunately, children are children, and the juniors probably don’t fear god or death, because they march right up to Xue Yang and immediately begin bombarding him with questions.

“You work for the god of luck, right?”

“Are you working with Sect Leader Nie?”

“How long are you staying? Are you guests disciples now?”

“Hey, are you hungry? I know where the dining hall is.”

That last one isn’t a question, but it’s the only one they answer.

A-Qing points at the girl whose head just barely peeks out from between the other disciples. She
“You. You know where the food is?”

“I sure do,” says the small disciple.

“Five points,” says A-Qing, inciting frustrated groans from all the other fun-sized, miniature to-be-cultivators. “If you want to shove your noses into our business, feed us first.”

The small disciple leads the way, holding her head up proudly. She doesn’t waste any time showing them around the grounds; she makes a beeline for the training ground, takes a narrow path into a rock garden, and herds the entire procession into a long hall fitted with plenty of tables and cushions.

Once they’re all seated and happily inhaling the last of their food, the questions start again, slowly at first, and then they get personal real quick.

A-Qing answers them because she can. Obviously she doesn’t reveal any sensitive information because she isn’t an idiot, but she’s not shy about letting them know about her past, or Xue Yang’s past, or their journey so far.

The reason is simple: everything sounds absolutely insane out of context.

“How did you two meet?” asks one of the disciples, gesturing at Xue Yang.

A-Qing considers this for a second. Then she says, “Somebody gutted him like a fish and left him to sun-dry on the side of the road, and I said *fuck cannibalism* and dragged him back with me.”

Xue Yang throws a teacup at her. She leans out of the way and hurls a spoon at his forehead. It connects, and he scowls viciously.

“And then he tried to gut me,” A-Qing continues, “but he was a bitch and got himself killed by Fuxing, like a bitch.”

“Thank you for the riveting story,” Xue Yang snarks, because he’s an asshole.
“Cannibalism is bad,” Mo Xuanyu adds, quite severely.

So it’s a weird one-way street where the juniors are giving their all to navigate the opposite way, but the road is just so utterly nonsensical that it’s impossible to tell if they’re actually going anywhere.

When they start directing their questions at Mo Xuanyu in an attempt to squeeze some answers out of the most innocent-looking member of their party, they’re instead met with a very serious discussion about the practice of array-drawing and how now is then and then is later, and how time is an illusion in which they’re all living the same days as they have in the past and in the future, and how circles are the ideal shape for connecting all points in time to the one you’re living now, which is why talismans could be replaced by circular arrays built into the foundations of cities and towns, since they have so much potential and could enhance the growth of crops, keep disease at bay, slow the effects of weathering, and ward off pests and monsters.

By the end, the juniors have even less of an idea of what’s going on than before, and they’ve more or less sworn off asking Mo Xuanyu any more questions.

Mo Xuanyu breathes a sigh of relief, because he’s a smart person who knows how and when to play others, and A-Qing is immensely impressed.

Now the question is: what do the vassals of a god of luck do when they’re bored out of their minds and find themselves babysitting a bunch of Qinghe Nie disciples?

“Ever heard of capture the flag?” A-Qing asks, and that’s probably where things start getting weird.

Have mistakes been made?

“Oh, how swift you are, Wind-Swept Maiden! You’re so fast that you can’t even catch up to me!”

“You piece of shit! Get over here so I can knock a hole in your head!”

“What’s that? Your tiny arms are too short to grab any flag?”
“Try saying that once I pull your intestines out through your mouth!”

“What a mouth she has! Do you hear that, my tiny servants?”

Nope. No mistakes have been made whatsoever, because the only mistake that exists right now is Xue Yang’s ugly, smirking face, and A-Qing’s going to do this world a favour by smiting it out of existence and into the twelfth dimension, because that’s where it belongs.

The current situation looks something like this:

Capture the flag is a simple game. Two sides, a boundary line, flags to the captured: it’s as straightforward as stabbing someone.

But how boring is it to just play on the ground? Where’s the thrill? The creativity? The epic moment when you realize that yes, you can in fact make that jump, and yes, your so-called friends are filthy traitors and deserve to have their faces smeared against the stone tiles?

A-Qing calls this ingenious training activity Capture the Flag but the Floor is Also Lava.

See, the good thing about Qinghe Nie is that their base of operations is built directly onto the side of a mountain. That means that while one team has to struggle against gravity, the other team has to struggle against the face of impending doom as they watch the ground approach their delicate, brittle bones with all the force of a sledgehammer to the gut.

So obviously A-Qing’s team is climbing up the rooftops while Xue Yang’s team is hurling themselves off them.

“Get him!” A-Qing cries to her tiny minions, who roar back and throw their tiny, wobbly, fleshy bodies toward Xue Yang.

Xue Yang grins. He waves the flag in the air, to which his own team cheers and hoots. Then he turns tail just in time to dodge an arrow that would’ve otherwise lodged itself in his throat.
Mo Xuanyu, who’s always had a better hold on his sanity than the rest of them, is acting as referee, nervously darting around and loudly narrating every action. He clutches a voice-amplifying talisman to his lips, and he’s really giving it his all, which only fuels the fire.

“And it appears that Jiangzai’s leaning back on his hit-and-run days,” declares Mo Xuanyu, from a few rooftops away. “But Yufeng-Zhe isn’t the first vassal for nothing! I’m sure she won’t give up!”

Don’t want to make good, kind Mo Xuanyu gasp and broadcast his wondering if you’re okay after taking the brunt of a particularly nasty fall to the entirety of the Qinghe Nie Sect? Then get up and make him cheer for you when you grab the flag instead, you heartless bastard!

A-Qing whistles a sharp high note that makes the air vibrate. The wind howls around her, catching her steps upward and springing her high, high into the air.

“Yufeng-Zhe, catch!” the small disciple shouts, tossing a bow and a full quiver up toward A-Qing.

Like the badass she is, A-Qing catches the bow mid-flip, kicks the quiver into a rapid spin, and slips into the cracks between things.

It’s always quiet where the cold runs deep. The world holds in stasis a few planes higher, where mortal souls look like quivering balls of light and spirits draw their own outlines in tiny little firecrackers.

A-Qing lowers herself gently onto a nearby watchtower.

The arrows—wood and bone and shiny like teeth—are so simple to push into place. A-Qing gives them a few nudges, blows a blistering cold breath through her teeth, and hops into reality once more.

“Yufeng-Zhe moves faster than the eye can see, and quieter than the choral of night!” Mo Xuanyu cries enthusiastically. “The blessed child of winds is just as deadly as a phenomenon of nature!”

Props to Mo Xuanyu for making A-Qing seem like some sort of deity. That would be cool.

It’s almost methodical, how the arrows drive themselves after Xue Yang in a tile-shattering pattern of
thunk, thunk, thunk. The disciples screech at the sudden turn of events and take cover by flipping onto balconies; Xue Yang flips himself out of the way, laughing all the way, and shouts, “What, we’re really doing this now?”

“Do you really want to know how many exploding talismans I have up my sleeves?” A-Qing sneers.

“More than me, admittedly,” says Xue Yang, who then proceeds to hurl a set of blood-red talismans at her.

Oh, so they really are doing this.

“Formation!” A-Qing shouts, and her disciples sweep their blades upward in a half-dome of glowing green sigils that ward away the attack.

With a sweep of her hand, the wind grabs the smoke by the neck and hurls it away. A-Qing claps her hands, flicks her wrists outward, and snatches two green fans from where they’ve appeared beside her palms, because gods may die, but their legacies don’t.

“You,” A-Qing says to the small disciple. “Come with me.”

The small disciple leaps over, a fine whitewood bow in her hands. “Are we going?” she asks, and A-Qing wants this girl to be promoted immediately to head disciple.

“We’re putting a hole between Xue Yang’s ugly eyes,” is A-Qing’s curt response.

“Cool,” says the small disciple. “I’m Nie Yequ. I’m kind of a crack shot. Can I do it?”

“Hell yeah,” says A-Qing, and then she grabs Nie Yequ around the waist, flips her fans open, and blasts upward in a torrent of cherry blossoms and cold gales.

The two of them shoot past their own team, Xue Yang’s team, and come to a halt between the foolish, earth-bound, mortal disciples and the sun above their heads.
“Once the first petal falls,” A-Qing begins, her voice resonating across the jagged, lonely mountains of Qinghe, “the rest are sure to follow!”

She thinks Xue Yang might be mouthing, oh shit. Good for him and all his tiny disciples.

They want to see what a god looks like, do they?

Then they’d better sit down, because A-Qing has a lot to show them.

The wind howls. It screams, sings, echoes in the narrow pathways, the sprawling training grounds, the silent halls; it slips through A-Qing’s teeth and makes her cheeks numb with cold. Her lips crack and bleed, and tastes like flowers. Like cherries.

“What can tarnish gold is nothing but gold itself. What can fell the gods is nothing but the gods themselves!”

Nie Yequ’s eyes widen as her whitewood bow begins to crack. She holds it out away from her, and the bark begins to peel; gold light breaks from deep within, where wood becomes bone and bone becomes darkness and darkness becomes stars and galaxies and time and space and the entire universe, as tiny and meaningless and incredible as it all is.

A single cherry blossom blooms at the tip of her bow. It crawls upward, somewhere toward the star of the south pole.


There’s no need to pray. She can just speak if she likes. No gods are listening up in the heavens. All the gods that exist are living and walking and dancing along with mortals, and it’s one hell of a show.

Nie Yequ notches an arrow. She takes a deep breath from her mouth, then holds it. “O goddess of reconciliation and travels,” she whispers, “grant me sight, grant me strength... I offer unto you the skin on my fingers that flies true with my aim, the blood of my enemies that I shed for you alone, the warmth of the hearth that awaits me at home... I ask for your blessing and protection.”
That’s two checkmarks right there. Blessing? A-Qing’s blessings are promises, but they’ll work just fine. Protection? Well, she’s got two good arms and legs for a reason, doesn’t she?

“What done and done,” she says, then turns back to the stunned disciples below them. “Love yourself,” she declares, “lest the world should fall at your feet because you tore it down for a heart you broke!”

The bow strains with Nie Yequ’s unfaltering aim, and the arrow tears away from her fingers.

Now, A-Qing doesn’t want to brag or anything, but she’s learned a few fancy tricks over the years. She’s been by Fuxing’s side for every little blessing he’s conjured up. She has some sharp eyes. Ergo: she knows how to play with fate, the world, whatever.

Call it a home brew if you will. A-Qing’s cooking up handmade blessings straight from her mortal hands, and they’re even better than some dumb divine intervention, because what has that ever done for anyone?

One arrow becomes two, two become four, and in a heartbeat, the clouds are fat and arrow-ladden, and all of it comes storming down on the gaping crowd.

A-Qing happily drops down onto the roof, snatches the flag from Xue Yang, who’s currently pinned down at every loose flap of clothing available.

“The lecture about collateral damage should be wonderful,” he says blandly.

“Nothing Mo Xuanyu can’t fix,” says A-Qing. “More stuff for him to test his arrays out on.”

Xue Yang raises a brow. “And Hanguang-Jun?” he asks.

“Uh,” says A-Qing.

Right. That might be a bit of a problem.
“Whatever,” she decides, handing the flag to Nie Yequ. Another disciple on their team hobbles over, hands her the opposing team’s flag, and then proceeds to pass out.

A-Qing nods at the still-smiling girl, and the small disciple grins with all her teeth, bows, and leaps back down to home base, whitewood bow still in hand.

The rest of the disciples slowly collect themselves. Loosened and broken shingles clatter as they push themselves to their feet. They mutter amongst themselves, groaning and rubbing at new bruises.

Nie Yequ really is a crack shot: her arrows didn’t so much as scratch actual flesh. They raised hell, smacking around debris and ricocheting everything off each other to hurl sizeable shunks of stone and ceramic into limbs and foreheads, but what are cultivators if not durable?

A-Qing sits down beside Xue Yang. In the distance, they hear Mo Xuanyu running after Nie Yequ, shouting, “And there she goes, home free! Young miss, what’s your name?”

There’s a bit of fumbling, and then a sharp voice says, “Nie Yequ!”

“Congratulations, Nie Yequ! It looks like you’ve really got this one in the bag!”

“Thanks! I’ll be ringing this bell, then!”

Xue Yang grunts. “That’s the bell talisman you made, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” A-Qing answers. She begins tearing the arrows from Xue Yang’s clothing. She wriggles a particularly stubborn one out, then says, “It’s supposed to do the whole package deal. You know. With the fireworks and the explosions and smoke and stuff.”

“And neither of us tested it,” says Xue Yang.

“Not even a little bit.”

“First time for everything.”
“Uh-huh.”

And they sit back, their hearts full with the knowledge that these disciples will be well-versed in the ways of crazy by the time they leave, and in a few moments, their features are illuminated by grey sunlight and the brilliant chain reaction of tiny little chemicals bouncing and colliding and bursting into vivid colour. Oh, there goes the smoke. And the explosions—yes, those certainly sound like explosions. There’s a lot more screaming than anticipated. Surely Mo Xuanyu and Nie Yequ and all the bystanders are alright. If they aren’t, they certainly don’t deserve to be partying it up in the Unclean Realm.

Distantly, A-Qing thinks she’ll name her bell array the Party Popper.

Yeah. That sounds nice.

“So let’s talk about collateral damage,” says Fuxing, to three vassals who cover the entire emotional spectrum.

Mo Xuanyu looks like he was just caught murdering a man. Xue Yang yawns, then blows a stray strand of hair out of his face. A-Qing rubs at her chapped lips with her fingers.

The talk goes on for a while, but A-Qing zones it out two minutes in. She’s heard it a thousand times over: play it easy, keep your heads low, don’t attract too much unwanted attention.

Okay, reasonable, except there’s a festival in two days, so who cares? Things are bound to explode that close to a festival. That’s probably how festivals work. That’s how all the festivals A-Qing has been to have worked, at least.

To be fair, the speech is more intimidating than usual because of Hanguang-Jun’s presence. He mostly seems disappointed in that weird, cold, scholarly type.

His silence has weight and presence. Xue Yang shifts in his seat. He’s always had problems with authority.
“Okay,” says A-Qing, once Fuxing stops talking. “So can we go around and fix up the buildings now?”

Fuxing raises a single brow. “Did you not hear what I said about untested talismans?” he asks.

“Sure,” says A-Qing. She stands, and so does Xue Yang. Mo Xuanyu takes their standing as permission to follow them, and he shuffles after with haste. “We’re gonna be around. Yell if you need anything.”

“I most certainly will,” says Fuxing, and then they’re off on their own again.

Now, the thing about fixing things is that it’s much more difficult to manage than breaking things.

Breaking is easy: it’s just hitting something with enough force to make it fall apart. Sure, it gets harder the more specific the breaking down, but it’s always going to be easier than piecing something together from scratch.

Fuxing made some talismans a while back that could fix things up. But screw that! A-Qing’s great at breaking things into component parts to be built again, Xue Yang’s great at understanding everything that goes into the end result, and Mo Xuanyu’s great at building said end result with his arrays.

They’re the dream team, and nobody can take that away from them.

Their first sweep of the Unclean Realm gives them a pretty good idea of how much damage their actually is. The answer: not a lot, but people probably wouldn’t appreciate tiny holes in their ceilings and debris all over their floors, because they’re picky like that or something. Whatever.

Anyway, the point is: there’s a lot of small bits and pieces that need to be put back into place, and running around the city, slapping random arrays down isn’t the most efficient way to do things.

The best way to go forward, then, is to just slap down one giant, super-powered array and get it done in one fell swoop.
So.

There’s this thing about giant arrays that’s kind of annoying.

It’s that the picture always looks way easier when you draw it in a book than over the side of a mountain.

“The lines have to be perfectly straight,” Mo Xuanyu says seriously, gesturing to one of many lines that need to be, as he says, perfectly straight. “The circle is a conduit which focuses and dictates the flow of power; it taps into the energies that exist within the earth, so don’t mess that up, either!”

“There is literally no conceivable way to draw this on a cliffside,” Xue Yang says, in a tone that demonstrates he’d really rather not do this.

“That’s because you don’t have the will,” Mo Xuanyu says, just as blandly.

“Fuck you, I’ll make you eat those words,” says Xue Yang, and then he’s racing up the stairs to get started on the outermost circle.

A-Qing eyes Mo Xuanyu a little. He certainly picks up on things quickly, doesn’t he?

Well, she thinks to herself, someone has to, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be Fuxing.

It takes a few hours, but once Xue Yang’s finally finished etching what he calls “a perfectly good circle, according to my judgement at least, but then again, my judgement has always been something of a moral dilemma, so if this entire place goes up in flames, it’ll be my problem, but that wouldn’t be the first time I destroyed a sect, so it’s all in good fun.”

A-Qing springs into the air to get a better look. It seems like it should be fine, but appearances can be deceiving.

The next time she stations herself high in the air, it’s with Mo Xuanyu on her back, shouting out commands with his voice-amplifying talisman.
“Remember,” shouts Mo Xuanyu, his voice wobbling in pitch as A-Qing floats slowly downward and jumps high into the air again, “you’ve got to get the sizes right for each of the triangles! The five-pointed star represents the five elements; if you draw one too big or too small, this entire place could spontaneously combust!”

A few disciples throw them nervous looks. In fact, a lot of them are watching the entire process, which means they’re probably thinking it’s the end times.

In the end, it takes them half a day to create a simple five-pointed array, and they all swear to figure out a system in which they can simply place down five smaller arrays and have the entire thing activate by itself.

The juniors greet them once they return. They cheer loudly, jumping up and down in a show of unexpected excitement, and demand to watch as the array activates and (hopefully) repairs all the damage created by their excellent and very productive training exercise.

“Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu, rubbing his hands together. He breathes into them, warming his palms. “Fingers crossed, everyone.”

It’s metaphorical, but the disciples cross their fingers nonetheless. It’s nice to have a small army of supportive kids. Maybe that’s what Fuxing feels like back in Lotus Pier.

One, two, three seconds pass, and Mo Xuanyu presses his palms to one great bend of the circle.

Silver light blazes forth from the array. The entire mountainside is awash in alchemical power, and a great rumbling sounds through the steep stairways and the narrow streets.

Buildings piece themselves together. Debris slots back into place. Every bit of unflattering damage and wear, caused by a very entertaining and effective training regime or not, seeps into a better, brighter state of repair. Even the stairways fill in their own cracks, slot together their missing steps.

It takes a good hour or so, but by the end of it, the Unclean Realm is looking just like it did when the Qinghe Nie Sect first claimed this mountain as their own. Suck on that, Lanling Jin! Go take your posh gold furnishings somewhere else!
A pretty nice place to be in before the festival, A-Qing thinks proudly. She high-fives Mo Xuanyu as hard as she can, and he returns the favour with a smile equally as brilliant.

Xue Yang declares that he’s never doing anything like that again, which is understandable, since he just spent forever and a half scratching a giant array all over this dumb mountain. On the bright side, Jiangzai’s pretty sharp, so the buildings here should stay nice and shiny for at least a while.

Sect Leader Nie doesn’t say much. He’s probably too stuck in his own head to really care.

Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun appear to be doing their own thing, because A-Qing doesn’t see them around much. Their next conference is scheduled for the night before the festivities in order to be extra sneaky, so the biggest players are probably off polishing their pieces before the board’s set up.

Like good disciples, A-Qing, Xue Yang, and Mo Xuanyu wander around town and stick their hands into any sort of party prep they can.

Wen Qing-jie catches them and waves them over to a giant procession of lantern floats. They all take a second to marvel, check out all the craftsmanship and such, and then they get to work.

“I didn’t know Qinghe had lantern parades,” says A-Qing, contemplatively.

“It’s a big deal around this time of year,” Wen Qing-jie says. She floats up to the top of a—well, a float, and pins a green-and-gold flag to the top of the dragon’s head. “The most talented disciples wield fire and perform,” she explains. “Wen Ruohan took personal offense to the imagery and prohibited the festival until his sorry head rolled off his shoulders.”

“What a megalomaniac.”

“You’re telling me. Can you pass me that banner over there?”

A-Qing tosses one end of the banner up to Wen Qing-jie. She ties the weighted end to a wooden support, then catches the other end and drapes it over the dragon’s back.

A few disciples pass by. They wave to both Wen Qing-jie and A-Qing, then hurry on to rig up the
It’s all a lot of work. Somewhere along the line, the disciples discovered that Xue Yang is actually pretty nifty with paper crafts, so now he’s being forced to cut out chains of flowers from coloured paper. He appears to be testing out every scowl and sneer in his arsenal on everyone who meets his gaze. They don’t seem to care too much, because a few nasty glares and knife-eyes are pretty cheap in comparison to the stupidly pretty and delicate crafts they’re receiving in exchange.

And then there’s Mo Xuanyu, who’s having a great time working out arrays to make entire floats change colour all at once. He’s in the middle of a heated argument with a disciple, and it’s a mess of a conversation about colour theory and lighting and other stuff A-Qing doesn’t really care about. What she does care about are the arrays painted onto all six sides of a rectangular lantern, because that looks suspiciously similar to that one flame array that almost murdered them all, and if Mo Xuanyu has figured out a way to slap that bad boy onto paper and not raze the entire place to the ground, then A-Qing wants in on it, because her bell talisman could use some work, and there’s always wriggle room for exploding talismans.

A-Qing mostly wanders around. She’s never made any lanterns or floats before, but the disciples are eager to ask for her help. She carries baskets of supplies from one end of the chain to the other, does her best to patch up rough splottes, and runs a cart full of snacks relentlessly down the road, demanding that everyone stay hydrated in a manner Jiang Chenyi would be proud of.

It’s weird, it’s not what A-Qing though she would be doing at all, and it’s great.

What’s the fun in being stressed all the time? Sure, they have to figure out their plan to take down mister high-and-mighty before he sniffs them out, but burnout is a real thing.

The problem with all these idiots—Fuxing, Sect Leader Jiang, Sect Leader Nie—is that they all have goals of some sorts, and they’re pretty good at keeping at them. But why? Why do they sprint after something that always seems just a little out of reach?

It’s an easy question once you take a few steps back and look closely.

It’s because at one point, they were determined. Who can blame them? Everyone starts off determined. But then that determination became the only thing they had left, and that drive became habit.
A habit to keep fighting, or to keep searching for revenge, or to bring peace to the world, or whatever.

That’s what they say, isn’t it?

It’s not the fall that kills you. It’s the stop. That’s exactly why you don’t stop.

When you stop, what happens?

A-Qing would say, well, you keep living, obviously.

Turns out it’s harder for some people than she expected.

And what does she say to that?

“Uh, sorry, Yufeng-Zhe,” says the junior disciple A-Qing’s currently holding on her shoulders. He’s struggling to pin one end of a flower chain to the head of a falcon, and he seems awfully flustered about it. “I’m not really good at this. Sorry for, uh, the trouble.”

A-Qing shifts her grip a little. She stands on her tiptoes so the boy can get a better grip on the float.

She says, “No worries. Take your time.”

It takes a while, but eventually, the junior manages to tie the pieces together. He thanks A-Qing for her patience, bows deep and long, and hurries off to where his friends are gaping at him.

A-Qing waves to the group. The juniors all jump. “Come on and help me figure out these garlands,” she shouts, gesturing to the pile of half-folded paper flowers atop her cart.

In the span of a few minutes, there’s a small army of children hoarding around the cart, trying their best to make petal-shaped abominations out of coloured paper. They kind of look like some eldritch being from hell marched by and warped all organic things into jagged, multi-coloured mouths with too many teeth. A-Qing thinks it’s kind of cute. It has character, for sure.
So.

The point is.

Things get worse before they get better. And when they do get better, it happens slowly.

It’s not easy to live in that weird stasis between a goal you’ve been chasing for your entire life and the next checkpoint.

What’s the right way to explain it? It’s like you’re just floating around in the middle of an ocean, and you know the waters beneath you go down forever and ever into places where it’s cold and quiet, but you don’t want to sink, and you know there will be more storms, more boats passing by, and you just... keep floating.

Like dead fish. Glassy eyes, rotten smell. That’s what it feels like. It’s pretty lonely.

Which is why, A-Qing thinks as she commands the juniors to follow one boy who seems to actually know what he’s doing, you take things slow.

You talk to people. You find hobbies. You take back the life you pushed away, piece by piece. You learn how to live life again.

It’s all a matter of time.

So basically, the moral of this story is *fuck* time, that shit sucks, obviously it takes time to cook rice and let water boil, but it’ll be a sum game of jack shit if you don’t get off your ass and do something about it!

That night, after dinner, A-Qing peeks her head into a certain room in a certain hall at a certain time.

“Hey, Sect Leader Nie,” she says, to flame-lit darkness.
She can make out the corners of a bed, the worn edges of a desk, and a swathe of shadow where delicate fans sit on glossy stands. She can make out a head, two shoulders, two arms, two legs.

He’s in a contemplative mood, then.

“IT’s kinda late,” says A-Qing. She takes care to shut the door behind her. “Did you want to talk about something?”

There’s a sigh. A hand grabs the lantern, and Sect Leader Nie’s full, exhausted expression comes into view. “I’m not sure what else I would do these days,” he says.

“Okay,” is A-Qing’s answer. She marches to his window, then clambers out through it and onto the boards overlooking the waters of a small garden. “It’s not that cold outside. Fresh air for good circulation for good thoughts, right?”

Sect Leader Nie hesitates. It’s not as much of a physical thing as it is a quiet frosting over of his eyes. Then he says, “Alright,” and climbs out to sit next to A-Qing.

It’s a bit of a silly picture.

A divine vassal and a sect leader sit by a dark pond. There are a million stars in that tiny world below the water, where sound and light are tangible things. If you try hard enough, you can hang onto moonbeams like they’re silver threads, and curls of sound like they’re strands of hair; then the image breaks, and you’re just a fool with blind dreams and a home that doesn’t even feel like home anymore.

Life’s a weird thing like that.

A-Qing slips her shoes off. She lets her toes hang into the water. A little splash throws up a great bend of ripples, breaking the full moon into a thousand pieces.

“I guess Fuxing doesn’t really agree with you all too much,” A-Qing begins.

Sect Leader Nie heaves a sigh. Part of it’s because of annoyance; most of it’s out of exhaustion.
“Well, these sorts of talks are always difficult,” he says, as if it makes it any better.

“Kinda hard when you have to face down Hanguang-Jun as well.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I remember when we were silly children studying in Gusu—he would make rounds at night and terrify us all. It takes a certain kind of man to uphold the rules so diligently only to break them when the time comes.”

A-Qing frowns. “What time?” she asks, carefully.

“When your moral code comes into question,” answers Sect Leader Nie. It’s a bitter thing that bleeds from his lips like a bloated, rotten fruit. He smiles, and it’s like he’s gutting himself. “Some people never bend. They earn the respect of the world... and the world destroys them.”

That’s what the world does. Well, specifically, that’s what humans do.

The world creates. Humans are just really good at taking a sledgehammer to anything they want to preserve. Does it make sense? No. But has it ever made sense to begin with? God, no.

“You’re talking about Fuxing,” A-Qing chooses to say. It’s the best way to ease into what she already knows.

Sect Leader Nie hums in agreement.

“Cool,” says A-Qing. She kicks out, and a splatter of droplets brushes apart water-born flowers. “Are you talking about me, too?”

“I don’t think there’s any arguing that you’re a pillar of stability,” says Sect Leader Nie, and it sounds like he means it.

That’s pretty flattering, coming from him. The truth is pretty flattering, coming from him.

“Cool,” A-Qing says again. She waits a second, lets the silence settle down into something a little
less comfortable. The moon reforms itself. It wavers once, twice, three times.

A-Qing says, “You really mean your elder brother, don’t you?”

Sect Leader Nie says nothing. But he says nothing only for a moment. “Nothing gets past you,” he comments, like it’s a simple observation. Nothing monumental or concerning. A-Qing’s emotional magnetism, that can’t really be called empathy or kindness, but rather a sharp kind of intuition built up from years of watching and waiting and understanding for her own survival, is actually pretty handy when people need some help unravelling their heart of hearts.

She doesn’t like playing the role of a keeper. She sure as hell doesn’t want to be the crutch for all these people to lean on. What she can do is push them back onto their feet and tell them to walk the good walk. One day, she’ll die, and they’ll die, and they’ll all be dead as headstones and stardust.

Morbid thoughts aside, A-Qing can’t be surprised that Sect Leader Nie’s projecting the image of the late Chifeng-Zun onto her. It’s kind of flattering, but mostly worrying.

“I heard stories of Chifeng-Zun when I was younger,” she says. “They were pretty wild. Everyone insisted that he could cut up mountains and eat them.” For emphasis, she adds, “I don’t think he ate mountains.”

“I can’t recall him ever doing that, no,” says Sect Leader Nie.

“He was one of the spearheads of the Sunshot Campaign, wasn’t he? A war hero. No wonder...”

No wonder he died during peacetime, she doesn’t say.

“He was really a force to be reckoned with,” is what she decides to say.

Sect Leader Nie reaches into the quiet. It’s hard to grab what you want when it doesn’t make a sound, but he’s been muffling himself for years. It gets easier as you practice. “He was a good person,” he says, quietly, as if the words don’t truly exist. He wrings his fingers in his sleeves. “Did you know, Yufeng-Zhe, that I used to find him absolutely unbearable?”
“Why? Was he that overbearing?”

“He pushed me so hard,” says Sect Leader Nie. He slips off his shoes and kicks his toes into the water. The moon breaks overhead. “I trained with the saber because of him, and I realized I was awful with the saber because of him.”

An older brother with a will of steel. A younger brother with a spine of bone. One born as a blade, the other forged into one. It’s a story. Just... not a rare one. It hurts all the same.

“Everyone’s good at what they’re good at,” says A-Qing.

“Oh, yes,” Sect Leader Nie agrees, enthusiastically. “The blade, the saber, talismans, arrays, blessings—a truly varied skill set, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That sounds nice,” says A-Qing. “But what are you good at?”

Silence.

Sect Leader Nie sighs. It’s an empty thing filled with old breath. “When you ask these questions,” he says, “I’d rather not answer them.”

“I don’t think it’s too hard of a question to answer.”

“Then I’ll pose the question back to you. What am I good at, Wei Chengfeng?”

The smile Sect Leader Nie puts on is a wide, cold thing. It says, try and tell me what I already know.

It’s not a good smile. It has weight and teeth, but that weight is a burden, and those teeth are ground down to nothing. A-Qing would like to see it removed and replaced with something more genuine, though that’s a big ask in and of itself.

“Well,” A-Qing begins, “give credit where credit’s due. You’re a great strategist.”
“Mm,” is all Sect Leader Nie voices.

“And the obvious ones, too: you’re a brilliant actor. Your foresight is incredible.”

“Thank you.”

A-Qing thinks for a bit. “The less obvious ones,” she says. “You’re great at fan-painting. Painting in general, actually. You have a really steady hand. I think you’re pretty steady as a person. You’re really good at fan dancing because of that, probably.” Sect Leader Nie’s giving her a really weird look, so she tells him, “It comes from your legs and your wrists, mostly. Steady on your feet and quick with your wrists. That’s what you are.”

“I don’t think I’m particularly good at fan dancing,” Sect Leader Nie says, a bit hesitant.

“I think you are,” A-Qing argues, and that’s the end of that.

It’s always hard to convince someone of their talents when they see things the exact opposite way. That’s the thing with Sect Leader Nie: he’s got a brain that works out everything to the finest detail, and that’s great for things like plotting the demise of your enemies and painting intricate landscapes. The thing is that he isn’t proud of his cunning because he thinks his late brother would hate him for it, and he isn’t proud of his steady hands either, because he could be swinging a saber instead.

All if it’s just a tangle of strange emotions. All of this is for Chifeng-Zun. All of this is because of Chifeng-Zun. The whole question is: would he be proud? Or would he be disappointed?

Unfortunately, Chifeng-Zun’s mouth is attached to his face, which is part of his head, which happens to be elsewhere at the moment.

Oh well. No use in waiting.

A-Qing kicks her toes outward again. A few droplets land on the big, glossy leaves of plants that dip into the water.
“Do you think your brother would be proud of the way you’re doing things?” she asks.

Sect Leader Nie takes a breath. “I believe,” he says, “that he was always above these sorts of things.”

“What sorts of things?”


“Well,” A-Qing tries, and stops.

She doesn’t know enough about Chifeng-Zun to say anything. It would be ridiculous to just make something up, and A-Qing isn’t about to lie to Sect Leader Nie’s face. How often does he even try to be honest to himself?

Not often, probably. It’s hard to be honest with yourself when you’re alone. If you’re going to spill your heart out, it might as well be in someone else’s hands rather than the floor. Makes cleaning up much easier once you’ve fixed your ribs so they aren’t piercing your lungs. Plus, someone can hold the flaps of skin out as your stitch up everything that’s torn and broken.

Personally, A-Qing doesn’t like Sect Leader Nie’s way of doing things. Life’s just an endless game of chess for him. People are pieces, and pieces are lost. Of all the hundreds of thousands of people on this earth, his world is composed of a tiny fraction of them, and he treats them with careless ease.

But he isn’t a bad person.

A-Qing tries again. “I’m saying this because I want to know,” she says, “but it seems like you really want closure.”

“I’d like that,” says Sect Leader Nie.

“You’re awfully sure that revenge is going to get you there.”

“Oh,” Sect Leader Nie puts in, in a tone of voice that demonstrates he doesn’t like thinking about it
too much, “Perhaps.”

A-Qing gives him a curious look. “You don’t sound too sure,” she points out.

“My revenge is for my brother.” The wringing is back, and Sect Leader Nie’s sleeves crinkle into thin lines. His lips follow suit. He says, “You might think poorly of me, and so might your god and everyone under his light, but this is the one thing I refuse to let go of.”

“Then hang onto it,” says A-Qing. She moves her feet in little circles, and she can almost fool herself into believing that the water parts because she tells sit to.

Sect Leader Nie goes rigid, and the force of the stop shatters his smile in a few places. Then he asks, “Do you really think that?”

“Why not?” A-Qing asks in return. “It’s good to have a goal. It’s natural to want revenge. He killed your brother, for god’s sake.”

“I can’t tell what you want from me,” says Sect Leader Nie. “Do you condemn me, or do you support me?”

A-Qing gives a gesture of half-half.

“You aren’t going to tell me to forgive him, are you? I’ve heard enough of that from your god.”

“Fuxing isn’t my god,” A-Qing says. “And I won’t waste my breath. I think you’re right, in some ways. Jin Guangyao has done some horrible things. He needs to pay.”

Sect Leader Nie gets in a quick, “With his life, preferably.”

“Okay, see, this is where we kind of diverge,” A-Qing says, very blandly.

“It’s the simplest of equations,” Sect Leader Nie argues. “A life for a life.”
“When has that equation ever worked out?” A-Qing demands. Her heel hits the water a little too hard, and the splash wets both of them. She can’t bring herself to feel sorry about it. “You know it doesn’t work like that. Lives aren’t simple values you can add and subtract—they’re collections of a thousand pieces that move and break and build themselves up again, and not even the gods can change that!”

“It’s equivalency,” Sect Leader Nie continues to insist. He’s getting annoyed now, and the pitch of his voice climbs higher with his temper. “What would you have taken away from him if not his life?”

“His status, his pride, his self-righteousness—”

“That doesn’t even come close to equalling the value of my brother’s—of a life.”

“I need you to understand,” says A-Qing. “No matter what you trade, no matter how even it seems, if you stubbornly adhere to rules of equivalency and balance and ignore everything else, you’ll always, always lose something!”

Sect Leader Nie laughs. “You think I don’t know that?” he says, his words as sharp as his teeth. “What do you want me to say, Yufeng-Zhe? That I’m a selfish child who can’t forgive and forget? That my revenge is the light of my life?”

“Yes!” A-Qing answers, almost shouts. “If you say that to me, why can’t you say that to yourself?”

Silence. Look at his wide-eyed gaping, like he’s just been caught doing something he’s not allowed to do.

“And you’re wrong about a few things,” A-Qing storms on. “Do I think you’re selfish? Yeah, I do, considering you dance people around to your pretty little tunes without thinking of how they feel, what they lose, how much it hurts to be spun into circles because of some mastermind they can’t even see!”

Honesty where honesty’s due. Sect Leader Nie can’t say anything in response to that.

“But,” says A-Qing, and this part is really important, “I don’t think you can’t forgive and forget. I
think you won’t.”

Silence. Then: “It might as well be the same.”

“Can’t means you’re incapable. Won’t means you refuse to.”

“Semantics.”

“Semantics that matter.”

“I’ll repeat myself, since it appears you didn’t understand,” says Sect Leader Nie, and ohh, that’s a low blow, you stubborn fool. “This revenge is mine. Understand?”

“I sure do,” A-Qing fires back. “Because in case you’ve forgotten, Xue Yang murdered everyone I could count on, but he’s here now, and it’s just—whatever.”

And that’s where the question lies, right?

So here it is:

Has A-Qing forgiven Xue Yang?

And her response:

Hell no!

You really think it’s that easy to forgive? Of course not! Whoever thinks otherwise has never been hurt to the point that they have to think, do I let go? Do I keep holding on?

Forgiving is for saints and people with hearts bigger than their grudges. A-Qing isn’t either of those things. She’s just a bit more determined than usual, which some people might consider stupid, but
she’s doing just fine, isn’t she?

“You don’t need to forgive Jin Guanyao, ever,” A-Qing says, taking care to make herself very, very clear. She looks Sect Leader Nie in the eye and refuses to let his gaze escape elsewhere. “He wronged you. It hurt. Don’t ever forget that.”

“I won’t,” Sect Leader Nie says. “That’s the point.”

A-Qing shakes her head. The flowers in her hair glisten a sheen of faded gold under the moonlight, white like snow and skin. It reminds her of when she broke her arm so badly that the bone under her wobbly flesh peeked out. It hurt. It hurt. It hurt, and it took so long to heal.

“The point,” A-Qing says, “is this.” She takes a deep breath, then asks, “Aren’t you tired?”

Sect Leader Nie is a lot of things, but he isn’t stupid.

The moon is whole for a fleeting second. Then Sect Leader Nie dips his toes back into the dark waters, and the illusion shatters.

“What does it matter?” he says, and his voice sounds so far away. “I’m working hard. My brother…” He trails off, and his eyes get glassy. “He would be proud.”

“Proud of what?” A-Qing presses.

“That I’m giving my all,” Sect Leader Nie says. “That I’m—running myself ragged for the world.”

“Are you really doing this for the world?”

“What a pointless question. Of course not.”

“Are you doing this for Chifeng-Zun?”
“Yes. No. I…”

“We’ll give it half-half. Now here’s the kicker: at the end of all things, are you doing this for yourself?”

“Yes,” Sect Leader Nie answers quickly. His brows furrow in thought. “Closure,” he says. “It’s for my own closure and my brother’s justice. Yes,” he finishes, as if he just cleared it up for himself.

“Really,” says A-Qing.

“Really.”

“Would you like to know what I think?”

“I might as well hear it, since we’ve already come so far.”

“Cool. I think that you don’t really know what you’re doing anymore.”

“I most certainly know what I’m doing.”

“Do you really?” A-Qing demands. “You don’t even remember what you’re doing this for!”

“I just told you!”

“You just remembered!”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It means that this has been going on for so long you don’t know what else to do with your life!” A-Qing shouts, slapping her fist against the boards.
She tries not to glare. No matter how angry she is, it’s not fair to throw all the blame onto Sect Leader Nie’s shoulders. What choice did he have in all this? He didn’t want this. He didn’t want to become who he is now. He could’ve been happy. None of this needed to happen.

The worst part is that he knows all this. That’s part of the reason why he hates Jin Guangyao so much. All of the could-bes, the should-have-beens, just... lost. All because one man destroyed his family.

Sect Leader Nie stares into the silver waters. “I don’t need to know what I’m doing,” he says. “I just need to keep moving.”

He can’t even lie to himself anymore.

And that’s what the tragedy really is.

A-Qing doesn’t really know what to do. She doesn’t like when people touch her without her permission, even if it’s out of comfort. There is one thing she’s okay with, even when her heart feels like it’s been through hell and all the places on the way there.

She pulls her feet from the water. She proceeds to scooch behind Sect Leader Nie with her palms and heels.

She leans her weight just far enough to let their backs touch.

“Allright?” she asks simply.

It’s quiet for a while. “Alright,” is what’s returned.

All these boys are so... so... utterly tragic.

That isn’t on them. But A-Qing wishes that they could understand their emotions a bit better and realize that it isn’t wrong to act on them. Then, with those emotions, they could better understand
everyone around them, and with that kindness, the world could a bit clearer, or a bit softer.

“I know this is going to sound stupid,” A-Qing says, quietly. “But it might be better to just let go.”

Sect Leader Nie stares into the night sky. “You want me,” he says, like he can’t believe what he’s hearing, “to just let go?”

A-Qing nods. Her flowers clank against each other a little.

“I can’t do that.” It’s easy to feel every hitch of breath. He stutters silently, then says, “You said it yourself. I won’t ever forgive him.”

“Forgiving is different than letting go,” A-Qing explains. She pulls her knees to her chest. “Once you let go, you can start accepting forgiveness toward your own person.”

“I’m not a good person.”

“I think you’re alright,” says A-Qing. “Anyone who can feel as if the world’s come crashing down when their loved ones go away must be at least okay.”

The warmth against her back shivers.

“And,” she adds, “Even if you’re not a good person... I think you still deserve forgiveness. Maybe.” She looks into the darkness that is Sect Leader Nie’s room. “I don’t know yet. I haven’t... yet met... anyone who’s truly irredeemable.”

“They exist.”

“Yeah. And I’ll just need to learn how to accept that when I meet them.”

“You certainly treat me quite well.”
“Don’t write yourself onto a list that doesn’t exist yet,” A-Qing says, nudging him a bit with her elbow. “Besides,” she adds, “I think you’re pretty cool. Anyone who can listen to me and consider letting go of long-kept resentment, even if just a little bit, has a heart that can grow in my books.”

“You can’t possibly believe—”

“I can believe,” A-Qing interjects.

The words Sect Leader Nie is searching for won’t come. That’s the thing: he threw them away years ago.

“This is just one tiny wish from a stupid girl,” says A-Qing. She grins. It’s a stupid thing full of hopes and dreams, but that’s what gives it meaning. “But if you could let go of the vengeance that’s been chaining you down to this life, then you could focus more on how your disciples are tragically awful at folding paper flowers.”

Sect Leader Nie laughs, and it sounds like a sigh of relief.

He laughs for a while. He really lets it all out.

The night is dark, but there’s nothing new about that. All the stars are bright, but that’s how things have been since the beginning of time.

But A-Qing doesn’t think it’s stupid to say that the night is just a little bit brighter now.

“My disciples aren’t that awful,” he says. His voice is a bit fuller, like he isn’t eating off a plate of empty revenge anymore.

A-Qing lets out a clap of laughter. “Then you haven’t seen the garlands they’re making,” she fires back. “They look like mouths with way too many teeth. It’s almost cute.”

“You don’t sound like you helped them much.”
“You think I know how to fold flowers? I’m a girl of many talents, but that definitely isn’t one.”

“I see. Your fingers are too short.”

“My fingers can do cool things, like strangle people.”

“Xue Yang’s rubbing off on you.”

“Whatever.”

They sit like that for a bit longer. A-Qing’s toes are mostly dry, so she slips her shoes back on and shifts forward. As soon as her back leaves Sect Leader Nie’s, the moment is broken, and they both clear their throats.

“That was a riveting conversation,” says Sect Leader Nie, once he’s clambered back into his room.

“Sure was,” says A-Qing. She places the lantern back onto the table, then holds his gaze even among the flickering shadows. “Sleep on it. When Fuxing asks you next time, just tell him you changed your mind and leave it at that.”

A somewhat sly smirk draws itself onto Sect Leader Nie’s lips. “You’d leave him in the dark?” he asks.

“It’s none of his business,” A-Qing declares.

Sect Leader Nie considers this. “You’re right,” he decides. “It’s my business, and it’s your business because you insisted.”

“Nope,” A-Qing says. She raises her arms in a big criss-cross to denote that he’s very, very wrong. “It’s none of my business either. I’m just a bothersome pest who won’t stop yammering until people get their emotions in line.”

At least he smiles. “Then this bothersome pest should go get some sleep, because I’m sure she’ll be
busy setting fire to my sect tomorrow as well.”

“I’ll try my best,” A-Qing promises, grins, and goes on her merry way.

The halls are quiet. She can feel something stirring in the shadows. There’s nothing to say what it really is, but whether they be demons, ghosts of the past, or curious disciples, it doesn’t change the fact that the sky is full of stars, and the moon is bright.

It’s a nice night for change.

Wen Qing-jie really likes festivals. Either that, or she’s just happy to have something to do.

“You’ll be performing a routine for the civilians,” she tells A-Qing. “Get them on their feet, excite them a little. You know?”

“I could line them up and walk them off a cliff if I really tried,” A-Qing says, quite proud of herself.

“Great,” says Wen Qing-jie. “Don’t do that.”

Wen Ning peeks his head in, and so do Song Daozhang and Daozhang. Apparently they had some trouble along the way with a spontaneous monster encounter, nothing dangerous or intentional or anything, just some bad luck, which they seem to run into an awful lot, and Wen Ning went to go give them a hand.

Meaning his hand kind of fell off, and now Wen Qing-jie gets to scold him for being reckless while punching the stitches back in.

A-Qing greets them with all the energy she can muster, then tells them that they missed out on this awesome new training method she came up with that involves only a tiny bit of collateral damage and this incredible explosion at the end, and all the juniors loved it so they’ll go for round two during the festival to show off to all the civilians of Qinghe, and did they know that A-Qing is going to be leading this big dance to get everyone excited for the entrance of his divine lordship, the golden god Fuxing? Not that he’s that impressive or anything.
It’s just nice to see Daozhang and Song Daozhang again. They really get the short end of the stick every single time, no thanks to a certain sword spirit, but then again, everyone in their ragtag team has been screwed over by fate time and time again. They’re comrades in screwed-over-ness.

A-Qing makes sure to recount all her stories to Daozhang and Song Daozhang as she works on the floats. She waves her journal in the air, proudly declaring that she’s been writing and reading as much as she possibly can.

“Maybe one day I’ll let you read it,” she says. “But that’ll only be when I get good enough to edit my own work!”

“I’m sure you’re very good already,” Wen Ning says supportively.

“Your handwriting is completely and utterly illegible,” says Xue Yang, phasing out from the second story of a nearby building and seating himself comfortably in the dragon’s head.

The mood plummets.

A-Qing pushes Xue Yang off the float.

He lets out a colourful chain of expletives, then catches sight of the two people he most recently murdered.

“Oh,” he has the audacity to say with a big, dumb grin, “well, I certainly remember you.”

A-Qing leaps off the float and clocks Xue Yang across the jaw. Wen Ning places himself firmly between the two parties, trying to soothe them as best as possible. A-Qing focuses on pulling her stupid sword spirit’s lips all the way to his ears.

It’s good that Xue Yang’s crazy muderkid gauge is all the way down to a reasonable level, probably a solid higher than average, but his asshole gauge is literally punching at the roof and making cracks in places nobody ever knew possible.
Just because you don’t kill people anymore doesn’t mean you’re not an asshole. A-Qing makes sure that Xue Yang is very, very aware of this, and then she finally gets off his sorry, physical form.

“Can you please think for once in your life?” she yells, prying his stupid hands from where they’re caught on her stupid hair.

“Take your own advice before acting like a wise sage to others,” Xue Yang sneers, which is the perfect opportunity to grab his ear again.

“Get your hands off her,” says Daozhang, and A-Qing really appreciates it, but maybe he should sheath his sword, because the disciples are getting kind of weirded out, and it would suck if someone bled out their guts all over these nice floats they’ve been working so hard on.

“I’ll never forgive you,” says Song Daozhang, and that’s a very fair thought which A-Qing won’t try to change, but she just had this conversation last night and she’s pretty well practiced, which is handy, because, you know, not flaying someone is probably a good thing.

“Maybe we should talk this out,” Wen Ning says, meekly but loudly.

“Thank you,” A-Qing says, then untangles Xue Yang’s fingers from her hair. “Can we just find a quiet place with some food and just talk for a second?”

Out of nowhere, the small disciple, Nie Yequ, pokes her head out from behind a phoenix float. “I know a great place,” she chirps.

“Oh my god, stalker,” says Xue Yang, like the ungrateful bastard he is.

A-Qing elbows him in the side. “Lead the way,” she tells Nie Yequ, who gives her a bright smile and a thumbs-up.

Wen Ning is really a godsend. He slides in between the two parties at all times, trying his best to keep up a nice, peaceful conversation. He mentions the weather, and when he runs out of ways to describe the clouds, he talks about all the places he’s seen during his travels with Wen Qing-jie.
And Nie Yequ’s an absolutely incredible junior, too. She has this face on that demonstrates that she’s minding her own business while sticking her nose in theirs, but her lips are slapped firmly shut. She leads them through winding, narrow back streets, deliberately slowing down over steeper slopes to get a good look at the small procession behind her.

It’s actually kind of nice. The tension is so thick you could stick a knife in it and it would stand up straight, but A-Qing realizes quickly that Wen Ning has seen some strange temples with inscriptions about a lost pantheon of gods. And from experience, she knows that the only way to validate something is to cross-reference it with every source possible. That’s pretty much how she makes friends these days.

“I’m not sure what could’ve happened,” Wen Ning says, contemplatively. He’s walking beside A-Qing instead of behind her now, and A-Qing’s trying her best not to look like she’s visibly straining to keep eye contact with him. “It seems like there was a massive conflict between two powerful factions, but I’m not sure why, or how it all happened.”

A-Qing thinks for a bit. She remembers flowers, a night sky full of lanterns, a never-ending song, and a tragedy of two lovers who forget themselves. “I think I might have a clue,” she says.

She tries to explain it as best she can. It’s a messy, jumbled tale that sucks all around, but it’s still a story. All stories have a beginning and an ending. It’s that simple. It isn’t at all.

“Oh, I see,” says Wen Ning, once A-Qing’s done. “Um, it’s curious you should mention that, because I saw something about Luxing.”

The name catches A-Qing’s attention immediately. “Luxing?” she repeats. “You mean the golden god of rank and influence?”

“Yes,” says Wen Ning. “He had a sister. Um, she was a disciple, I believe, and it’s said that a rift formed between them, which is what started the conflict.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure. I... I suppose they had a disagreement over other gods. From the old stories, that’s how the heavens split apart.”
Okay, now that’s something A-Qing needs to get her hands on. “Where are these old stories?” she asks, praying to high heaven—or at least as far as wherever the hell Fuxing is—that they’re at least in decent, legible condition.

“Um,” Wen Ning begins, and that’s not a good way to start anything. “Um,” he says again. Fiddles with his hands a bit. Great. “The Qishan Wen Sect had an incredible library.”

“Not liking the use of past tense,” A-Qing says, flatly.

Wen Ning winces. “It mostly burned during the Sunshot Campaign,” he says, officially cementing that idea as a dead one. “But,” he adds, and that’s a good place to add that word, “the Lanling Jin Sect recovered everything that wasn’t destroyed. Maybe they would have more of the story?”

A-Qing thinks for a bit.

She really does want to figure out this whole mess with the gods that lived before, because they sure aren’t living now. She doesn’t need to, but she wants to.

It’s hard not to want the truth after everything she’s seen. The fallen lovers, the forgotten temples, the hidden trials... what were they all for?

Surely there’s a greater story behind all of this. She’ll figure out what’s going on, and then finally put every divine being in their place.

Stupid gods and their mortal-fearing ways. So dumb.

Eventually, Nie Yequ leads them up to a quiet pavilion overlooking a very steep, very dangerous, but also very scenic fall. She proudly declares that this is where she usually comes when she needs some time alone, and she’s more than happy to make her alone time into not-so-alone time.

A-Qing says, “Hey.”

“Help me out with for round two,” says A-Qing.

Nie Yequ practically blooms. “Cool,” she says, beaming like a tiny little sun, before clambering up onto the roof of the pavilion to give the adults some serious talk time.

Xue Yang sits as far away from Daozhang and Song Daozhang as possible. At least he has enough of a brain to do at least that.

A-Qing places herself on a firm cushion, then takes a breath. She looks around at all the eyes on her, then says, “Alright. So I think I should explain what’s going on, not just with Xue Yang, but with this entire mess. Gods and politics and vengeance and all.”

And she does.

She starts at the very beginning—or, at least, her beginning.

She doesn’t have four years’ worth of time to explain, so she tries to make things short and sweet. She tells Daozhang and Song Daozhang what they already know: about how she met Fuxing, and how Xue Yang got the pointy end of a sword, and how everything started getting wobbly from that moment onward.

She falls back on her words from when the sky was darker and fuller. She urges both parties to let go of their resentment, but to never forgive and forget, not if they don’t want to, but to consider it when they’ve fought the good fight and just want to rest.

All things come to an end, she says. Don’t let your spirit go before your mercy.

But she doesn’t spend too long on it. Xue Yang already knows what she’s saying, having travelled alongside her for at least a while to absorb most of it passively or just through osmosis. Daozhang and Song Daozhang are nicer, kinder people. She knows that they know what she’s saying, but it’s nice to get it out there. Stir it around a little. Have tiny Nie Yequ consider it as well.

Song Daozhang is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “How is that you’ve forgiven him after everything he’s done?”
And it looks like Xue Yang’s lending an ear as well.


“Fair enough,” says Xue Yang, picking at his nails.

“Right,” says A-Qing. She turns back toward Song Daozhang and looks him in the eye. “You don’t just forgive someone for murdering people you love. And you don’t forget it, either. You just—” She waves a hand. “Learn to live with it.”

“You could kill him,” says Nie Yequ’s voice, from above their heads.

“Sure could,” A-Qing answers. “You in the mood to die for the sake of the universe, Xue Yang?”

“Not particularly.”

“And that’s that,” A-Qing finishes. She uncrosses her arms, shifts the cushion under her a bit. “The world is messed up enough as it is,” she explains. “I’d rather not kill people I can avoid it. Humans are stupid wads of flesh and bone, destroying every speck of kindness and mercy just because it’s easy to break. It gives a good snap, and it tastes sweet too, but do it too much, and it rots your teeth.” She makes a gesture of snapping hardened honey in half. “You know?”

“Yufeng-Zhe knows best,” says Nie Yequ. There’s a smile in her voice and a wind through her teeth.

“I don’t think it’s worth the victory if you lose yourself in the process,” A-Qing sums up, rather aptly, she might say.

And that’s the end of that. Moving forward, she talks about her travels, all the weird and wonderful things she saw, all the weird and wonderful people she met. She talks about Mie Yu, Ying Huohua, the Trader, Jiang Chenyi, all the hundreds of faces who walked through her life. She talks about her struggles and her valiant battles.
There’s a lot of stuff she doesn’t talk about, too. It’s her story. She can choose to trim and cut wherever she wants. Everyone has a right to their own secrets.

Being a storyteller, of course, means that you should end your stories on a high note.

People who live and breathe and die rely on stories to keep them going. It isn’t a delusion if it helps you sleep better, or if it calms your heart. It’s a balm to keep in the good and ward off the cold.

So A-Qing ends her wonderful story by saying that she has high hopes for the future, since they’re all working as one awesome team. She also informs them that she’s been working on a kickass array that’ll blow everyone away at the festival, maybe literally. Eh. It’s a work in progress.

By the time they go their separate ways, the sun is pounding down overhead. They shuffle off in search for shade, and A-Qing notices with some satisfaction that Daozhang and Song Daozhang seem contemplative.

Nie Yequ still has a sparkly grin on. “You know a lot of things,” she says to A-Qing.

“I’ve seen lots of things,” A-Qing says. “You kind of get used to the world after a while.”

“Mm,” Nie Yequ hums. “No, you don’t.”

This kid is way too smart for her own good.

A-Qing plants a hand on Nie Yequ’s head and gives it a good ruffle. “Keep mouthing off like that and you’ll never climb the ranks,” she says.

“It’s more fun here where I am,” says Nie Yequ, in the same tone she’d say, the weather’s nice today. “Power changes people, right?” There’s a curious glint on her teeth as she declares, “I’ll be the powerless little brat and end up stronger than all of them combined.”

“You do you, crazy kid.”
“Yup. Only one of me.”

With that conversation over and done with, the rest of the day passes quickly. They roll back into formation, wander over to Wen Qing, and get themselves directed toward the kitchens, where Xue Yang proceeds to antagonize every single cook and then prove himself worthy of the title head chef, except there are some pretty competent women there as well, so he grudgingly accepts his role as a minion and lets himself get swept up in the chaos that is festival prep.

A-Qing gets pushed over to a station where she can safely cut up as many vegetables as she likes. Wen Ning, though kind and strong, isn’t the most hygienic person due to his being kind of dead. They all assure him that his presence is very much appreciated, then send him to babysit the juniors as they attempt to fold paper flowers.

A-Qing doesn’t want to say things are a mess, but she does. Maybe this is what every festival is like. Chaos, and then more chaos.

She nods sagely to herself. That’s good. Chaos is good.

Things move frighteningly quickly in the kitchens. The cooks wield their knives like they’re peeling apart skin and meat and bone even when they’re chopping radishes, and it makes for a really weird environment. Either way, A-Qing gets caught up in it, and eventually, she’s asking others about their grip and their technique.

The cooks eagerly share their tips. They inquire into A-Qing’s own wielding, point out that it’s definitely unorthodox and looks a bit like Yunmeng swordsmanship pounded into a very distinct style that they can’t recognize.

It looks ancient, they say. Where’d you learn something like that?

And A-Qing laughs and says, Well, some lessons only kick in after everyone’s dead and gone.

They all agree, then finish hacking up the last of the vegetables. Something explodes in Xue Yang’s direction. Someone screeches, but it isn’t him. Classic.
And A-Qing finally, finally catches Fuxing alone after dinner.

It’s when she’s just finished carrying the last batch of plates and bowls to the kitchens to be cleaned. Her hands are still a little wet, and she’s feeling pretty drained after a long day of exchanging techniques that can be used in both ingredient prep and cutting someone’s head off. Swords are cool like that.

Then she rounds the corner, walks directly into Fuxing, and they both go stumbling back.

“Ouch,” says Fuxing, followed by, “Oh.”

“There you are,” says A-Qing, sufficiently annoyed. “Where have you been? The Unclean Realm isn’t even all that big.”

“I’ve been,” Fuxing begins, and stops, and thinks. He thinks for too long, A-Qing might add, to answer such a simple question. “I’ve been thinking about things for a bit,” is his response.

A-Qing narrows her eyes. Fuxing is many things, but he’s never in his life been subtle.

“So, like, did you guys bone or something?”

“There has to be a more eloquent way to put it.”

“Wait,” A-Qing says, then stops. Her brain kicks itself alive again, and she finally gets her mouth to sound out, “Seriously?”

There’s no honey in Fuxing’s twitchy smile. It tries to shape itself into something presentable, but all it looks like is that his lips have got maggots crawling through them.

Silence. A small crowd of small disciples rushes by them. They bow their heads quickly, then hurry off to do whatever it is crazy kids do after dinner. Set fire to things, maybe. Practice jumping on roofs for their demonstration of skill at the festival. Something like that.
One of these days, A-Qing’s going to tell this stupid god that silence is just as good an answer as blithering nonsense.

For once, she’s actually kind of proud.

Wow. Wow! Fuxing really took the initiative this time! How crazy is that? Fuxing, going out and facing his problems before they barrel straight into his gut with knife?

That’s some top-tier character development.

A-Qing pats Fuxing on the shoulder. She makes sure to get a good grip, look him in the eye, and peek back the stars to get to the idiot boy underneath. “I’m very proud of you,” she says, as seriously as she can muster.

“I’m so honoured to have your approval,” says Fuxing, in the same voice he’d say, *wow, I kind of want to die.*

No. Absolutely not. A-Qing has to grab the bull by the horns and finally steer it back home.

Everyone around her has problems with their emotions, other people’s emotions, emotions in general. She knows that. She’s more or less accepted it. It certainly doesn’t mean she’s happy about it, but once you get used to walking around it soaking wet shoes for four years, you learn to zone it out. It’s a metaphor that works, she thinks.

“Let me guess,” says A-Qing, because her guesses are usually spot-on.

To be fair, it doesn’t take a genius to unravel these very basic feelings, but these sorry souls need all the help they can get.

“You’re a hot mess, and so is Hanguang-Jun, and both of you carry so much turmoil and self-blame inside your silly little hearts that you always think the worst of yourself and the so-called best of each other, when it reality you’re so terrified of rejection that you’ve already accepted it as truth, ignorant to what the other feels, and while you can’t understand why Hanguang-Jun loves you, you know you love him regardless, but it’s the *why* you want him to answer and maybe the *when* so you can better understand the Wei Wuxian who lived and died without ever embracing his heart of hearts and come to terms with yourself, and in fully understanding why you’re loved, you can start to
understand why you love him, but the simple truth is that even though you don’t understand, you
don’t have to, and you like that, because it means that his love is unconditional and so is yours, and
all you want from this world and the next and whatever realms play stupid games with our fates is to
be happy, at peace, and content by his side.”

A-Qing sucks in a deep breath.

“Cool?” she asks, in full monotone.

Fuxing looks like he’s just had his soul ripped out of his chest and ricocheted around the narrow
alleyway. “Uh,” he says, like an idiot.

“Did you get that?” A-Qing demands.

“I think so.”

“Great. Now repeat it back to me in your own words.”

“In my what,” says Fuxing.

“Do you have a brain?” A-Qing asks, with impressive calm.

“I do in fact have that.”

“And you have a heart, too?”

“Unless the anatomy of divine beings suddenly flipped on its head recently, yes, I’d say I have that,
too.”

“Wonderful,” says A-Qing. “Then why don’t you slap those bad boys together, use your genius
deductive skills and all the desires within that squishy, pink blood bag and make the mega-Fuxing
that runs on both logic and emotion?”
There’s a good, solid moment where a great, big silence trots in between them and settles down for a nap. It’s the kind of silence that feels tangible, like a door you could knock on and ask, *hello? Anyone in there?*

“Did you just refer to my heart as a squishy, pink blood bag?” Fuxing asks, delicately.

“Don’t answer my question with a question.”

“Sorry.” Fuxing coughs into his hand, as if he needed to cough in the first place. Loser. “Well,” he begins, then clears his throat, “you put it very aptly.”

“Thanks.”

“So I believe that... I should better understand myself.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Actually, I’d say I know myself quite well. I certainly know what I want. It’s when others get involved that things get all messed up.”

“As it always is.”

“So,” Fuxing says, a little desperately, probably very eager for this conversation to end, “you’re saying I should talk to Lan Zhan and be,” his tongue does a double-take and spits out the words all at once, “honest with everything I want, no matter what happens.”

God, it is such an utter relief to finally hear mister golden god of luck who can’t say three words for shit come to this very basic realization.

“Do it for all that is good in this world,” A-Qing says, very seriously.
Another pause. This one’s more out of realization than hesitation, which A-Qing loves to see. It folds outward into something resembling awkwardness and shame, which A-Qing is extremely grateful to see, because it means there’s at least some sort of small rodent running the wheel that is Fuxing’s sad, sad brain.

“Do you think I should’ve talked to him before, uh,” says Fuxing.

There’s a wall right next to them that would welcome his face eagerly. “Yes,” answers A-Qing, through gritted teeth. She tries to add in as much I’ll destroy you as possible into her words without actually saying them. “But I’ve come to accept things as they are,” she says, with undying patience.

Another group of juniors brushes past them. Nie Yequ is somehow among them.

The small disciple looks up at A-Qing (which is a wonderful feeling) and then up at Fuxing. A little something happens in her shiny eyes, like two stars colliding and eating each other alive. The pieces, which she shouldn’t have to begin with, slide together.

Nie Yequ gives Fuxing a thumbs-up. “Good job,” she says gravely, then lets herself be swept along by her friends.

A-Qing and Fuxing give her a long, hard look. They stare until her back disappears around a bend and the laughter dies down to something more distant.

“We’re sure she’s human,” says Fuxing.

“Honestly? I have no idea,” says A-Qing.

And that’s that. Once they’re done contemplating Nie Yequ’s unique existence, they go their separate ways, fingers crossed on both sides, because if this turns out well, they can finally breathe easy.

Mo Xuanyu and Xue Yang wander into the room around the same time A-Qing crawls through the window.
“Did it go alright?” asks Mo Xuanyu, tentatively.

Xue Yang takes a loud, rude bite out of his peach. Where the hell did he get that? Wasn’t the kitchen staff throwing knives at him earlier? “Looks like our resident god grew a pair,” he says. “About time. Is it really that hard to sit on a—”

“There are children here,” A-Qing snaps.

“Where?” Mo Xuanyu asks, blinking his innocent eyes.

A-Qing and Xue Yang exchange A Look.

“Don’t worry about it,” they say in tandem.

They silently exchange an oath to protect Mo Xuanyu with their lives. Someone has to be pure at heart, and sure as hell isn’t going to be either of them. You can’t protect someone’s innocence from the world, but you can try your best to keep the world at bay.

Not that Mo Xuanyu needs any protecting. But, well, you know. You see a stray puppy, you can’t help but try and bandage it up.

Something like that.

Anyway.

Night passes, day rolls around. That means the festival’s happening tomorrow, which means that they need to wrap up their discussions today.

Needless to say, everyone is horribly confused when Sect Leader Nie smiles from behind his fan and declares that he’s alright with leaving Jin Guangyao alive.

A-Qing grins the widest grin her face can manage. Sect Leader Nie catches her gaze, nods a tiny little thing that’s barely an inclination of his head, and every single person in the room catches it.
Fuxing’s head turns slowly. “A-Qing,” he says, “did you do something?”

“Baseless accusations,” she declares.

“Besides,” Sect Leader Nie adds with a wicked smile, “I believe there’s a good chance he’ll suffer more alive than dead.”

That’s a pretty good point. Mister high and mighty can’t do much but squirm once all his power and status is torn from him, right?

Seeing all that fall apart in his hands should be enough for Sect Leader Nie to be at least partly satisfied. It’s not nice to wish suffering upon anyone, obviously, but it’s a perfectly normal feeling.

“I think we should throw him in baby jail,” says A-Qing.

“What baby jail?” asks Sect Leader Nie.

“Hell baby jail,” she answers gleefully. If the smile on her face freaks anyone out, they don’t comment. “A place where he can’t be touched, but oh boy are the nightmares real, and when Momma Moon loves her baby sinners, she’ll try to swallow you up into her belly and keep you there forever.”

Silence. You could probably hear Mo Xuanyu whisper, “Does she mean the Winter Witch?” if you listened hard enough.

Sect Leader Nie’s mouth twitches at the corner. Ha! Success.

“Are you sure,” he says from behind his fan, “that you’re not the one who wants to kill him?”

“There’s more than one way to kill someone,” says A-Qing.
With kindness, for example. That one’s really effective. It’s worked on every single person she’s tried it on so far. It’s kind of dumb, how people close themselves up and have the audacity to act shocked when kindness is what gets them to open up.

Weirdos. Luckily, A-Qing’s here to provide the normal they don’t have.

There’s nothing much to say after that. Most of the plan has already been formulated and nailed down into place. Fuxing probably came expecting a fight, and now he looks pretty lost. That’s just how their group dynamic works, really.

On the bright side—and for once, there’s only a bright side, which is a miracle and a half—everyone’s pretty pleased with themselves. Sect Leader Nie calls A-Qing over to say a short, “I’ve considered it,” to which A-Qing’s response is, “Thanks, I really appreciate it.”

They nod at each other again, then go their separate ways.

Curiously, Sect Leader Nie heads out the door toward the main street, where all the juniors are scrambling to put the finishing touches on the floats.

Hopefully he can save them. Then again, it’s probably hard to save those poor souls when they’re already so far into the thick of things.

Godspeed, Sect Leader Nie.

There’s another interesting thing, too, and it’s that Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun seem to be in much higher spirits. And by much higher spirits, A-Qing means that the PDA crimes they’re committing should land them in solitary, or maybe not solitary, but a place where they can go be sickeningly affectionate where nobody else has to deal with them.

What the hell, Hanguang-Jun? Good on you for getting your man, but please, for the love of god, get that public menace off your lap.

Xue Yang’s expression has been wrinkly the entire morning. Mo Xuanyu seems happy for them, going so far as to congratulate them personally, but he seems pretty awkward about it.
Yeah. That’s a given.

It’s a relief to catch Hanguang-Jun by himself for even a few minutes, but A-Qing manages it, because she’s awesome like that.

“Congratulations on working things out,” she says, earnest as she feels. She really is happy for them, even if she doesn’t completely understand it. “I hope you can find what it is you’ve been chasing for this entire time.”

Hanguang-Jun is silent for a moment. His golden eyes are still, and it’s the definition of tranquility and peace, but there’s something new just beneath the surface, and it’s alive and breathing and flourishing.

“I already have,” he says simply.


In the span of a single morning, two of the most important conversations and denouements have been tucked away in the corner with all the other things A-Qing has finally managed to finish.

Maybe the Unclean Realm just kicks her into high gear. She’s proud of herself for everything she’s managed to check off her list.

Now for the festival.

You know, the thing about festivals is that it’s mindblowing how things change when night falls and the lights go out.

Brilliant lanterns weave gold-red streams up steep paths; each stairway is accompanied by garlands of golden flowers, courtesy of a certain god of luck. Music rings out in the distance, driving a solid, steady beat into the cold mountain face, and merchants selling all sorts of strange and wonderful trinkets are trying to convince festival-goers to give their products a shot.

It’s an incredible experience, walking from the main hall all the way to the front gate. The shadows
of the buildings ahead cast down in great splotches of black, but their silhouettes tear apart the
darkness and wave brilliant green-and-gold banners, helpfully illuminated by a bit of alchemic
powder and creative array usage.

All in all, A-Qing thinks they did a great job.

“I really—I don’t think this is all necessary,” Mo Xuanyu says, gesturing helplessly at his clothes.
“It’s... far too, um, fancy... for someone like me.”

A-Qing looks him up and down.

“I think you look quite dapper,” she says firmly.

It’s nice to see Mo Xuanyu in formal garb. He has a really nice face, cute and clear and all that good
stuff, but he tends to default toward simple robes that don’t make him stand out too much. To be fair,
it makes things much easier to clean up when arrays get messy, but give the boy his time to shine,
alright?

Xue Yang chose it out for him, which might as well be a miracle. Turns out murderers have good
taste in clothing; Mo Xuanyu looks like every part of the divine disciple he is in those black and gold
robes. He looks a bit like Fuxing, but way more practical since that’s the essence of a master of
talismans and arrays. He keeps fidgeting with his sash and seems to forget that there’s a wreath of
flowers tied to his ponytail, because he freezes halfway through every turn.

“I didn’t know the sash was for me,” Mo Xuanyu mumbles, tracing his fingers over the fine gold
etchings on the silk. “I don’t need all these. I can just draw them myself.”

“Better safe than sorry,” says A-Qing. She doesn’t recognize some of them. “What are they for,
anyway? Protection?”

“A few of them. This one’s to ward away malevolent spirits, and this one’s to attract good fortune,
but it’s still a prototype. Um, I was thinking if I could test it out and see how many times I run into
Fuxing tonight, maybe it could give me an idea of how well it works.”

“Using Fuxing as a guinea pig,” says A-Qing, nodding in respect.
“A test subject.” Mo Xuanyu tries.

The arrays twinkle a bit under the light of all the lanterns. They shine different colours, reflect back all shades of moon and stardust. Mo Xuanyu makes the most curious things.

Since they're the guests of honour, they have to greet people with formal blessings and bows and all that nonsense. Mo Xuanyu tries to keep it up; A-Qing just waves and stands there, handing out golden flowers when people ask for them.

The visitors stream in. They gape at the mountain, gape at the disciples, then gape at the realization that they’ll be in the presence of a god soon enough. Watching them is an amusing way to pass the time, but it gets gold soon enough.

Xue Yang phases through the wall and settles next to them. “Busy night,” he comments half-heartedly.

“Aren’t you supposed to be setting up the floats?” asks A-Qing.

“Sect Leader Nie’s got it covered.”

“Huh. That’s good to hear.”

“Here’s to praying nothing sets on fire.”

“I mean, you’re not there.”

“Do you honestly believe the probability of something going up in flames is higher with me than it is with him?”

A-Qing thinks for a second. “Benefit of the doubt,” she says.
Xue Yang shrugs. He pulls a flower from A-Qing’s hair and tosses it to a passing civilian. They stumble to catch it, then stumble over their thanks.

“I think it’s about time we got started,” Xue Yang says.

“Um, did we check with Fuxing to see if our demonstrations are okay?” Mo Xuanyu asks tentatively.

“Not at all,” answers A-Qing.

“Oh dear,” mumbles Mo Xuanyu.

“It’ll be fine,” A-Qing says, leading the charge up the stairs. The crowd parts to make room for three gold-clad figures taking the steps two at a time. “It’s not even that extreme. It’s just a bit of noise and heat. That’s fine, right?”

“Oh dear,” Mo Xuanyu repeats, and that sets the tone pretty well for the rest of the night.

It’s by pure luck that Nie Yequ doesn’t fly straight off the mountain and dash her puny skull against the rocks.

“Be careful,” yells A-Qing, her grip firmly caught around the girl’s sash. “Keep your head in the game! Don’t let a stupid trap take you out!”

“Yes, ma’am,” says Nie Yequ, in a tone of voice that demonstrates she isn’t even remotely rattled. In fact, her smile curls upward just a little more, and she draws another arrow. “I’ve got it now,” she says. “I just needed to get used to the blast radius.”

In an easy motion of notch-pull-release, Nie Yequ lands an arrow onto a faint, blue array. Another disciple, dressed in black-and-red instead of black-and-gold, happens to cross into the array at the same time.
The entire roof goes up in a brilliant burst of light. There’s a scream, but by the time A-Qing actually hears it over the sound of the hammer of god smiting someone half to death, it’s too distant to make it out clearly.

A-Qing chalks it up to her imagination, because that’s what you do in competitions.

She pauses to admire the smoldering wreck that is the rooftop. She admires it a bit more as it slowly pieces itself together again, slapping down shingles and ceramic like a convoluted puzzle. The array follows suit, circling in on itself to draw itself into existence exactly as it was before.

“Nice shot,” says A-Qing. Nie Yequ hums in agreement. Then she clambers up onto A-Qing’s back, swinging her quiver behind her.

In a single leap, A-Qing clears four houses on a slope of at least sixty degrees, then continues at the same pace, using her memory and the airborne lanterns as a vague outline of the path to take.

“A-Qing looks up. As expected, there’s Mo Xuanyu, sitting comfortably atop a float-turned steed, keeping good pace with them as he speaks into his new and improved voice-amplifying talisman.

“As you know, Yufeng-Zhe and Nie Yequ claimed victory during the practice match due to their incredibly synergy,” Mo Xuanyu tells the audience, whose collective numbers probably total up to a few thousand and are spread out all over the mountain, watching their own mini battles of red-versus-gold. “Yufeng-Zhe, how do you feel about your progress so far?”

A-Qing snatches the talisman Mo Xuanyu tosses down to her. “I’m feeling like I could kick some major ass,” she says, as blandly as she can manage, then hands it to Nie Yequ. “Tell them what you think, Nie Yequ.”

“I’ll punch an extra hole in Jiangzai’s head,” chirps the tiny disciple.

“Ooh, those are fighting words,” says Xue Yang’s voice, from who the hell cares where. “Fortunately, I don’t have a corporeal body to gut. Darling Yufeng-Zhe, on the other hand...”
“Bitch, you can try.”

“I fully intend to.”

“Please keep collateral damage to a minimum,” Mo Xuanyu reminds them helpfully.

“Whatever,” they say in tandem.

The situation looks a little something like this:

So. Festivals. They’re fun, right?

When they take place in the Unclean Realm, obviously they have to have a little something that makes them special. Every cultivation sect has a tendency to brag about their power in the least subtle way possible, and the Qinghe Nie Sect’s way of doing things is to have their disciples perform little shows to prove how competent they are.

Usually that happens via sparring. You know, put two people on either side of a raised platform, give them swords, and let them have at each other. But that’s boring. Bland. Seen it, been there a million times. If they’re not fighting evil hounds that howl your soul into nether realms or crows that eat your heart out through your eyes, what’s the point? No lightning to redirect into blast strikes, either.

Say it together now: boring.

As a responsible adult and the first disciple of the golden god of prosperity, A-Qing isn’t about to let that slide. Who cares if your disciples can point a sharp stick at each other and do some fancy tricks with their feet?

Nobody. Everyone can do that. What these people need is a fast-paced, high-stakes demonstration of just how incredibly awesome these tiny, crazy juniors are.

They did it once; they can do it again. That’s exactly why Capture the Flag but the Floor is Lava is up and running again, except this time, it’s in darkness with nothing but dim lantern lighting to draw out fuzzy silhouettes of roofs, and Mo Xuanyu made some wonderful, self-activating trap arrays that
do everything from drop a vat of dye and feathers onto unsuspecting victims to hurl them off the mountain.

Frankly, they’re weapon-grade and probably a bit intense, but that can be overlooked. This is Qinghe Nie. Are you even a disciple if you can’t avoid some arrays?

The answer is: yes. But try not to get hit by the latter of the arrays, because those can get, uh, troublesome.

Fortunately, Mo Xuanyu was kind enough to slap glowing bands onto their robes to denote their teams. Red for Xue Yang, gold for A-Qing. Easy. Visible even in darkness. Great for target practice when your bands don’t match.

So apparently Xue Yang’s planned things out a bit better this time, which isn’t much of a surprise given his conniving rat brain, but A-Qing’s team is going with the classic hold the fort until the ace comes back victorious strategy.

The plan is as follows:

Keep up the good fight. Blow stuff up. In the unlikely situation that blowing stuff up should fail, which it never has, tuck the flag into someone’s robes and charge recklessly ahead.

No rules to break if they all bend so far you can tie knots with them.

In all honesty, A-Qing thinks they could’ve coordinated things a bit better, but as a wise woman once said, they have the advantage of simplicity.

Not to quote herself or anything.

There are indeed disciples guarding the way up, stationed in groups of two every few roofs apart. A-Qing isn’t mean enough to shatter their future prospects entirely, so she settles for juggling them out of the way with her fans and tossing the naughty ones into windows and doors if they’re squirming particularly hard.
Nie Yequ lands every shot she takes. She pins people down by their robes in difficult places, like the one unfortunate boy who’s now dangling between two houses by either of his sleeves, or that one girl who can’t seem to get her hair out from where it’s somehow tangled into the shaft of the arrow.

And A-Qing runs.

If there’s one thing A-Qing’s good at, it’s running. She hurls Nie Yequ up when the blockades get thick, leaps into the cracks between things, and sorts out the mess by dragging some of the soft-bodied children all the way down the mountain. It’s quick, it’s efficient, and it’s a great way to throw everything into disarray.

Needless to say, it’s a pretty easy trip up the mountain. Nie Yequ warns her of oncoming enemies and then proceeds to snipe them out of the air. A-Qing continues her pace undaunted.

Until she hits a roadblock in the form of a chain of arrays that whines to life immediately after she zips past them.

Nie Yequ hops off her back. The little disciple knocks her knuckles on the formation. It knocks back.

It’s easy to see what’s going on here.

The flag, which is just a glorified piece of scrap cloth Xue Yang found somewhere, waves peacefully in the wind. A-Qing and Nie Yequ are in the very plaza in which the flag flaps casually, and the problem lies in the fact that there’s now a huge blockade of silver light keeping them in the plaza and separated from the outside world.

A-Qing thinks for a moment. She ducks her head into the cracks between things and tries pushing on the wall. No go.

She ducks out, then gives the wall a good kick. It thrums a bit, probably dissipating the force all throughout the sky-high barrier.

“Oh,” she says, dispassionately. “Spatial-rending arrays? Really?”
“It’s just a special something to make things fun,” Xue Yang’s voice chimes. “Keep the beastie contained—isn’t that right?”

“Look in a mirror first,” says A-Qing.

It’s definitely an annoying predicament. To be completely transparent, A-Qing expected Xue Yang to go mano-a-mano, but then again, he’s always been a coward. So this is just par for the course.

Nie Yequ makes sure to grab the flag. At least it hasn’t been rigged with explosives.

“This is a situation,” says the small disciple. She’s still smiling. Why is she smiling? “What should we do, Yufeng-Zhe?”

Good question. The array doesn’t seem like it’s going anywhere soon, and A-Qing kind of has to be somewhere soon before Xue Yang tears through her team and steals the victory like the thief he is.

“Hmm,” says A-Qing, to herself.

“Hmm,” she says, after thinking a bit.

“Hmm,” she says, with emphasis, after she thinks up something that might just work.

“Okay,” she finally says, turning to Nie Yequ. “I’ve got a really stupid plan, but it’s going to be great.”

“Does it involve things exploding?” asks Nie Yequ.

“No,” says A-Qing. “But it might involve things disintegrating.”

Nie Yequ contemplates this fact. “I guess it’s okay then,” she decides.
“Great. Now let me just get some flowers.”

When A-Qing says this plan is dumb, she means it. It’s incredibly stupid. She’s here, trapped in this stupid plaza, clapping her fans open and closed as fast as she can, because as far as she knows, that’s the fastest way to summon as many flowers as possible.

“That’s a lot of flowers,” Nie Yequ says lightly, to a sheet of flowers that’s covered the entire plaza and is currently crawling up their ankles.

“Thanks,” A-Qing says. “I didn’t notice.”

“So this is all to trade.”

“Yeah. Flowers don’t grow as naturally over there as they do here. It’s the good stuff for them.”

“This isn’t illegal in any way, right?”

“Fuck the law,” says A-Qing.

“Fair enough,” is Nie Yequ’s response.

As you can imagine, flowers pile up very quickly when you’re very, very determined. This, combined with A-Qing’s curious tendency to draw in all manner of creatures that really shouldn’t belong on this side of existence, makes for a rather confusing and hectic spectacle.

A-Qing isn’t sure what Mo Xuanyu sees right now, but what she sees is this: the entire plaza buried in flowers, with two shorter-than-average girls crawling on top of a gate to stay out of the fray.

“I think that’s probably enough,” Nie Yequ says.

“It should make for a pretty wild night parade,” A-Qing agrees.
“A what?”

“Don’t worry about it,” says A-Qing, dismissively. She looks up toward the sky and spots a full moon. Nice. Things somehow always seem to work out with these things. The stars always align themselves just right when things need to explode.

So when she clambers up to the highest point on the gate, braces herself, and shouts, “O Trader under moonlight, be my guide!” things are looking pretty good.

Five minutes later and A-Qing’s wrapping up the details of a simple trade with a simple eldritch being from another dimension. The Trader looks awfully pleased to have been summoned here, and A-Qing has to wonder if she’s somehow strapped the Unclean Realm to the great wheel of fate that turns and turns and runs over all their toes and fingers because it’s fun to watch them squeal. Hopefully not. That would be messy.

In the distance, A-Qing can hear Mo Xuanyu nervously commenting that the moon appears to have disappeared. If she listens really closely, she can almost hear Fuxing sigh.

Well, joke’s on them. The Trader sits on the gate, almost touching elbows with A-Qing, and she’s having a great time scribbling out the details of this deal in a language nobody with normal eyes can read.

She’s a bit of a weird one, with that moon trotting behind her like an obedient puppy, but A-Qing’s seen weirder things.

Fortunately, the Trader is also one of the least messy messy beings in all of existence. She’s not here to make things better or worse; she’s just hanging around, minding her own business, scribbling down deals and contracts into parchment, or if you’re unlucky, carving it into your gravestone. It’s a perfectly good path. It’s just a bit wobbly and narrow.

“Anyway,” says A-Qing, leading the conversation away from where it’s somehow turned back to herself, “I’d appreciate it greatly if you could inform your hounds about human physiology and how meat and bones aren’t necessarily great things to bite, because Sect Leader Nie would most definitely have me executed for destroying his sect.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” says the Trader, twirling a lily on her finger absentmindedly. She looks down at the makeshift vat of flowers, smiles, and snaps her fingers.
In one comical *poof*, the entire batch disappears.

“Thank you for your patronage,” says the Trader, and in one not-so-comical *poof*, she snaps herself out of existence as well.

Nie Yequ muses silently for a while. She doesn’t seem surprised, or fearful, or shocked. Just thoughtful. “So,” she begins. Thinks for a bit longer. “Ghost hounds.”

“Not ghost,” says A-Qing. “Skeleton hounds. They have... a unique skill set.”

They both clamber down the gate and loiter in the plaza for a bit longer. It’s hard to guess exactly how far Xue Yang’s gotten in his gallant crusade to come as close to murdering innocent children as possible, but if past events are any indication, A-Qing thinks it’s pretty close.

A chilling howl breaks through the night sky.

It’s more literal than it sounds, because the stars and the deep plum darkness and the moonless light crack in half high above their heads, peeling back to reveal a sort of void that only true nothingness can create.

It’s the kind of nothing that hurts to look at because it doesn’t make sense. There’s no such thing as nothing, except here it is, and here they are.

A-Qing raises her hand to the split in the seams. “Hey there,” she calls out. The nothing turns to her with all their beady, cackling heads. “Here, boy!”

A yip-yip-hooray would be suitable right now, but obviously A-Qing’s saving that for later, since it’s an absolutely ridiculous victory chant that she’ll force-feed to Xue Yang when she wins. Because she will.

The procession phases into the plaza like it was always there, but not in the way your eyes just miss things sometimes. As soon as the hounds touch the smooth, tiled ground, they begin pacing around like they’ve owned the rocks and the mountains and this entire earth since before a great astral body smashed into it and dug out all sorts of neat things.
Not that A-Qing would know. But it sure sounds interesting.

“Hey there,” A-Qing repeats, to a plaza full of creepy, eldritch dogs. They all turn to stare at her. “Your master told you the details, right? You know the drill. No biting, no eating, and no murdering. Howling and headbutting are safe. Copy?”

The dogs yip. It sounds like a million ceramic pots being broken all at once.

“Great,” says A-Qing. She gestures to Nie Yequ, and the small disciple climbs onto her back once more. “Let’s get going, then.”

In a horrifying choral of surprisingly harmonious howling, the silver barrier shatters into pieces.

“That was anticlimactic,” says Nie Yequ, thoughtfully.

“Usually is when you have demon dogs,” says A-Qing.

In hindsight, it’s probably a terrifying sight to see hounds with no skin, no flesh, and no eyes barreling down rooftops at breakneck speed. Most civilians aren’t familiar with the Other Side, so to their untrained minds, it probably looks like the end times have come in the form of bobblehead skeleton dogs.

That would be one hell of a way to go out. Unfortunately for the world, A-Qing doesn’t plan on letting it end itself like the collective idiot it is. If the world wants to end, it’ll be on her terms and no one else’s.

“Out of the way!” yells A-Qing, as the horde lands in the middle of a bright and vibrant plaza full of civilians.

“Lord save us,” someone screeches.

“Divine inquiries should be given to the closest stationed Qinghe Nie Sect disciple,” Nie Yequ
provides helpfully. Her voice pitches upward when A-Qing shoots forward to keep up with the hounds.

From there on out, it’s a sad game.

The red-and-black-clad disciples put up a good fight where a fight can be had, but the horde is too creepy and too otherworldly to be stopped by any physical means. They howl, and the poor kids just drop unconscious where they stand. Anyone who isn’t drooling on the ground is horribly dazed, which makes them easy targets to get headbutted off the rooftops.

If A-Qing had the capability to feel sorry for the juniors, she would. Except she kind of needs to win right now, and she’d rather leave the pity party for when she has time.

By the time Mo Xuanyu catches sight of A-Qing, he seems decently alarmed.

“And here’s Yufeng-Zhe, making good pace with a horde of, um,” a pause in which Mo Xuanyu contemplates the worth of his existence against the jaws of undead dogs, “semi-divine servants from another realm.”

A-Qing gives him a thumbs-up. Mo Xuanyu stares into the rend in the sky despairingly.

Soon enough, they’re approaching a scene that looks like one of those epic fables of a fortress being stormed and a horrible battle of attrition following close after. Her disciples are putting up an incredibly respectable fight, having abandoned law and order and reason long ago in exchange for pure, unadulterated feral power. Unfortunately, Xue Yang’s a bastard and a one-man army, and it’s a long but losing battle.

That would be cool, except A-Qing doesn’t care for any battles of attrition, and she’s getting hungry, so it would be nice to end this as quickly as possible.

“So you cheated your way out of it,” Xue Yang says, after he’s been pinned down by five hounds. He sighs. “Of course. You always have the trickiest ways of slipping out of these things.”

“That’s me,” A-Qing says, as smugly as she can manage. “Playing things right when they go all stupid.”
“That doesn’t make any sense. Also, tell this dumb dog to get its jaws off my face.”

“IT’s not biting.”

“No, it’s not. It’s in that delicate state between hungry and murderous. Call the stupid mutt off.”

“Whathever.”

A-Qing calls the hounds off only after Nie Yequ has secured the flag and is throwing herself down the mountain at a pace neither of them can hope to match.

It’s actually kind of frightening. Has she always been that fast? God, what a weird kid.

When Mo Xuanyu declares the game over, it’s with a deep sigh of relief and a quick comment of, “Um, that bell talisman looks awfully familiar.”

Somewhere near the main gate, something explodes. This explosion is the beginning of an epic and glorious chain reaction in which fireworks are transmuted and lit simultaneously, firing high up into the broken night sky in a rush of glaring gold bursts. Chains of fire trail upward, waving around like cute little serpents hell-bent on destruction, and then the screaming really picks up when giant clouds of smoke pillow down from nowhere and start throwing flower petals into the wind.

A-Qing sits on the rooftop and watches with peace in her heart. Xue Yang sighs, then makes himself comfortable as well.

“Yip-yip-hooray,” says A-Qing, because she can.

“Fuck you,” is Xue Yang’s response.

All in all: not a bad night at all.
The thing about festivals is all of them have to end eventually, and once they end, it’s time for clean up.

Fuxing gathers them around a table and gives them the talk again. This time, they’re all too tired to process it properly. All the damage is gone, anyway, and the hounds have long since wandered off back home and closed the door behind them. It’s all behind them, A-Qing says, distantly.

“I didn’t raise you like this,” says Fuxing, but there’s no heart behind it.

“Yes you did,” A-Qing fires back accusingly. “You most certainly did, and now you have to deal with it.”

“I most certainly did not. I told you not to make exploding talismans. That’s what a respectable adult would do.”

“You told me that bullshit while making them yourself. Didn’t you accidentally give some civilians wings once? What’s wrong with temporarily punching a few holes in walls?”

“Collateral damage is something we strive to avoid,” Fuxing says, in a tone of voice that demonstrates he’s trying to get it across to himself as well.

“Sure, dad,” says A-Qing.

While Fuxing processes his abysmal parenting skills, Hanguang-Jun tells them all, “Prepare for departure.”

“Okay,” asks Mo Xuanyu, trying not to make every statement sound like a nervous question.

“We will be leaving for Gusu,” Hanguang-Jun elaborates.

“Oh, nice,” says A-Qing. She’s never been to Gusu—not properly, that is. It always seemed kind of awkward to bring it up, but now that things have been settled, she’s pretty excited to see what the
Cloud Recesses look like.

Apparently there’s something about rules? Whatever. That won’t be stopping her anytime soon. She’ll shave the beards off any elders who think they’re better and brighter than a world that’s always changing.

That night, when they’re all sorted into their rooms, A-Qing thinks for a bit.

It’s a self-reflection she deserves. Or rather, as always deserved.

Things are changing. Not in a huge way, but she can feel the shifting in her gut.

It used to be just her and Fuxing. The two of them against the world. And... as depressing as it sounds, it was kind of fun that way.

There was a sort of peril in it, but there was also a kind of camaraderie you don’t get anywhere else. The world fell to pieces around them, and it was their job to scramble and try to put things back into place without breaking it even more.

But now Xue Yang and Mo Xuanyu are here, and Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun have their own thing, and things are changing.

Is that bad?

No. Of course not. They’re just different.

One story is becoming two. But it’s all the same overarching story, with all the same characters and places and feelings. Fuxing would’ve come back no matter what happened; that’s just how he is. And Hanguang-Jun would’ve found him no matter what. That story will always happen.

But A-Qing, Xue Yang, Mo Xuanyu—they’re the kids who were forsaken, as dramatic as it sounds, and it’s a miracle they’ve even come so far.
Yeah. That’s right. Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun have their own story in every timeline. But this time, the three forgotten brats have one, too.

Huh.

Interesting.

A-Qing muses this over for a bit.

And then, under the woven light of the moon, she flips open her journal and begins writing an author’s note that’ll take a lifetime and a half to finish.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for your patience! i needed some time to collect myself after writing chap 8, but now i'm back!

last chapter and this chapter are kind of what i see as turning points in the story. this is the story of fuxing... until it isn't. it's a story that exists thanks to him and some shenanigans i'll get into in the next chapter, but i like to see it as the story of outsiders that suffered fates worse than death until they didn't, and now the world revolves a little bit around them, and they revolve around the world, and they're just trying to live the lives they suddenly have no matter how strange the people they walk with are.

nhs is a really interesting character for me because his actions are all implied, not shown. it's hard to truly understand everything he does simply because the perspective locks you out of his mind; personally, i'm of the opinion that he's... kind of lost in his own desires. holding grudges for a long time really drains your spirit, but if you feel like you have to hold onto it, there's just no release. nhs never wanted to grow up the way he did, but here he is now, so he has to keep going. if he stops, what'll it all be for? that's the question that always comes up with grudges and vengeance. who is it for, really? what do you really gain? how much do you really lose?

forgiveness vs letting go is one of my favourite themes of all time, if you couldn't tell... and it feels great to finally let it all out!! nhs deserves to be happy like he was before—enjoying the world and all the little things that came with it!! why are all these characters so tragic!!

and!! before i forget again because i am a fool!! here's a-qing being a complete and utter badass ft. the (un)lucky luck squad! repressed emotion is the name of the game until a-qing gets a hold of you, then you're done for

if you have any questions, you can ask me at my curiouscat!
i'm also on twitter, so feel free to talk to me there!
interlude: the intriguing incident of the name-stealing bride

Chapter Summary

The Siblings:

A stone-cold heart catches fallen stars.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, long story short, people have been going missing because of a name-stealing bride.”

A-Qing rubs her temples. “Wow,” she says, flatly and incredibly unimpressed. “This almost
reminds me of that time a night-eating sun started eating people.”

“Very much so,” agrees Mie Yu.

“So you’re telling me that a bride can somehow steal names.”

“And with it, identities, memories, and souls.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” says A-Qing.

“Sorry,” says Mie Yu, without much heart.

They both down the last of their tea. A-Qing slams her cup down, not hard enough to chip it and
incur the wrath of the so-called patricide girl who treats them like her children, but certainly loud
enough for everyone within a respectable vicinity to flinch like they’ve just had knives thrown at
them.

A ghost-demon-spirit bride. Great.

It’s way too early in the morning for any conversations about demon brides that can somehow swipe
away hearts and names and all that good stuff, but apparently semi-magical pseudo-spiritual crime
never rests, so here A-Qing is in bright, sunny, cursed Yinhe along with her jolly crew of unlucky
lucky allies, having the time of her life making detours from The Ineffable Plan because an evil
monster has taken identity theft way too seriously and is literally shattering people out of existence.

It’s a headache and a half and A-Qing doesn’t want anything to do with it. Apparently this name-
stealing bride can’t take a hint and see that people have to clean up after it.

“By the way,” says Mie Yu, gesturing vaguely to where Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun are doing some
romantic nonsense like looking into each other’s eyes or something along the same vein, “I see
you’ve solved one problem. Congratulations.”

“It’s a never-ending cycle of misery and despair,” says A-Qing.

“At least some things never change,” says Mie Yu, and that’s the end of that.

So, what’s going on here?
It's just another lovely day here in warm, pleasant Yinhe.

That's perfectly fine by itself. The problem lay in the fact that whenever A-Qing visits Yinhe, it's never for a good reason. Life seems to be taking that fact very seriously to heart, because these numbers are tallying up fast against the so-called tourist destinations advertised by enthusiasts and locals. It's hard to enjoy the scenery when you keep looking over your shoulder to check if the sun's turned into a giant black spot again.

Besides, said scenery includes a certain chasm that drops you directly into Other Side hell, and frankly, those memories can stay in that god-forsaken hole.

There really isn't much to the story. They were setting up the groundwork for The Ineffable Plan, but otherwise minding their own business.

Minding their own business never saved them before, and it isn't going to start now.

“Alright,” A-Qing says to Xue Yang and Mo Xuanyu, once she’s thrown all her belongings on the bed. They barely glance in her direction. It's pretty much become second nature to share a room by now. “Does anyone know about any monsters that can eat names?” she asks them, crossing her fingers that someone here has the information tucked in some weird crevice.

Mo Xuanyu looks up from his scripts. “Uh,” he begins, “I beg your pardon?”

Xue Yang tightens the bandages around his wrists, then moves onto picking at his nails. “Metaphorically or literally?” he asks casually.


“Mm,” says Xue Yang. “Nope. But that thing could eat me and choke its sorry self on my pointy bits.”

“I'd like to avoid feeding people to demons if possible,” Mo Xuanyu hastens to say.

“We don’t even know if it’s a demon,” A-Qing points out.

“Names are written onto the soul,” says Mo Xuanyu, soul-bounding array expert. “They act as identifiers. Pointers, if you will. Memories are bound to names as well. The soul kind of shatters without a name or memories to piece it together.”

While A-Qing can’t classify herself as an important figure in the research of disembodied thoughts and trauma and desires, she fancies herself well-versed enough to at least offer some irritated comments.

“What a pain,” she says, seating herself with a huff.

Name-stealing brides aren’t an everyday thing, not even in their unfortunately extraordinary lives. That said, name-stealing brides don’t even come close to some of the stranger things they’ve seen. So all in all, it’s about average on the scale of weirdness.

Once they’ve messed around for long enough, they decide it's time to do what they do best: tinker with things so hard everything explodes and the component parts are easier to see.

“We’re heading out,” A-Qing tells Fuxing on the way. “Don’t get yourself killed while we’re gone.”

“Somebody needs to decode all these fables,” says Fuxing, waving a surprisingly thick tome in the
air. He looks back at Hanguang-Jun, who gives them all a tiny inclination of the head that can barely be classified as a nod. “Well, two brains should be better than one. Don’t blow anything up.”

Now he’s just jinxing it.

A-Qing would love to pretty it up a bit, make it seem like this isn’t all as monotonous and annoying as it sounds. But it really is.

She’s seen thousands of magical shenanigans play themselves out to be even more magical and evil than they originally seemed, and she fully expects this investigation to take some sort of hideous turn halfway down the road and throw them all off with how tragic/brutal/disgusting the real deal is.

But that can wait for later. Right now, it’s time to spin the wheels in her head and get down to business.

“Hello, Yufeng-Zhe,” greets a bean paste bun vendor.

“Hey,” says A-Qing. “Do you have a moment?”

The vendor raises an eyebrow. “This is about the disappearances, isn’t it?”

“I really wish it wasn’t.”

“No biggie,” says the vendor. He wipes his hands clean, then asks, “What do you want to know?”

And the story goes a little like this:

A few weeks back, a merchant was travelling the roads late at night. She stayed in Yinhe for a few days and got comfortable. Met some people. Sold some stuff. Packed her bags and left. The usual.

So when she showed up barely a week after she left, people were kind of confused. Maybe she had forgotten something, or had pounded out an agreement with some locals?

Either way, it was nothing to worry about. She was just one of many merchants, and while her distant behaviour and empty smile were disconcerting, the people of Yinhe are hardened veterans when it comes to the spectrum of weird, which stretches from their fingertips to the horizon and all the way around until it smacks them in the back of the head.

The point being: okay, so maybe this lady had some ghosts in her. Cool. Who doesn’t?

Life went on. Everything was great. And then one day, the merchant just dropped dead out of nowhere.

The reaction was something like, alright, that’s kind of worrying. But as we established earlier, she probably had some ghosts in her. Due to this very peculiar but not astoundingly rare fact, we are led to the conclusion that the ghosts squeezed her organs a bit too hard, and her heart exploded.

This was unfortunately debunked when they performed an autopsy and realized that her heart hadn’t exploded, but had rather shattered like glass.

They had to pick out the pieces from the rest of her organs. It was disturbing.

Okay, thought everyone, sufficiently creeped out. That’s not normal. Hearts don’t usually do that.

They called in a medic, who took one look at the corpse and suggested they fetch a monk, and then they called in a monk, who was convinced the entire town was under the influence of demons, and
then they called a rouge cultivator, who poked his head around for long enough that they found him with his face buried in a vat of uncooked rice, had a good laugh, and stopped laughing when they performed an autopsy on him and discovered that his heart had shattered as well.

That was around the time Mie Yu decided to give Fuxing a call. It was a reasonable reaction.

“And you called it a name-stealing bride because...”

“Well, clearly the thing stole the merchant’s identity,” the bean paste bun vendor says righteously. “Every night after, we’d see a woman in bridal garb prancing down the streets with the merchant’s face.”

Serving fresh nightmare fuel: one of Yinhe’s many gifts. “Why didn’t you call it the face-stealing bride?” asks A-Qing.

“Now that’s just a bad image,” the vendor replies, almost scandalized. “Can you imagine something going around and peeling people’s faces off? Name-stealing sounds much better. Less blood involved and all that.”

“But people still die.”

“Yes,” says the vendor.

“Mmkay, you guys are weird,” says A-Qing.

“Pleasure to be of service,” says the vendor.

He hands her three steaming hot buns, then waves cheerfully as she goes on her way to people whose weirdness she can tolerate.

Despite the rumors of an evil creature who steals identities as a pastime, the residents of Yinhe seem to be going about their lives as if everything’s perfectly fine. They’ve always been a little concussed in the head due to their vicinity to abnormal, supernatural things. Maybe that’s just how things are this far south. A-Qing wouldn’t know. Yinhe’s the bottom line of all her travels. So far, that is.

Once this is all done, she’ll probably wander around for a bit, fix things up where they need to be fixed for a bit longer, and then set out for distant lands.

The world’s a big place full of dumb people. Her journal might only have so many pages, but her eyes and legs work just fine, don’t they? So as long as the world can wait, A-Qing’s going to keep walking and walking until the wheel of fate itself comes along and grinds her bones to dust. Then she’ll roam around as an incorporeal spirit for as long as her ectoplasmic body lasts, and after that... well, she’ll probably be born as someone new and have to do it all over again.

Sounds fun. Also exhausting. Those aren’t mutually exclusive.

Introspection and future planning aside, it’s strange watching civilians wander around the ever-chaotic market streets. There’s the sound of something very valuable breaking, followed by an explosion of sorts. Nobody bats an eye. A guard, however, sighs to herself and trudges over to the general area where the sounds came from.

A lot of people say, “Hello, Yufeng-Zhe,” as A-Qing passes. Nobody tries to offer their firstborn to her. It’s an incredible demonstration of character development.

By the time A-Qing makes it to the dead-end alley with a certain etching of a certain god of luck by a
certain sword spirit, Mo Xuanyu and Xue Yang are already waiting for her. They appear to be
discussing the physiology of the human body and if hearts can actually transmute themselves into
anything remotely shatter-able.

“I think you’re missing the point,” A-Qing tells both of them once she’s stepped into the
conversation.

“No, no, it’s important,” Mo Xuanyu insists. He draws a simple array into the dirt with a stick and
points at an obscure symbol. A-Qing has no idea what it means. “If we write a script with the prime
of soul, the element of fire, and the planetary metals of gold and silver, we get something that
roughly translates to and so the heart hardens, though it can also mean let the soul shatter.”


“Sulfur for the soul, fire for bright emotions, gold for vitality, silver for memory,” says Mo Xuanyu.
He taps the stick against a symbol that looks like a candy stick skewered the wrong way. “See?”

“No,” A-Qing says honestly. “But I believe you. What’s this for again?”

Xue Yang slits a piece of parchment out of his robes. He flicks it over to A-Qing with careless ease.
“We found a cute little hint,” he says. He also smiles, which is the equivalent of brandishing a knife.
“Apparently a little girl ran out when dawn broke and found it where the bride once stood.”

Very carefully, A-Qing unfolds the parchment. She holds it away from her in the very reasonable
assumption that it’s going to explode. It doesn’t.

She examines it more carefully. It’s a bunch of strange drawings in a circle.

“It sure looks like an array,” she says.

“Intelligent commentary is just one of your many gifts,” says Xue Yang.

“Shut the fuck up,” says A-Qing. She kneels down beside Mo Xuanyu, who props his chin on his
hand to better examine his array in a more intelligent-looking manner. “So you’re trying to recreate
it,” she continues.

“Yes,” Mo Xuanyu confirms. He scribbles some more symbols outside of the array, presumably to
play with later. “That array—I’ve never seen anything like it,” he explains. He hesitates before
saying, “It’s very... traditional.”

“It’s old as shit and creaks when you look at it too hard,” Xue Yang supplies.

“Well, I mean,” Mo Xuanyu says, and nothing more.

If two out of three people agree, then A-Qing’s bound to reach the same conclusion sooner or later.
She traces out all the pointy triangles and evenly-spaced lines.

That certainly doesn’t bode well.

“It looks similar to a bell talisman,” she realizes with some horror.

The aforementioned bell talisman inevitably attracts Xue Yang’s attention. All of them have this
curious tendency of gravitating toward things that a) explode b) implode c) spontaneously combust in
colorful manners or d) all of the above. This means that all three of them are huddled around a
shoddy doodle of an array, a tiny piece of parchment, and a small slip of red paper.
If you listened hard enough, you could probably hear the wheels spinning slowly in their minds.

“When you call it a bell array,” Mo Xuanyu begins carefully.

A-Qing answers him before he finishes that thought. “It’s a bell array because it attracts all kinds of prosperity into one place,” she says. “But you know the deal. Too much prosperity can only end in disaster.”

All three of them nod sagely. If there’s one thing they understand, it’s that life is a bitch and a half.

The too much prosperity part is mostly lost on them, but it’s depressing enough to imagine a poor soul sitting through course after course of resplendent meals only to starve to death the next day because fate forgot to feed them. That’s why you either break into fate’s house and freeload there until it has a nervous breakdown and gives you all the meals you want, or you learn how to cook for yourself. Alternatively, you could become a being above mortal functions like eating. Life’s weird that way.

“Hypothetically, then, the bell array could accidentally shatter a heart,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“I don’t think we’re dealing with either ‘hypothetically’ or ‘accidentally’ here,” Xue Yang puts in helpfully.

“But it shouldn’t just shatter,” A-Qing argues. She sketches out the component parts of the talisman beside Mo Xuanyu’s array. “See?” she says, once she’s done. “Everything has a root character of fire, gold, or the sun. If anything, people should be spewing flames and deep-frying their eyeballs inside their skulls.”

“Counterpoint,” says Xue Yang. “You draw everything with those roots because you’re Fuxing’s disciple. What’s the root of the array?”

They all lean in to take a closer look. The characters are curved and artistic and incredibly old. A-Qing thinks they look something like trees.

“Wood, maybe?” she says, mostly guessing.

“But then people would be rotting on the spot,” Mo Xuanyu points out. “Wood would be growth and decomposition.”

“Or they’d turn into little orchards where they stand,” Xue Yang adds, in usual morbid fashion. “They’d have little vines trickling out their noses and seeds in their brains. Yum,” he tags on cheerfully, because he’s disgusting like that.

The conversation continues for a while. While they can’t figure out how to replicate the array exactly, at least they know that something is responsible for creating or controlling it.

Unfortunately, their resident necromancer happens to be elsewhere at the moment, and the investigation is far from over. Mo Xuanyu jots down a note to go harass Fuxing about some specific strand of how he gets corpses to jump up and dance on their boney, stubby, tippy toes for him. Then they stand up, dust themselves off, and head toward wider and busier streets in the hopes that a clue will walk directly into them. That, or they’ll have to chase after it manically, brandishing exploding talismans and swords and maybe evil dogs.

This day just keeps getting better and better by each passing minute.

“Okay, this bride thing is incredibly creepy,” A-Qing voices, a little delayed but justified nonetheless.
“Why the hell is it stealing names? Why not just...” She gestures in that worldly fashion to denote a departure from the norm. “Eat them, like normal monsters? Isn’t that what they usually do?”

“They usually eat the full course,” says Xue Yang. “Soul and all.”

“It could just be a picky eater,” Mo Xuanyu suggests.

A-Qing thinks back on her previous investigation here in wonderful Yinhe. “I don’t get that kind of feeling,” she says, praying to every deity that’s still alive and kicking up above that things don’t turn out like they did back then.

“Because you’re the expert now,” Xue Yang says, blandly.

“I’ve seen more weird shit than you have,” A-Qing argues.

“How many demons have you seen?”

“One more than you, right?”

Xue Yang narrow his eyes. “Is that a joke about how I’m a demon, or is this about the flower goddess?”

A-Qing gives a gesture of half-half.

“Nice,” says Xue Yang.

“Three, please,” says Mo Xuanyu to a street vendor. It appears he’s abandoned them in lieu of honey candies. He shoves one in his mouth and continues walking. “I was thinking it could be a god,” he says, teeth clinking against the hard candy. He kind of looks like a squirrel. That’s sweet.

If only the prospects he’s swinging into play were as nice as him. Nope: they suck real hard. But what else is new?

“A god,” A-Qing repeats slowly. She lets that sink in and immediately wants to punch a wall. In an attempt to preserve her own sanity and patience, she says, “I don’t think any self-respecting god would start name-napping humans.”

“Shouxing,” Xue Yang chirps.

“Dead.”

“Dead dead? You mean like Fuxing, who clearly isn’t dead?”

“Shouxing probably blew up with her realm. Different story, different times.”

“Probably. We’re doing probably again.”

“If Shouxing was still alive, she’d be living happily with Ying Huohua in some distant corner of the world, not taking up another killing spree,” says A-Qing, a little heated. “What the hell’s up with you, asshole? You really want to ruin that for them?”

“This is the whole ‘redemption arc after death thing’ you love so much.”

“Bitch,” says A-Qing, genuinely offended. When did she ever give that sort of impression? That’s bullshit and they all know it. “If you die a horrible person, you stay a horrible person. You’re lucky because Fuxing zapped you back to life and installed Jiangzai 2.0 in your sad brain,” she reminds
him, because apparently he’s forgotten all about it.

“Ah, but I was the one who came to terms with it,” Xue Yang points out, like it’s something to be proud of.

“I would’ve seriously murdered you if you hadn’t,” says A-Qing.

“Well,” says Mo Xuanyu, out of absolutely nowhere, “what about Luxing?”

Everyone falls quiet. There’s a frightening moment where the pieces click together, and denial spreads itself like a thick glue all over said puzzle.

One fish, two fish, three fish, four. Fuxing, Shouxing, Luxing, a whole pantheon of gods that screwed up so hard the heavens split in half and crushed all of them to death. That’s why you don’t fuck around up in the clouds: because the very concept of ascending is fragile, because it’s really just doing something so good that a higher power takes the time to give you a badge of honor, except said badge of honor cuts every part of you that touches it and drops like a goddamn star when it slips out of your hands.

Ascending and all the bullshit can go sit in the corner. People can be good to others without the promise of godhood at the end. Immortality is one hell of a garbage gift.

With all that in mind, A-Qing doesn’t have much to say.

“No,” she says resolutely.

“Ohh, I hear denial in that word,” Xue Yang sings. Unbeknownst to him, his chances of living to see tomorrow just dropped drastically. Alas, murder will have to wait until after this dumb paranormal mystery is solved.

“It’s just a guess,” Mo Xuanyu assures them both. “We don’t really have a good sample size, but this was the first place Fuxing came to after he was reborn, and Shouxing loitered here for a while, so by process of elimination...”


Xue Yang hums a note of disagreement, then muses aloud, “Maybe he doesn’t eat them. Maybe he’s making their names into one mega-name.”

“What would you do with that?”

“Become a demon who can only be slain once someone recites your name in full,” says Xue Yang, with all the confidence of someone who’s had way too much free time to create imaginary characters in that weird, warped brain of his.

“Okay, OC generator,” says A-Qing. “Use that brain power to formulate coherent responses.”

A pause. Then Xue Yang says, “Do we even know if Luxing’s still alive?”

Oh, thank goodness. A logical question. Those are getting rarer and rarer by the day.

All three of them think for a bit. That’s one good thing about their fun-sized group: all of them have decent brains in their skulls.

“Well, Shouxing and Fuxing made it out okay,” Mo Xuanyu starts.
“Clearly the old Fuxing had some problems and had to hire someone new for the job,” A-Qing points out. And what a person they chose.

“Luxing wouldn’t have gone down easily,” says Xue Yang. “He’s a golden god. Those guys can sure take a beating.”

Can gods resurrect themselves after dying? That would be creepy. The good thing about ascended gods is that they all used to be human in some way, shape or form, and the thing about humans is that they still bleed when you stab them no matter how divine they are.

But what happens if you turned a god into a pincushion? Would they shake it off and keep up the good fight? Probably, right? Fuxing managed that even before he got promoted from number one public enemy to number one god of prosperity.

A-Qing can’t say if she’s onto something or just reading too deep into it, but gods of fortune tend to meet some ironic fates. Take Fuxing, for example. He sure wasn’t too prosperous before he got slapped into the job, and even afterward, things were pretty bumpy with the whole memory erasure thing and all that tasty, tasty denial. And Shouxing’s longevity took the form of a night that played on repeat for the better part of a millennium.

As the god of rank of influence, maybe Luxing’s having a good time dealing with a never-ending existential crisis? A-Qing has no idea. What’s the opposite of having influence? Not having influence? Maybe, but that doesn’t sound tragic enough to fit in with the others.

“Assuming that Luxing’s even alive to begin with,” says A-Qing, “we have no way to find him. So.”

To demonstrate exactly how well-oiled this machine is, Mo Xuanyu pulls out a large scrap of paper out of his robes and slaps it onto the nearest flat surface, which happens to be the wall outside a fabric store.

“A tracking array is easy enough to create,” he says brightly. “Should we make one?”

The vendor peeks her head out, analyzes the situation, and nods. It’s worrying how desensitized these people are, but whatever.

A-Qing shifts her attention back to Mo Xuanyu’s wide smile. “Sure,” she says, “but don’t we need to slap it onto the target first?”

“Then we should use someone as bait,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“It’s going to be me, isn’t it,” A-Qing says flatly.

Xue Yang leans on the wall like a dumb cat, raising the hand that has all five fingers in an attempt to give them a run-down. He says, “Let’s go through our party. Fuxing’s a god, and you can’t name-nap a god. Hanguang-Jun’s the closest thing to invincible. Mo Xuanyu’s so loosely connected to the Mo name that he might as well not be called that at all.”

Mo Xuanyu gazes at Xue Yang in appreciation. “Thank you,” he says, as earnestly as he sounds.

A little twitch finds home in Xue Yang’s cheek. He’s always had problems with genuine displays of affection and/or thanks.

“And,” Xue Yang concludes, “I literally could not give two shits about my name.” He gestures to the world at large and demands, “You want to be dead? You want to be a sword? Be my fucking guest, dumbass.”
“Which one of my names would it try to steal, anyway?” A-Qing wonders. “Probably ‘A-Qing’, right? That’s the one I’m closest to.”

“What would happen if she took ‘Yufeng-Zhe’ instead?” says Mo Xuanyu. He frowns in thought. “Would you just... not be a windrider anymore?”

“How the hell do souls even work?” A-Qing shouts, to nothing and everything all at once. She pounds on the wall, startling a few civilians, and goes on to say, “Why the hell are names so fragile, anyway? What’s the point? There’s no weight behind them! They’re just stupid words and strokes and characters!” Because life is an abstract illusion and the only way to break said illusion is to shatter the concept of life being a toy that fate makes and breaks, A-Qing declares, “Fuck names! I own my own person! It’s my actions that give weight to my presence, not whatever tacky titles people stick to me! I’m just me, and nobody can change that!”

Scattered applause follows her brilliant speech. The nearby civilians seem very moved by her attack on life in general, which is nice.

Mo Xuanyu leaves a polite silence, then says, “Um, so you’re okay with being the stand-in, right?”

“If at all possible, I want to sleep for three days straight, given the fact that we were assaulted by thunderstorms all the way here,” says A-Qing.

In an attempt to reassure her, Mo Xuanyu offers a simple, “It’ll be okay,” which would be much more comforting if he wasn’t struggling to find a stick of cinnabar somewhere in his robes. He does eventually find one, which is great, except he fumbles with it, and the sad thing drops onto the ground where it breaks in two with a sad little crack.

They all stare at the tragedy for a bit. It seems oddly appropriate to give in attention, given. You know. Everything.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Mo Xuanyu says, hesitantly.

“What a bad omen,” Xue Yang chirps, like the asshole he is.

A-Qing wants to find a nice bed and pass out for a bit. “Let’s just find get this stupid bride to try and eat me,” she says, already resigned to her fate.

“I wonder if this bride has, like, fifteen rows of teeth,” Xue Yang wonders, because he’s a paragon of intelligent thought.

Well, A-Qing thinks as they find some place to wait until night falls, at the very least, this should be fun. Explosions and flames and fireworks considered.

It turns out that Mo Xuanyu’s tracking array is one part tracking and two parts immolating.

Not that A-Qing has anything against immolating arrays. In fact, she fully supports the use of them in battle. They work incredibly well against people who fight by the rules and don’t expect you to pull out things like, say, fire that purges your fighting will from your bones. And maybe also your bones.

The problem lies in the fact that this array is activated by long distance, and as much as A-Qing trusts
Mo Xuanyu, she’s not sure his eyesight is good enough to judge the distance between divine disciple and demon bride lady well enough to activate it just right so only one of them burns.

Despite what everyone says, A-Qing does, in fact, possess a sense of self-preservation. It’s just a bit rusty, but it’s nothing a bit of elbow grease can’t fix.

“I made a tracking talisman once,” A-Qing says. “It was great. Worked like a charm. Can’t we use that?”

“It works better with immolation,” Mo Xuanyu tries explaining for what must be the fifth time in ten minutes.

Logical fallacy aside, A-Qing’s really interested in what interesting contraption Mo Xuanyu has figured out this time.

“You’re sure.”

“We don’t know exactly what the bride is, so if we set it on fire, it should be quite obvious.”

There’s nothing A-Qing can say to disprove that point. “Things do tend to work better when you set them on fire,” she admits.

“Exactly,” Mo Xuanyu says victoriously.

“We could stab her,” Xue Yang suggests. He has that eager glow in his eyes that demonstrates he would really like to stab something. “If we stab her and she doesn’t bleed, we could rule out a few options as well.”

That’s not a bad suggestion. “So we’ll stab her first and then set her on fire,” A-Qing decides.

She thinks the plan out in her head. If this bride thing spends most of its time wandering the streets like a loser spectre, then running it through should be easy enough. There’s nothing a sneak attack and a well-announced “hyaah!” can’t fix. Except maybe familial bonds. Those are nasty to deal with.

Conveniently enough, the sun hightails it out of the sky a few minutes later, leaving Yinhe at the mercy of a supposed demon bride. Even so, people seem pretty cool with the possibility of having their faces and names stolen. The nightlife is as vibrant as ever, with lanterns and good drink and food and maybe a few shaddy merchants selling suspicious items. Maybe these people really do have demons in them.

Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu, armed to the teeth with arrays and cinnabar sticks. He flips himself onto the guard tower and takes a deep breath. “I’ve set everything up, but in case something goes horribly wrong, I also drew an earth-rending array to trap the bride in a big dome of stone.”

“And I’ll be in there too,” says A-Qing.

“I made sure of it,” Mo Xuanyu says proudly.

Tears are shed over Mo Xuanyu’s growth. “I’m so proud of you,” A-Qing tells him, clapping a hand onto his shoulder.

“Don’t kill it,” Mo Xuanyu calls after A-Qing, who leaps off of the watchtower and onto the street in a single motion. “And don’t throw Xue Yang at it either, because he’ll definitely kill it!”

“He’s right,” says Xue Yang, all snug and comfortable in his sword form.
And that’s about where the plan commences.

As soon as people catch sight of A-Qing, they grab their belongings and move further down the street. Shopkeepers herd any late-night customers into the safety of their shops.

It seems the people of Yinhe have a sharp sense of when things are about to go down. It’s probably a genetic thing, given how dangerous this place is. Why do people even live here, anyway?

Whatever. The fact of the matter is that people do live here, right in the center of an invisible doom magnet, and someone needs to keep law and order around here.

“Okay,” A-Qing says to herself. “Time to stab a demon bride.”

“Try not to get your face eaten,” Xue Yang cheers.

As their luck would have it, it takes all of fifteen seconds for every single lantern to blow out in an ominous display of supernatural activity and plunge the street into darkness.

The civilians sigh in tandem. It’s incredibly well-practiced, which raises a lot of questions.

Strolling down the street toward A-Qing is a thin figure dressed in red. It’s got the full costume: veil, dress, gold ornaments, and it immediately brings back bad memories.

The thing meanders its way down the road. It doesn’t seem to be in much of a rush. Distantly, A-Qing wonders how people actually got caught by the dumb thing if it travels at the pace of Xue Yang when he’s trying to be intimidating. Quick note: it doesn’t work. That’s how you get stabbed, and then maybe die.

“Hey there,” A-Qing greets the bride once it approaches. “So I hear you’ve been stealing names.”

“Hrnggh,” says the bride, placing its existence right there between creepy demon that must be annihilated immediately and comically horrific thing that must be annihilated immediately.

“Not in the mood to talk, I see,” Xue Yang comments absentmindedly. “Oh well. Saves us time. Let’s go.”

As a disciple of a fairly renowned god, A-Qing’s had her fair share of stabbing things. That’s what happens when you put give a girl a sword and tell her to protect herself. She stabs things. It isn’t that hard to put two and two together when the world has a vendetta of sorts against you.

That said, it’s not like A-Qing particularly likes stabbing things. She tries to avoid it when she can, since most situations that require the use of a sword are either spectacularly mundane or irritatingly life-threatening. Perhaps there’s an in between. If there is, she hasn’t seen it yet.

A-Qing analyzes the situation. It’s looking very sad. The bride doesn’t seem to care too much about this threat of stabbing thing, with that guttural gurgling and empty-headed sauntering.

So A-Qing runs up and stabs the thing through.

It’s like skewering a sheet of paper. There’s no returned force at all, and for a split second, it feels like the bride’s going to fold in on itself and snap out of existence.

It doesn’t. A-Qing leaps back and eyes the wound. To nobody’s surprise, there’s no blood to be seen.

“Oh, good shot,” says Xue Yang. “It almost wandered out of the way for a moment.”
“Shut up,” snaps A-Qing.

“Hrnghgh,” says the bride, with what sounds like some offense.

That’s fair. A-Qing would be offended if someone stabbed her without reason. Except she totally has a reason for stabbing a weird demon paper-maché bride who’s been sucking people’s names out of their faces, so really, the reaction is completely unjustified. But the being stabbed part—fair.

“No blood, Mo Xuanyu,” A-Qing yells upward.

“Oh, wonderful,” Mo Xuanyu shouts back. “It’s most likely an artificially created puppet then!”

“So can I cut its head off?”

“Not if you can avoid it.”

“It feels like paper,” A-Qing points out, skeptical. “If we set it on fire, won’t it burn to ashes?”

“No if its creator has anything to say about it,” is Mo Xuanyu’s chipper reply.

Well, alright. No more wasting time, then.

Apparently A-Qing’s fears were a bit ungrounded, because the bride seems incredibly benign for a demon puppet. Maybe that’s why all the civilians are so unimpressed. Anyone who got caught by this dumb thing had to have been taken really off guard when it happened. As long as you have decent eyes and spatial awareness, you should be just fine.

That really calls the ability of the merchant and the rogue cultivator into question, but as a wise woman once said: when life hits you, it hits you hard. Not to quote herself or anything.

A-Qing feels comfortable enough to lower Jiangzai. She wanders backward, keeping a keen eye on the bride, who keeps the same sauntering pace.

Since they have some time to kill before Mo Xuanyu’s immolation tracking array slaps them silly, A-Qing asks, “Any reason as to why you’re here?”

The bride grunts.

“Cool,” says A-Qing, keeping up the pretense of a normal conversation. “Your boss must be awful. You know. Given your awful hours. Shouldn’t you ask for a raise?”

The bride pauses as if considering this. For one terrifying moment, A-Qing ponders the probability of puppets and corpses upping themselves in power by sheer lust of meritocratic power alone.

Then the moment passes, and the bride makes a gurgling noise like she’s choking on everything in existence.

Cool. Very cool.

“Maybe you’d like to share the name of your boss,” A-Qing suggests. “Wouldn’t it be nice to hold people accountable for their actions?”

“Why do I feel like that’s a poorly disguised attack on my person,” says Xue Yang.

“I didn’t mean it that way but I’m pleased you were offended regardless,” says A-Qing.
“Just a little further,” Mo Xuanyu calls, leaning himself over the edge of the watch tower with commendable balance. “Just a bit... a bit further...”

Not to be dramatic, but A-Qing swears she feels the array shift under her feet. She speeds up a bit, puts more distance between herself and the bride, and hightails it out of there once the bride is positioned exactly in the center of the five-point star.

Turns out that Mo Xuanyu is just as good as demonic immolation (?) as A-Qing guessed, because everything inside the perfectly curved lines of the array goes up like a barnhouse full of flammable things. Like paper. And animal feed. And livestock.

It smells somewhat like a campfire. It would, however, be much more enjoyable without the eldritch screaming. That’s pure nightmare fuel right there. A-Qing doesn’t think she’ll be able to get that echoey, triple-layered howling out of her head for at least a few hours.

A pair of blackened hands pounds at the array’s barrier. A face appears through the inferno, revealing features that can be described as anything but human. A-Qing would like to suggest the words monstrous, hideous, horrifying, or any applicable synonyms.

“Oh my,” says Xue Yang, with a rare pinch of genuine fear. “She really does have fifteen rows of teeth.”

“You counted?” asks A-Qing, horrified and disgusted. What the hell, Xue Yang, you weirdo?

“What else am I supposed to do if I’m not stabbing?”

“I don’t know, maybe offer support like a good sword spirit?”

“That’s a joke. That has to be a joke.”

“Do you count my teeth when we talk?” A-Qing demands.

“No,” says Xue Yang, with completely unjustified offense. “You’re an adult human with thirty-two teeth. What the fuck? That’s creepy as shit.”

“Sorry, I still can’t move on from the fact that you count teeth as—as an investigative approach?”

“Somehow has to be observant,” Xue Yang snaps. “Now can we move on from teeth and deal with this demented bride?”

Said demented bride pounds on the barrier. She howls a bit more. It’s getting a bit old by now.

“I think you might be able to identify some monsters by counting how many belly buttons they have,” Mo Xuanyu offers once he’s clambered down from the watchtower.

“No, that’s nipples,” Xue Yang insists, with all the confidence of a researcher who’s spent his life devoted to the study of an obscure strand of science that nobody cares about, like how to count nipples on demons. That very sentence radiates so much chaotic potential that A-Qing has to wonder if it’s healthy. Probably not.

While Mo Xuanyu and Xue Yang discuss the physiology of various demons and monsters that have much easier methods of identification, like looking at them and realizing that hey, that looks like a skeleton dog that can disintegrate me if it chomps my hand, the bride throws out a few more half-hearted attempts to frighten them all to death.
It is deeply distressing to hear Mo Xuanyu’s invested interest in dissecting monsters. For a traumatizing ten minutes, A-Qing has to come to terms with the fact that she and Xue Yang have enabled Mo Xuanyu to unleash his full potential.

Full things are good. Potential is good. Fullest potentials are dangerous, because they unearth some very strange interests that would otherwise stay buried six feet under.

“I think we can let her out now,” says Mo Xuanyu, once he’s peered through the flames for long enough to decide that the bride should be sufficiently agitated. “As a defense mechanism, it’ll probably fight back a little, then run home.”

“Fine by me,” says A-Qing, grateful to be moving on from teeth and nipples.

Mo Xuanyu takes a deep breath and claps his hands together.

The barrier shatters into a million silver pieces. The flames roar for a moment longer, then fade out to a strange sort of transparency that leaves a distinct impression of flickering in the back of their eyes when in reality, they were probably never there to begin with.

The bride takes a moment to collect itself. In what must be unintentional humour, it dusts some ash off of itself, which is actually quite disgusting because most of it happens to be skin, and then it swivels around to stare at their little group with the emptiest, deadest, angriest eyes A-Qing has ever seen on a demon.

“Time to go,” Mo Xuanyu says quickly, just in time for the bride to rush forward with shocking speed and run a set of razor-sharp claws through the place where he once stood.

So you just need to poke the dumb thing enough until it gets angry. Makes sense.

A-Qing would like to say that their battle is something epic and spectacular and worthy of unreasonable lengths of elaboration and narration, but it really isn’t. It’s actually kind of boring.

Well. Boring by her standards. The civilians are probably less enthused to be caught in the crossfire, though they do an excellent job of protecting them. That or they’re incredibly excited. It’s probably the latter, given how people poke their heads out of second-story windows to cheer them on.

The bride plays by demonic rules. It moves at breakneck speed, lashes out with claws and fangs, and drips plum-black goo from every orifice that burns all the colour away from everything it falls on.

Creepy, a bit disgusting, but not nearly as threatening as other supernatural beings they’ve skewered into little kebabs. Monster kebabs. Would that taste good? Probably not. Who knows what kind of weird blood keeps those things moving.

Xue Yang materializes back into his smiling, sadistic form. He does this stupid thing where he hurls explosive talismans at the bride, then turns his arms into blades and shoves them forward when the bride runs into him. He repeats this several times and manages to punch several gaping holes in the bride’s chest out of pure reckless faith alone. A-Qing would be impressed if she wasn’t also disappointed.

Fortunately, Mo Xuanyu has enough self-preservation and intelligence to utilize his long-range arrays to do incredible things, like slap up random stone walls to ricochet the bride into other arrays that do more incredible things, like explode.

That’s great for A-Qing, who decides that wandering into what appears to be a minefield isn’t the smartest idea. So she takes a page from Fuxing’s book and conjures up a few hundred thousand
miniature blades shaped like petals (they really are just petals, but cultivation and divinity are some
dangerous, dangerous toys) and starts slapping them at the unsuspecting bride.

It’s a depressingly one-sided battle. The bride gets in a few scratches here and there, but by the time
ten minutes have passed, she’s hobbling home with three curious vassals chasing after her.

“She’s headed out of town,” Mo Xuanyu points out. “Could it be that abyss you were talking
about?”

“That’s the opposite way,” A-Qing answers. “For all we know, she could be headed someplace I’ve
never seen.”

As expected, A-Qing’s hunch is right, because they’re always right. They run after the bride for a
while, passing by the city gates and diving straight into the trees.

Not a good place to be. Forests are dangerous by themselves just because of what could be in them.
The forests by Yinhe might as well be the metaphorical equivalent of walking on top of the fence
that separates this world from all the weird, wacky realms that sleep beneath it.

The bride looks back at them a single time before darting into a clearing. It then proceeds to dive into
a well that looks like it was built before stones even existed.

The three of them scurry to the edge of the fall.

It’s definitely a well. That much is pretty obvious. It goes on, and on, and on, into darkness that none
of their eyes can make out.

“That’s promising,” Xue Yang voices for all of them.

“Let’s see how deep it goes,” Mo Xuanyu suggests.

He finds a sizeable rock at the edge of the clearing and drops it into the well. They count together:
one, two, three, four, five, all the way to thirty-three before they realize that they’re waiting for a
sploosh that’s never going to come.

“So we’re dealing with Other Side shenanigans again,” says A-Qing, completely void of humour.

“And we still don’t know who the culprit is,” Mo Xuanyu adds.

They stand in silence around a well that goes on for so long that it goes up again into another realm.

“We should get Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun,” says A-Qing.

That’s probably the best decision they’ve made all day.

“This,” says Fuxing, peering into never-ending darkness, “is comically horrific.”

Hanguang-Jun doesn’t appear to have any particular opinion of how terrifying this well business is.
He does, however, have a slightly more severe expression on than usual.

The weather really seems to want to drive the horrifying atmosphere home, because lightning flashes
in the distance, followed by a worryingly loud and sudden clap of thunder.

Weird. They’ve been having pretty bad luck with thunderstorms lately. Maybe this is the world’s way of telling them to stop poking their noses into Other Side business so often. To that, A-Qing would say a firm fuck you, because it’s the Other Side that needs to stop fondling with their world first.

"I really do wish that novel had more helpful stories," Fuxing mutters to himself. "I didn't even know crime novellas were a thing back in the day."

“The bride took a leap of faith into this gaping void,” says Xue Yang. He leans over the lip of the well, frowning as he surveys the fall. “She can’t possibly be sturdier than we are. Who wants to go first?”

“Me, of course,” says Fuxing. “I’m not about to get all of you killed if something tries to eat us all alive!”

Nobody complains. The only reason Hanguang-Jun doesn’t protest is because the two of them leap together into the void, leaving the rest of them waiting in silence.

A few minutes later, something gold fizzes out of the darkness. Mo Xuanyu catches it in his hands and uncups them to reveal a single gold coin.

Are they really doing this again? Seriously? What the hell is up with the Other Side?

“We’re good to go,” A-Qing declares, already climbing over the edge. “Time to kick ass and hopefully find a bed.”

“Oh dear,” mutters Mo Xuanyu, and fittingly, that’s the last thing A-Qing hears before she lets gravity do its good work and hurl her into a dimension that’s out for her blood.

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The cities in the Other Side all have a tendency to be as extravagant and glaringly bright as possible, and it appears that this one’s no different.

Every single building has its own glowing sign, as if some maniac juiced every firefly in existence and slathered the result over each and every stroke of each and every character. Looking at the sea of bright signs physically hurts, which should be illegal. A-Qing tries her best to keep her eyes down out of the whining, glowing, eye-stabbing range of all the humming signs and buildings.

The residents seem perfectly fine with all the noise and light. They go about their day as usual, twitching in their twichy ways, casually turning the eldritch into the mundane by method of being completely and utterly normal.

“Poor taste,” Fuxing muses to himself, in a rare display of common sense.

“I don’t think it’s so bad,” tries Mo Xuanyu. “It’s just a bit much.”

“I take personal offense to all,” A-Qing gives an irritated wave to the world at large, “this.”

“Wonderful,” says Xue Yang, already picking at his nails. “Shall we get started and find a nice place to stay?”
They do, in fact, find a nice place to stay. Nice being a term used to contrast of every other building in this horrid realm, that is.

A-Qing can’t complain. She drops onto her bed and passes out almost immediately, because that’s what you do when you’ve spent the last week being a thunderstorm magnet, which has to be a thin veiled metaphor for being the target of divine intervention or something like that.

Mo Xuanyu shakes her awake once dinner comes. Grudgingly, she pulls herself out of bed and dumps all the life-sustaining goods into her body like a good human.

“I didn’t expect the bride to escape to a place like this,” says Mo Xuanyu, gently easing in the conversation once they’ve finished their food.

“It’s a separate realm from the Other Side,” A-Qing provides. “An other side of the Other Side, basically.”

“And we’re here because...”

“Because some dumb being fled here after the aforementioned war between gods to protect themselves,” A-Qing says venomously.

“They’re law and order around here,” Xue Yang says, banking on memories he only has because his sword form has eyes and really keen spatial awareness? Something messed up like that. “I bet if we interrogated some residents, they’d spill some kind of tragic story about Luxing.”

In that case, there’s nothing left to do but interrogate some residents.

Since Fuxing’s always been a hands-off mentor, surely he won’t mind if his vassals steal away into the night. He has no right to be worried, anyway. They can hold their own and have a decent understanding of their emotions, which puts them all at a higher starting point than their pretty god.

Anyway.

They clamber out the window and drop onto the street. A few people give them strange looks, which is suspect, because strange things should never be strange in the Other Side.

Note: human reactions for non-human beings. Curious. Also foreboding.

Wandering the streets alone at night is an interesting experience. Fortunately for A-Qing, this is a major step down from the sheer weirdness of the previous god-trap she stuck her nose in.

No flowers, no ominous chanting, no undead brides. Win, win, win.

Well. Maybe not that last one. You can’t win them all.

“Hello,” says Mo Xuanyu to a young woman who has the misfortune of facing their inquiry. “Um, if you don’t mind, could I ask you a few questions?”

The woman looks Mo Xuanyu up and down. Places the knife aside. Wipes her hands. “Sure,” she says, and A-Qing gets the distinct impression that the alternative answers would have been less than friendly.

Clearly Mo Xuanyu recognizes this as well, because his fidgeting kicks into high gear. He starts with, “Um,” and then manages, “well, you see, we’re new around here, and we just—wanted to know where we were.”
The woman’s features soften from murderous to severe. “That sucks,” she says with a sigh.

“Oh,” says Mo Xuanyu. “Um, any particular reason for that?”

“You got dragged here by some creepy bride with like, twenty sets of teeth, right?” asks the woman.

“Fifteen,” Xue Yang mutters under his breath, like a creep. Louder, he says, “Yup. That’s us.”

“Great,” says the woman, in a tone that says this is not great. “Welcome to hell.” There’s a moment where the silence sits for a bit too long and A-Qing starts filing mental complaints to every god in existence, which is probably, like, two, but then the woman adds, “That was a joke. We just call it hell because it might as well be one.”

That makes it so much better. “Oh,” Mo Xuanyu squeaks out. “One... one of many?”

“I was surprised too,” the woman agrees. “Never thought I’d need to use a plural form of hell anywhere else but the mortal world.”

Behold: the freakiest person you’ve seen today just made a great point.

“That was an extremely metal way of putting things,” says Xue Yang, with growing respect in his eyes.

“I try,” says the woman, tucking her knife away in a swath of fabric order to examine a new one. Why did they choose to interrogate the owner of a knife shop, again?

“Let me guess,” says A-Qing, getting in her two cents. “We’re stuck here.”

“Most people come to that conclusion sooner or later,” the woman answers with a shrug. “Kudos to you for getting there so fast.”

“That’s me,” says A-Qing, with a renewed desire to beat fate over the head with a club. “Fast. I am speed.”

“Why are we stuck?” asks Mo Xuanyu, taking a sharp turn back onto topic.

The woman looks between the three of them. “Cultivators,” she comments quickly. Then, with the most disappointed A-Qing has ever seen concentrated in one place, she says, “You must have either been taken really off guard or nonexistent spatial awareness.”

“Hey,” says Xue Yang, vaguely offended, “we chased the bride in. She didn’t drag our names in, which I presume is the normal way of crossing over.”

“To be completely accurate, she slowly crawls into your consciousness and eats your name through a mirror,” the woman provides.

Creepy and inefficient: two of the biggest and most defining features of any eldritch being.

“Wait,” A-Qing interrupts, having come to a worrying revelation. “You’re not a soul. You’re a name.”

“Real quick on the uptake, this one,” says the woman, with some regard.

Last time any of them checked, names can’t take physical form. They can add pretty features to an already pretty form, but hey, check it out: a few characters and psychological knots don’t add up to a human. There’s a lot more meat and bone and insecurity to the recipe than you’d expect.
“That’s part of the reason we call this place hell,” the woman explains. She does so while she sharpens a knife with precision that has to be for dramatic effect. Hopefully. “You get dragged over as just a name, and depending on what that name is, you get built up as a new person.”

There’s a pause in which everyone lets that information sink in.

With great hesitance, Mo Xuanyu says, “And your name is...”

“My family name was Dao,” the woman allows. “That’s about all I remember.”

“So your new identity is ‘knife’?”

“Actually, it’s 借刀杀人.”

“That’s a badass name,” Xue Yang says honestly.

“That’s not a name at all,” A-Qing snaps to her dumbass sword. “That’s an idiom.”

The woman stops grinding her knife. “Not to quote myself or anything, but you really do pick up on things quickly,” she says to A-Qing, with growing respect.

Respect is a good thing to have. Whether it’s still something nice when you get it from a woman who literally goes by the supposed name of to attack using the strength of another, or as most people put it, to do someone’s dirty work, is highly questionable.

Fortunately, that’s a moral dilemma they don’t have time to deconstruct. “Do all of you go by idioms based on your family names?” asks A-Qing.

“Yup,” says the woman. Dao, or whatever. It really is a badass name, but Xue Yang doesn’t need to know that.

“Is there a reason why you turn into idioms?” Mo Xuanyu asks.

Dao shrugs. “I bet there is, but hell if I know,” is her curt response. She seems awfully flippant about the whole thing. “Any more questions, or can I get back to work?”

“Just one more,” Mo Xuanyu hastens to say. “Who’s the one in charge here?”

The look Dao gives them is just short of stupefied. “You don’t know?” she says, one part surprised, two parts disappointed. It’s the kind of question that you answer with a face full of fist, but A-Qing tries to be cordial these days. It’s better for her mental health.

“Listen, knife psycho,” she says, as flat as barren field in which the fucks she gives lay, “thunderstorms hate us, a creepy arts-and-crafts bride just tried to make mincemeat out of us, we dove headfirst into a damp-ass well and now we’re stuck in a twelve-year-old’s literature textbook, and I’d love to beat whichever dipshit thought eating names out of souls was a good idea over the head and tell him to leave my goddamn world alone.”

Mental health: it’s great until it starts slipping. This place is like a waterslide.

A-Qing takes a deep breath, then says, “Capiche?”

Dao cocks her head curiously. “Hmm,” she muses. “Capiche.”

“Great. So who’s the lucky guy?”
“Luxing,” Dao answers, which doesn’t even come remotely close to being a surprise.

They wave Dao a half-hearted goodbye, then find the nearest restaurant where they can at least pretend that it’s just another normal day.

There’s no point ordering more food, so Xue Yang waves the waitress down and calls for the most alcohol-laden drinks he can list off the top of his head. Half of them sound like they’d poison any normal human being, but Xue Yang has never been one of those. So.

When the waitress comes around and looks at A-Qing expectantly, A-Qing asks if they have tea. She does this in a tone of voice and body posture that demonstrates she is capable of great feats of destruction if challenged. The waitress scampers off.

“I asked the waitress for her name,” Mo Xuanyu comments.

“Is it ‘patronizing asshole’?” asks A-Qing.

“It’s 力不从心,” says Mo Xuanyu.

Ouch. That’s got to sting. Imagine introducing yourself to someone that has a ridiculously poetic and pretty name, like 夜瞑魂梦, only to say, oh, so you’re called the soul of the night or something like that? Cool. I’m the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Nice to meet you.

“I wonder what would happen if our names were stolen,” Mo Xuanyu wonders aloud.

“I’d be a psychopath,” says Xue Yang.

“I’d be me,” says A-Qing.

“I suppose I’d be pretty depressed,” finishes Mo Xuanyu.

With that wonderful thought out of the way, they get to business like good cultivators. But apparently good cultivators are actually assholes half the time, so maybe they’re just, like, superpowered vigilantes or something like that. Wouldn’t that be neat?

Mo Xuanyu unfolds a piece of parchment to reveal a very familiar immolation-slash-tracking array. “Here we go,” he says, then presses his fingertips onto the edge of the circle.

It’s cool, watching the parchment fold in on itself and raise tiny building-shaped bumps to craft into some sort of city. It would be good fun if the edges of the parchment didn’t fuse into the table underneath like some kind of soul-sucking demon.

“Well,” says A-Qing, “at least we know why we’re stuck.”

Xue Yang pokes the edges with a blade-turned finger. It disappears into the void and comes out with a screaming, maggoty thing stuck to it.

He flicks the miniscule monstrosity back into the darkness. It hurtles downward with a shriek. Holy hell. “I’ll pass on worms,” says Xue Yang, decently disturbed.

“Then we’ll do things manually,” Mo Xuanyu decides, a fading expression of the deepest kind of horror on his features. He clears his throat with excellent sportsmanship. “Um. So, the bride.”

They all look down at the map. Everything seems normal except for one black dot that appears to be on fire.
It warms A-Qing’s heart to know that setting stuff on fire really does work one hundred and twenty percent of the time.

Tracking the burning dot is hilariously simple. Looks like it’s hiding out somewhere, because it kind of just wanders around in the same house over and over again like Mo Xuanyu when he gets really into his own head.

It takes all of twenty minutes to locate the building. Said building looks like all the others: glaringly bright and in desperate need of a house fire. What’s the phrase again? Right. Ashes to ashes.

“Looks normal so far,” A-Qing tells the others, already clambering through the second-story window. That’s her specialty. “Should we kill this name-stealing bride now?”

“Let’s try to talk to it first,” suggests Mo Xuanyu.

“I’m not particularly fluent in guttural grunts,” says Xue Yang, following suit by floating up behind A-Qing.

“We could cut off its head to make things easier,” A-Qing realizes and promptly voices. “So it can’t try to kill us.”

Mo Xuanyu gives her a thoughtful glance as he scales the wall. “I suppose we could do that,” he says.

That’s the nice thing about their team of three: when they come to a decision, they go for it. Maybe that’s just how things work when everyone is everyone else’s enabler. Group dynamics are fun like that.

On the list of all the break-ins A-Qing has ever participated in, and that list is unfortunately long, this one doesn’t even rank in the top fifty. The still-on-fire bride eyes them curiously when they come hurtling down the stairs armed to the teeth, and in a turn of events that can only be described as a Major Fucking Plot Twist, she sighs, sits down at a table, and says, “Let me put on some tea.”

A-Qing answers without engaging her higher brain functions at all.

“Uh,” she says. “Sure.”

So ten minutes pass in which the three members of their jolly and somewhat abashed crew tap their fingers on the shiny, fancy, engraved table.

It kind of looks like the woodwork back at Lotus Pier. What a horrible thought that is.

When the bride returns, it’s with a pretty set of cups and an expensive-looking kettle. Hmm. Looks like the kind of goods you could get back in Yunmeng, and no, foolish brain, not now, at least wait until you have more of the story before you start slapping together two and two to make five.

The bride seats herself across from them. Mo Xuanyu tries to shuffle closer to A-Qing as subtly as possible.

“Sorry for trying to kill you,” is the first thing the bride says.

By pure reflex, A-Qing says, “It’s kind of whatever.”

The bride gives her a strange look. It would be amusing if she wasn’t. You know. On fire. Bits of her skin appear to be flaking off onto the ground. Eugh. “People try to kill you a lot?” she asks.
“It’s not rare,” A-Qing answers. “But what’s up with you, stealing names and all that?”

“Oh, that,” says the bride, distantly, like it’s a side gig she doesn’t really care too much for. “Immigration is rough at the moment. So Luxing decided to put in some more proactive policies.”

“Luxing doesn’t seem to understand the difference between immigration and kidnapping,” Mo Xuanyu comments.

The bride shrugs as if to say, not much I can do about it.

“Why’s Luxing trying to build up a city here, anyway?” A-Qing demands. “Immigration policies? What, is he really that stuck in his own head?”

“Er,” begins the bride, refusing to make eye contact.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well,” she continues, “Luxing’s... out of commission. Due to... various circumstances.”

This is sounding more and more like the curious case of the night-eating sun with every word, and A-Qing hates it. “Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, he kind of went insane a few hundred years back,” the bride says, tapping on her own teacup restlessly. “So. Yeah.”

As crazy as Fuxing is, at least he isn’t actually insane.

“By the way, can you turn this fire thing off?” the bride adds, staring directly at Mo Xuanyu with a face full of flames.

Mo Xuanyu blinks. “Oh, uh, sure,” he says quickly, fumbling to unfold the array and smudge out a few characters.

The burning dies down. Trying to keep eye contact with the bride is no longer a challenge.

“Anyway,” the bride continues, probably in a better mood now that she’s not actively burning. “You’re here to see Luxing, right?”

“We’re here to get the name-stealing to stop,” A-Qing says firmly.

“So you’re here to talk to Luxing,” the bride repeats. Before A-Qing can loudly berate her on not holding herself accountable for her actions, she says, “I’d love to help, take your advice and ask for a raise, but we’re idioms.” A helpless shrug. “Can’t do much when you don’t have any free will.”

That statement is incredibly disturbing. “Wait,” A-Qing interrupts. “What’s your name?”

“They call me 火中取栗,” says the bride.

Yikes. All these idioms make for incredibly tragic stories. Living your life literally being called cat’s-paw must seriously suck.

“Okay, Li,” says A-Qing, because these idioms are mouthfuls to say over and over again. “I’m guessing it’s specifically because you’re stuck as an idiom that you’re Luxing’s little immigration officer. But why the bride getup, and the name-taking? And that weird bell array for divinity?”

“Ooh, that’s easy,” says Li, apparently happy to answer questions that she doesn’t consider moral
tightropes. “Brides are creepy, so it’s easy to sneak into people’s minds and snatch their names when they get scared enough. And Luxing said it’d be easier to take names than souls. As for the bell array, I don’t know how, when, or why I have it, but it sure makes going out into the world easier!”

Okay. That array part is worrying. A mysterious, ancient array that attracts divinity like the end times with no discernible source? Worrying. Very worrying.

It's probably just a nifty little tool that helps Li keep a semi-corporeal form in the realm world. Right? Right. Maybe.

And as for the name-taking being easier than soul-snatching... well, she isn’t wrong about that. It seems that most mortals are aware that their souls are kind of important, since that sort of keeps you alive. As for names—who cares? You don’t even get to choose your own in most cases. If anything, a name is a nice, fat label to slap onto a meat sack, which in turn houses the soul.

Turns out names are more like bandages that keep the entire system from falling apart. That would’ve been nice to know earlier. Not that their name-invulnerable group needs it. But still. Hindsight, and all that good stuff.

It must be easier to tear off a label than it is to mine out a gem. Metaphors really put things into perspective sometimes.

“I like the ‘brides are creepy’ part,” Xue Yang says, because he’s fucked up. “That’s fun.”

“It kind of is,” Li agrees a little too easily. “People really freak out. It’s always the mundane that scares humans most.”

What is it with all these personified idioms spitting out wisdom they don’t deserve?

“I’d really like to ask why you guys are all idioms now,” says A-Qing, cutting that topic right down the center and throwing both halves out the window.

Li thinks for a bit. “Luxing said something a while back about having a sister,” she muses. “I guess his sister really liked literature or something.”

“Not liking this ‘I’m doing it all for my family’ kind of vibe,” A-Qing says apprehensively.

“Oh, don’t worry too much about it,” Li assures her, as if that makes A-Qing worry any less. If anything, her worry is shooting through the roof and strangling every nonexistent god in the heavens. “His sister died a while back. That’s why he’s been looking for so long.”

Silence. You could probably hear Mo Xuanyu’s will to live snap in half if you listened hard enough.

Li also considers her own words. She frowns as the realization kicks in. “On second thought, that probably makes things worse,” she says.

A-Qing downs the rest of her tea as she would lethal poison, then pounds her fist on the table along with the cup.

“According to our investigation thus far,” she announces, struggling greatly not to put her fist through a wall or scream at anyone, “names are being stolen and people are dying as backlash because Luxing’s making his own little idiom country for his dead sister, whose reincarnated soul is supposedly roaming the world, minding her own damn business, and let’s tack on a classic fairy tale ending and say that he’ll only stop when he’s found his sister’s soul, which, not to be morbid or anything, isn’t even going to work if he rips her name from her soul, because, newsflash, that’ll end
up killing her."

Li shifts in place awkwardly. “Er,” she starts again, “I was told it would be fine if it was just her name.”

“How on earth would that be fine,” A-Qing demands.

“I’m not sure,” Li admits. Fidget, fidget. “But I was told not to worry about it too much.”

“She will fall into a coma and never wake up,” says A-Qing.

“I know,” says Li.

“This coma is called death and happens to be irreversible in this specific scenario,” A-Qing tries to emphasize.

“I know.”

“Her soul is going to—and I literally cannot stress this enough—explode.”

“It’ll be one hell of an explosion,” Li says eagerly. “I’ve never seen a goddess’ soul explode. I wonder what it looks like.”

A-Qing isn’t used to her company being more reckless than she is. It’s horrible.

“Either way, you’ll probably be wanting to talk to Luxing soon,” Li goes on to say. She stands and dusts off her arms, shedding about two pounds of coal-hard skin. Ew. “I’ll introduce you. Er, I’ll try my best, I mean.”

“He won’t try to eat us, will he?” Mo Xuanyu whispers nervously.

“Not if he’s in a good mood,” is Li’s bright answer.

“And... is he in a good mood?”

“He never is, but attempt the impossible, right?”

“Sect Leader Jiang, save me,” A-Qing says, sarcasm practically dribbling down her chin. It’s only one of her commendable traits, thank you very much.

Li blinks in surprise. “Oh, you mean Jiang Fengmian? How’s he doing?”

“Dead,” Xue Yang answers. It’s truly awful, how he’s so hesitant to speak his mind. “Can we get going?”

“Sure,” Li chirps, completely unperturbed by the death of someone she had to have been familiar with.

Today is a gift that just keeps giving.

Li scurries upstairs to gather her belongings. Hopefully she isn’t too upset about the footprints all over her windowsill. Then again, she seems like the kind of person who could watch the world end and sum all her feelings of impending doom and despair up in a single “Cool.”

So she’s probably doing fine.
Meanwhile, Mo Xuanyu performs a few breathing exercises and Xue Yang picks at his fingernails. A-Qing taps her foot anxiously because she really, really doesn’t want to be here, because she has this foreboding feeling that it’s going to be smooth sailing one minute and the next their sorry, bloated corpses will be washed up and polluting some foreign shore. This situation isn’t exactly foreign, but the metaphor still stands.

“Okay,” says Li, leaping down the stairs with a new set of clothes and a flourish. She looks awfully proud of herself, and most importantly, looks just like any other strange resident of this wacky world. “Civilian mode activated. Let’s go!”

It takes all of three seconds for her to cheerfully swing the door open and come face-to-face with Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun.

“The party grows,” Li narrates, stepping past them and out the door.

A-Qing expels all the breath in her lungs. It feels nice, kind of like dying. “Come on,” she says, to a decently surprised Fuxing and a... well, a normal Hanguang-Jun. “I’ll explain on the way there.”

Fuxing raises a single eyebrow. “Alright then,” he says, and mercifully leaves it at that.

Thank god for their group’s shared ability to immediately adapt to the most nonsensical of bullshit.

“Oh, excellent,” says Fuxing, once A-Qing’s finished narrating their adventures for the night. She has no idea where he got the ‘excellent’ from. “You certainly move quickly, what with breaking into people’s houses and all.”

“We thought she wanted to eat us alive,” A-Qing snaps.

“No, it’s alright,” Li says quickly. “It was nice to have visitors for once, even if it was through my bedroom window. Most people here hate me something vicious.”

Then she turns her head and continues marching down the darkening streets with a big, bright grin, like that wasn’t the most depressing thing ever.

The people-turned idioms give them suspicious looks as they pass. Most of them are directed to Li, who takes all of them in stride either from sheer willpower, blissful ignorance, or an impressively powerful sense of denial. All the others are scattered amongst the living members of their party evenly. At least they’re hated the same as each other.

Wherever Li’s taking them, the creep factor is really climbing steadily. A-Qing can’t say she misses the glaring, humming lights of the city behind them, but she really can’t say she likes the look of the very dark, very narrow, very suspicious mountain road up ahead.

“I will be very upset if you turn out to be an axe murderer,” A-Qing informs Li, who shakes her head vigorously.

“Oh, no,” Li assures them all. “Luxing doesn’t like living in the city. He prefers it up there.” She waves in the general direction of the looming mountain before them. That is to say: upward.

“Ah,” says Fuxing, unconvinced. “What a... wonderful neighborhood.”
“He wouldn’t fit into a normal house,” is all Li says, but it really is impressive how utterly terrifying that one sentence is.

It takes maybe twenty minutes until they’re all looking up at the summit of the mountain from the base.

“Well,” says Li, pushing them all forward toward an ominous-looking archway, “good luck.”

Wishing someone good luck out of nowhere is basically the equivalent of cursing someone on the spot. Screw luck. It’s never done anything, anyway.

“This is a perfectly normal hike,” A-Qing insists. A shrieking wind tears its way through the trees and blows past with unnerving force. This is shaping up to be the worst escapade into any sort of haunted woods yet, and they just came from goddamn Yinhe. What the hell.

“Er,” says Li, refusing to make eye contact. “It’s more of a trip down memory lane, really.”

“Oh boy,” Xue Yang sings, like a semi-insane, murderous canary. “I love when gods project their memories all over earthly features.”

“He has really unreasonable office hours,” Li agrees severely.

A-Qing looks up at the mountain again. Why is it always mountains? “And this is the only way up.”

Li nods. “It’s kind of a pain sometimes,” she adds for good measure.

“Then let’s just get this over with,” A-Qing snaps, marching forward toward the arch.

The others fall in line behind her. It’s quite telling that she’s the one leading the assault.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Li calls after them. She says that a lot. It never works. “No matter how real it seems, it’s all gone and passed and dead!”

“Thanks,” says A-Qing, as blandly as possible.

“My pleasure,” says Li, before the entire world folds in on itself.

Before everything can full fade away, A-Qing turns to her comrades and declares, “Well. See you on the other side.”

She likes to think that her posture is brave and powerful until the floor collapses beneath her, dunking her headfirst into the void of memories she can’t bring herself to care too much about.

She sighs.

Alright, Luxing.

Let’s see exactly how you fucked up and how we can go about fixing it.

Okay.

So.
In hindsight, when Li told them they’d be walking down memory lane, A-Qing expected something dramatic.

Like—bam! Surprise empathy session! Have fun watching helplessly as the heavens somehow destroy each other from the eyes of a high-and-mighty god! Fingers crossed you don’t get stabbed or end up burning to death! You’re welcome!

Basically, what A-Qing’s trying to say is that she didn’t expect for her consciousness to be shoved inside some nameless mortal beggar girl.

It brings back all sorts of wonderful memories of when she was a helpless street rat, lying to assholes and people who probably weren’t as assholeish as they seemed back in the day (again with the hindsight thing, curse you, maturity) and faking her entire existence just to get by. The twelve-year-old body isn’t helping, with the twelve-year-old brain and twelve-year-old emotional development and all. She kind of wants to cry all the time and she doesn’t know why, which is fun.

On the bright side, A-Qing has plenty of experience being a nameless mortal beggar girl. Ah, the good times.

Yeah, no, those days kind of sucked. But hey: familiarity. That’s a plus.

“Huh,” says A-Qing, in the body of a random girl she just mind-jacked. “That’s new.”

“You new around here?” a passing worshiper asks.

It would be weird to ask the era out of nowhere, wouldn’t it? Probably. “Very,” answers A-Qing.

The worshiper throws up a charming smile, or at least the semblance of one. “In that case, welcome to the Temple of Luxing! Feel free to take a look around.”

Yeah, no shit. A-Qing isn’t about to pass by the biggest, shiniest temple she’s ever seen in her life and not poke everything that can be poked.

And that’s nice, but where is she even supposed to start?

The situation looks a bit like this:

A-Qing, resident windrider, Other Side whisperer, and divine vassal, is currently inhabiting the body of what seems like a twelve year-old beggar girl with zero cultivation potential. A bit of an unlucky roll there, but hey, what else is new? That’s been established.

Everything after that is a giant mess.

Of all the cities A-Qing has ever seen, she’s never seen one so... big and shiny and loud. It doesn’t feel like the Unclean Realm, or Lotus Pier, or Yinhe, or even the Other Side. It’s like someone took the fanciest part of each of the four and slapped it all into one place, decided it was a city, and called it a day.

As a nomad of sorts, A-Qing isn’t particularly thrown off by busy streets. People are loud, lots of people are louder—whatever. That’s old news.

When the hell did all these people believe in gods so much, though?

Well, there’s nothing A-Qing can do about her situation but try and figure out what’s going on.

What? Do people seriously think she’s going to let herself get dragged into a memory fun pit and not
uncover all the secrets of the old gods? She has her cake and now she’s going to eat it. Obviously.

With way too much time on her hands and no backstory whatsoever, A-Qing stares up at what she can only assume is the entrance to the Temple of Luxing.

They say ‘temple’, but it’s really more of a plaza. Which is very telling as to what these people think of Luxing, just in case the sea of pious worshipers wasn’t enough.

Whoever commissioned the design had no reason to slap three floors on that bad boy and raise it on a giant stone base, but they did, and nobody thought that was overkill at all. Then again, people do really weird things when they have money and time, like pave the floor leading up to said stone base which leads up to said three-story temple with coloured marble. Like, what the hell? Why don’t you throw out your pots and just melt your bulging stash of coins to make new ones?

“Pardon me,” says A-Qing, trying to be polite as she squeezes through the crowd. She’s been in this body for all of five minutes; it would be impolite to the owner if she were to antagonize anyone so quickly. “Coming through. Sorry.”

Luckily for A-Qing, this body is somehow smaller than her usual one, which is a sentence she never wants to say again. Regardless, she weaves her way through the worshipers and pops out in front of the crowd.

She looks up, up, and up.

Huh. That really is one tall temple.

“Pardon me,” says a man dressed in what’s probably considered uniform for a priest in this era. “You should allow others to finish their prayers before sharing yours,” he tells A-Qing, probably to soothe the irritated muttering from the crowd. “The venerable Luxing will listen always.”

“Luxing, huh,” A-Qing mutters absent-mindedly. What a guy. He must’ve been some hotshot when he was a mortal if he has this big of a fanbase.

There’s also the fact that he’s the god of status and rank, but whatever. The point still stands.

The priest raises an eyebrow at A-Qing’s distant tone. “Are you a new worshiper?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” says A-Qing. Telling the world that she’s the vassal of Fuxing would most likely get her thrown someplace dark and quiet at this particular point in time, so she ends up saying, “I came from a distant kingdom, and I’m not familiar with any of your gods. Mind telling me a bit about them?”

The priest gets strangely quiet. “You wouldn’t happen to be from the Northern Kingdom, would you?” he asks.

Ohh, that’s definitely suspicion in his voice. This is definitely important information to feed A-Qing’s understanding of what the hell is going on and where the hell she is.

“I don’t know what that is,” A-Qing says, equally confident as she is confused. It makes for a weird tone of voice, but it gets the job done.

“Oh,” is all the priest says, clearly relieved. He smiles like a pious servant, or a stubborn salesperson. “In that case, I’d be more than happy to tell you about our noble gods!”

And then A-Qing gets led on what she considers the most boring tour she’s ever had in her life.
Considering that she’s been on, like, two, it doesn’t really say much. But boring is boring no matter how you write it, and it’s by pure willpower alone that A-Qing doesn’t slip into the crowd when the priest isn’t looking.

He goes on forever about the history of the land and other dumb things. A-Qing zones out until she hears the words, “Our kingdoms were always at war, and we allowed ourselves to become used to our fate—until the noble Luxing ushered in an era of peace.”

A-Qing kicks her brain back into action. “So this war is over and done with?” she asks, cautiously. The one thing she doesn’t want to do is die, thank you very much.

The priest smiles a smile that’s the equivalent of giving shifty eyes and saying, uh. “The treaty has been written,” he offers, and leaves it at that.

A simple I have no idea would’ve done the job, but you do you, priest man.

Since it’s part of the job description, the priest goes on to describe the unbelievable benefits of devoting yourself to the path of peace and prosperity, because who doesn’t like peace and prosperity? Bonuses may include suddenly finding yourself promoted at work because Luxing likes you or something. It isn’t made very clear, but the priest does mention that free meals are provided for citizens who aren’t as well off, which is basically the only piece of information A-Qing takes out of that entire conversation. And the whole North/South kingdom war thing. That’s of decent importance.

“Oh,” the priest adds, before A-Qing can make her escape, “do stay in town if you can. We’re hosting a grand celebration in three days, and you certainly won’t want to miss it.”

“Celebrations are nice,” A-Qing allows. “What’s it for?”

“The ascension of Luxing’s honourable sister,” the priest says proudly.

“Cool,” says A-Qing. She knows about the sister news already, so that’s one surprise out of the way.

“Oh yes,” the priest agrees. “The glorious Ying Huohua has become the goddess of flowers and lanterns!”

—So she says, but life just keeps swinging madly with a metal bat, doesn’t it?

“Huh,” A-Qing says faintly. “Ying... Huohua. That’s a pretty name. Very cool.”

“Indeed!” says the priest.

“I’m gonna go stand in the corner now,” says A-Qing.

“Oh,” says the priest, disappointed. “Well, have fun.”

“I sure will.”

And since A-Qing always keeps her word, she does in fact go stand in the corner of the plaza.

Screaming into her hands would be a bit too manic even by her standards, so she settles for smacking her head quietly against the wall instead.

“Are you alright?” an innocent civilian has the audacity to ask.

“Please leave me alone,” says A-Qing. Smack, smack, smack.
“Uh,” says the civilian, whose goodwill is mostly likely pointed in the exact opposite direction as his desire to get the hell away from this creepy wall-smacking kid. “Sure. May Luxing be with you.”

“Tell him I’m not available,” A-Qing says blandly.

The civilian slowly backs away into the safety of the crowd. A-Qing’s just happy that people are finally leaving her alone to her awful, awful thoughts.

As expected, these thoughts are currently consumed by one sentence repeated ad infinitum:

Okay, so apparently Luxing and Ying Huohua are siblings?

That fact isn’t too nefarious by itself. People have siblings. Sometimes people ascend to become gods. Sometimes your siblings end up ascending as well. So what? People do loud things and are rewarded in loud ways.

The problem arises when you consider the fact that Luxing is apparently stealing names all to find his lost sister, who—surprise!—goes by Ying Huohua and no longer exists in any world due to, uh. Circumstances.

And hey! It only gets worse! Because Luxing’s apparently alright with only having Ying Huohua’s name, and maybe this is reading into things too deeply, but what if he knows about Ying Huohua’s majorly messed up soul and said, why not just take the part that’s not broken and use that instead? Ha ha, I’m such a good brother! I love desecrating my sister’s existence even more than it’s already been picked to shreds!

Not cool, Luxing. If that’s the story, then you need to seriously chill.

There’s no telling if A-Qing’s hunch is right or not. Chances are that it is, and that’s a truly horrible thought, but everyone has to be wrong one day. Perhaps life will be pleasant and choose today to be that fateful day.

Anyway.

There’s nothing a twelve-year-old beggar girl can really do in a big city except wander around, so once A-Qing pulls herself together, she steps out of the Temple of Luxing and throws herself into the bustling streets.

For a kingdom that’s been a war for almost forever, the city sure doesn’t look the part. The houses are pretty and big, the gardens are tastefully boastful, and the people seem pretty satisfied. In fact, A-Qing stands out as a beggar girl in a city full of well-off folks. She puts two and two together and figures that this particular city’s probably a trade hub or something like that. A basic understanding of economics tells her that the money’s concentrated here, and this poor girl she mind-jacked most likely hiked all the way to All Men Are Born Equal Town to get some coin to feed her family.

Yikes. That leaves A-Qing in a pretty big moral dilemma.

She doesn’t need to do anything, technically, since this is all one big memory. But it kind of sucks to know that a few people will probably go hungry because she has literally no idea who this unfortunate girl is.

Twelve years old and already so proactive: A-Qing’s got to give credit where it’s do and say that this girl sure has her eyes set on the future. What does that say about the government? Not a lot of pleasant stuff.
Politics aside—well, not really aside, but it’s not the focus right now—there’s a festival for Ying Huohua, and as someone who might potentially carry a teensy, tiny bit of Ying Huohua in her, A-Qing’s obligated to see it through.

She grabs a few free meals at the temple. It’s nothing fancy, but being full is always better than being empty.

The nights on the streets aren’t too cold, and A-Qing spends most of her time clambering up onto roofs to find a place where people won’t accidentally step on her. She eventually decides to throw subtlety out the window and crawl onto the temple’s roof to spend the night, which is a great idea until the morning guard changes while she’s asleep and she has to stealth her way down so she won’t be executed for blasphemy or anything like that.

Godless eras have their perks, like not being murdered for having conflicting religious beliefs. Three cheers for humanity. Hip, hip, hooray...

The day of the festival comes a lot sooner than A-Qing expected. She says that to be dramatic and all, but in reality, three days is a pathetic amount of time to wait for anything. A lot can happen in three days, sure, but all the important stuff happens over unreasonably long periods of time.

It’s when she’s in the middle of figuring out the footholds that someone almost scares her to death.

“Scaling the temple is prohibited.”

A-Qing’s soul almost ejects itself out of her not-body. She immediately flinches, and because of said very inconvenient flinching, her thin fingers lose their grip on the edge of the roof. Curse you, untrained flesh sack!

Fortunately, her otherwise painful fall is broken by a sturdy pair of arms. She’s set onto the ground, where she lets out a sigh and looks way up and at yet another priest, who looks far less enthused than the precious one. Man, her luck has been awful with these guys.

“Uh,” she begins, “sorry. I didn’t know that you weren’t supposed to—” Supposed to what? Climb monuments of worship and freeload on top of them? Seriously, Yufeng-Zhe? “Um,” she tries again, aborting her mission hard, “I like to see the stars at night. It... reminds me of home.”

That sounds a lot more believable and has the advantage of sentimental gut-punch. Fingers crossed that this priest takes it to heart.

A-Qing holds the priest’s calm gaze.

Well, she calls it calm, but in reality, she can’t read him too well. There’s something about those golden eyes that she isn’t quite familiar with, and she thinks it might be because he looks quite sure of himself and his emotions, and it’s discrepancies and conflicts and hidden desires that A-Qing’s good and spotting or she isn’t called the harbinger of reconciliation for nothing and hang on a second.

If A-Qing’s roaming this memory world in someone else’s body, what are the chances of the others all facing the same problems she is?

Pretty likely, given fate and all the nonsense.

A-Qing narrows her eyes. “Hanguang-Jun?” she asks delicately.

The priest blinks slowly. It’s kind of funny. “Yufeng-Zhe,” he says in response, and A-Qing lets out
a major sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank god,” she says, rolling her shoulders a bit. A fall is a fall no matter how catches you. “I was pretty surprised when I woke up in this body. I guess it was the same for you?”

“It was,” Hanguang-Jun answers, which is a serious blessing. If he was confused, then everyone else has every right to be as well.

“So you’re a priest and I’m a beggar,” A-Qing says after a moment of silence. She nods. “Makes sense. If things were different, who knows where we would’ve ended up?”

“Everyone deserves a happy childhood,” Hanguang-Jun insists in that straight-to-the-point way of his.

Guess that maybe we could’ve been normal people with normal upbringings and normal lives isn’t necessary then.

“But it rarely happens anyway,” A-Qing concludes gracefully. On that high note, she calmly changes the topic by asking, “Have you seen any of the others?”

Hanguang-Jun gives a simple shake of the head. “No,” he adds, for good measure. Unfortunate, but not unexpected.

“It’s okay,” A-Qing tells him. “Assuming fate plays its annoying games as usual, we should end up together by tonight at the latest.”

“That is how the situation usually works out,” Hanguang-Jun agrees, with a pinch of acceptance. Or resignation. When did he become this hard to read?

By the time the first of the worshipers start to flood in, A-Qing and Hanguang-Jun are safely outside the temple and out of the way of any prying eyes. Not that anyone would have anything interesting to see with them, but the safer, the better.

Li’s innocent statement of Luxing’s being too weird and wacky to live with the rest of the humanoid creatures rings true in her head. Those heebie-jeebies are violent.

“I know you—or rather, your persona has duties at the temple, but let’s scout out the city for today,” A-Qing insists. She has no ulterior motive at all. It’s just some nice walking around, maybe some talking, trying out all kinds of food and clothing, asking about where their journey is going to go after this is all settled and done, and what was that? Right. Food.

Hanguang-Jun agrees a lot easier than A-Qing would’ve expected. Then again, she’s never really understood him all too well to begin with.

There’s a whole lot to see with the festival happening tonight and all. Hanguang-Jun really scored lucky landing in a priest; apparently they’re loaded around here, and since he’s acting as a chaperone for A-Qing’s tiny beggar self, people eat up the “holy man shows mercy and love to sad, dirty girl who has never known kindness” act like crazy. Discounts, discounts, discounts, baby!

Not to be crass or anything. But who doesn’t love a good deal?

“I really appreciate this,” A-Qing makes sure to say to Hanguang-Jun when they’re eating up a lavish meal of colourful, fragrant dishes. A-Qing’s side of the table is noticeable, uh, meatier than Hanguang-Jun’s. She swings her feet awkwardly. They don’t even touch the ground. God, that’s weird. “I know I’m not actually twelve, but I appreciate your giving me the time of day.”
“I would not refuse you,” says Hanguang-Jun, a little confused.

“No, I mean, it’s nice to reflect back on what my childhood could’ve been,” A-Qing elaborates. “I’m pretty sure I would’ve ended up as a street rat in every timeline, but the people that came along and made it better really do change the future, huh?”

Hanguang-Jun considers this. “I find it difficult to believe that you could change drastically in any world,” is what he decides on.

Aww. That’s really sweet on him to say.

“Thanks,” says A-Qing, brightly. “I’d like to think that, too.”

Here’s a quick question:

When you’re having a nice lunch with your master-slash-god-slash dad’s boyfriend, what do you do?

Invade his privacy shamelessly, of course.

A-Qing leaves a polite silence before she asks, “So how are things going with Fuxing?”

“Well,” Hanguang-Jun answers easily.

Okay. Well. What does that mean? They’re talking to each other and getting their feelings across, right? Fuxing isn’t as emotionally constipated as he was before, right?

“Has he told you why he did what he did?” A-Qing tries.

“Yes,” says Hanguang-Jun, for the sake of everything good and holy in this world. Then he follows it up with a curt, “Mostly.”

That’s fair. “He can get sidetracked when he talks,” says A-Qing. “I hope he isn’t too annoying or anything.”

It’s incredible how Hanguang-Jun can declare, “I enjoy listening to him,” with a perfectly straight face.

Then again, he lived with the perfectly valid assumption that the love of his life was dead for five years, and for the three years after that, all he knew was that Fuxing was alive, wandering the world, not quite emotionally stable enough to confront the demons of his past, occasionally getting stabbed and stabbing people in return.

That’s like falling off a cliff and hitting every tree on the way down. From experience, A-Qing can say with confidence that that isn’t a pleasant experience.

A-Qing feels kind of bad for being the one who set it all up. “Um,” she starts, poking at a piece of chicken shyly. “I know I got in the way. I’m not going to apologize for it, because I don’t think I did anything wrong. But I know I was definitely a reason why you couldn’t meet sooner.”

The confusion grows in Hanguang-Jun’s gold eyes. “You have nothing to feel sorry for,” he insists.

“I don’t really feel sorry,” A-Qing corrects him. “I’m just kind of...” She makes a universal gesture for not having any words to describe her sentiments, which is rare for her. “Conflicted, I guess. Thanks for being such a good sport about it, though.”
Hanguang-Jun studies her for a bit longer. “You helped Wei Ying find himself when he was alone,” he says. “You stood by his side and grounded him. Of all people, you have done the most.”

“Okay, no,” A-Qing buts in. “I just travelled with him. Maybe gave him some advice. He was the one who decided to pull through.”

Both of them consider this for a moment. Then they nod at each other, having reassured themselves that people can be told what to do and what to feel any number of times and not change at all; they can also listen once and change forever. Who knows? People are weird like that.

Of course there’s a lot to see in a big city. A-Qing’s seen a decent chunk of what she could see, her being a street rat and all. With Hanguang-Jun’s priest persona, it’s a lot easier to slide into places without earning any dirty looks or getting chased out with a broom or something of the sort. Isn’t it neat, how people treat you differently depending on what they think they can get out of the exchange? Hooray for the innate goodness of humanity!

Anyway. They weave through giant crowds and end up near the huge gates to the city. It’s like a never-ending procession of people oohing and ahhing as they wander in like foreign tourists. A-Qing stares up at the adjacent guard towers for a while.


“The goddess will descend tonight at midnight exactly,” Hanguang-Jun supplies.

“And she’s going to have guards?”

“Yes. Are you worried?”

“Not really,” A-Qing mutters. She’s got a bad feeling; that’s all. Sue her. Last time, things sure turned out a lot nastier than anyone expected.

“The goddess of riddles, Li Miyu, will descend with her,” Hanguang-Jun adds helpfully.

“Oh good,” says A-Qing, utterly unimpressed. “Now she can tongue-twister people to death if they try to kill her.”

“Gods are much more powerful than we can imagine.”

A nice, bright image of Fuxing tripping over his robes and into a river comes to mind. “Sure,” A-Qing allows, “but they’re nowhere near as almighty as you might think.”

Hanguang-Jun gives her a look that says, don’t we know it.

The unlucky luck squad: comrades in nihilism. Fate truly weaves a confusing tale.

“Let’s try and see if we can catch any of the others here,” A-Qing suggests once they’ve run out of conversation to fall back on.

They end up waiting. There’s a silence between them, but it sure doesn’t exist anywhere else. This place is so goddamn loud, it’s giving A-Qing a headache. Like, okay, sure, festivals are fun, but gods aren’t that important that you need to invite everybody in the country to come look. Isn’t that kind of insulting? Hey, everyone! Our patron god’s sister just tripped up the golden steps and became a god! Come see her! She can do tricks and everything!

That’s the sort of vibe A-Qing gets. Then again, she’s never been one to believe in any higher
powers. It might sound weird given her role as a divine vassal, but all the gods she’s met have walked the same path as humans and never once looked up to the heavens.

 Doesn’t say much about the heavens, really.

 “A caravan?” A-Qing wonders aloud, leaning over the railing of a public observation tower to get a better look.


 “Oh, you noticed?” says a completely random bystander who probably wants to get on the temple’s good side. He smiles way too brightly, then explains, “They’re a group of mercenaries that trade across lands we’ve never seen! They played an important role in sustaining our military might during the Great War.”


 The bystander sputters. A-Qing scans over the faces of the mercenary merchants.

 They definitely look like a hardened bunch. You know what they say: never trust a merchant that sells you steel with a smile during wartime. Where’d they get the resources? How have they not been murdered by an opposing faction?

 Conspiracy theories aside, there’s a very unique smile in that procession that A-Qing would recognize anywhere. Survival instinct sure is neat.

 A-Qing clambers over the edge of the railing before anyone can react. Except for Hanguang-Jun, obviously, who holds her by the collar as she dangles over the platform.

 “There are safer methods to reach ground level,” he insists, with an elegant version of oh my god, psycho kid tagged on.


 They take the normal route down. A-Qing sprints to catch up with the merchant brigade.

 “Hey,” she says to one smiling merchant in particular. “Hey,” she says, tugging on his shirt when he doesn’t react.

 The merchant turns his head. Raises a single wild eyebrow. “Hey, puny kid,” he says in all his sixteen-year-old glory.

 “Hey, asshole,” A-Qing snarks back. “Get over here. We should talk.”

 The merchant catches sight of not-Hanguang-Jun. “Well, that’s three out of five,” he says.

 After some elaborate story about how A-Qing’s flesh vessel is the long-estranged sister of Xue Yang’s flesh vessel, the three members of their current party shuffle back up to the observation platform.

 “This unfortunate boy is a merchant-in-training,” Xue Yang explains, jabbing at his chest with his thumb. “And a mercenary, too.”

 “Not a great one,” says A-Qing.
“That’s true enough,” Xue Yang agrees. “When I was sixteen, my body count was way higher than this loser’s.”

Hanguang-Jun does this half-sigh, half-exhalation thing. “Killing is prohibited,” he says flatly, and leaves it at that.

Xue Yang waves dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, heard it a million times but with ten times the snark. Don’t freak.”

It turns out that Xue Yang’s been too busy over the past few days to really get a sense of anything, something about running numbers and playing accountant because nobody else wants the dull, soul-sucking job.

A-Qing’s about to say something really funny and intelligent when a really fancy procession pulls in. The mood practically plummets, which is kind of weird given the fact that the new guests seem very pleased to be here.

“Looks like some nobles,” says Xue Yang.

“Foreign nobles,” A-Qing points out. “What’s that banner?”

“It’s the flag of the Northern Kingdom,” the same bystander says, though it’d be hard to tell it was him with the venomous disdain sunken into his words. “Their emperor sent nobles over as a sign of goodwill.”

“I’m not seeing the goodwill,” A-Qing says cautiously.

“They stole our land, our lives, and now our goddess,” the bystander sneers.

“Great,” says A-Qing, before she turns back again. “So anyone else see a familiar face, or was it just me?”

Hanguang-Jun keeps a careful eye out in case A-Qing does something stupid, like hurl herself over the railing. She doesn’t. She takes the stairs down, then sprints after the decked-out horses.

“Pardon me,” she says to the youngest-looking noble. “Hey. Hey,” A-Qing shouts, when the head turns way above her. “Down here.”

The noble boy looks down and at her. “Hello,” he says, with a familiar nervous lilt. “Can I... can I help you?”

A-Qing gestures at the others. “Let’s talk.”

With one more member of their group added to their ranks, they shuffle back up the observation platform and are immediately met with dirty and/or confused looks.

“It seems that tension is still incredibly high even after the peace treaty was drafted,” Mo Xuanyu says. He picks at the ornaments on his wrists and around his neck uncomfortably. That’s fair. Also way too much gold. Again: fair. “This boy’s family seems to be very important in the Northern Kingdom, but it would be suspicious if I asked anyone why.”

“But you really landed a lucky one,” Xue Yang says. “A rich noble—at least you can be ignorant in comfort, whereas I have to crunch numbers until they crunch me.”

“Kill the numbers,” A-Qing insists.
“So we’re forgetting the whole ‘killing is prohibited’ thing.”

“Kill the numbers,” A-Qing repeats. “Math is evil. Might as well be a sin.”

Hanguang-Jun clearly disagrees, because he frowns. “I will teach you,” he says, which is probably the most horrifying sentence that’s been uttered since they got mind-dropped into these unfortunate folks.

The four of them loiter around for a bit longer before deciding that they’ve spent an obscene amount of time staring at nothing. It’s already dark out, so they grab one last meal and get some really weird looks before making their way to the Temple of Luxing.

A-Qing has no idea what the schedule is, so the best she can do is shove everyone in her corner and clamber up onto the top of the gate. She peers over the sea of heads and sees a pretty lady in flowing white robes decorated with pink flowers. She’s got a familiar sash that’s less tangible material and more floating petals knocked into the form of an accessory.

Red eyes, red lips. So that’s what Ying Huohua looks like when she isn’t eight kinds of fucked up.

“She’s here,” A-Qing tells the group, dangling off the roof. “You guys are too conspicuous. I’ll go look for Fuxing.”

“Take caution,” Hanguang-Jun warns her.

“Caution’s my nickname,” A-Qing blatantly lies. And then she’s off, running across the rooftops as everyone prostrates themselves.

The walls around the temple are easy enough to navigate. She hops down behind the temple, where it’s dead silent, and initiates stealth mode.

It lasts for maybe ten seconds before someone taps a finger on her shoulder.

A-Qing spins around and offers a spinning kick to whichever creep thinks stalking a twelve-year-old girl is cool. Newsflash: it isn’t.

And would you look at that? Good move, Yufeng-Zhe! You just tried to roundhouse a goddess!

“Oh,” is all A-Qing says to a pretty face, glassy green eyes, and two flower-adorned antlers. “Uh. Sorry.”

“If I didn’t know before, this certainly confirms it,” says the goddess, smiling so brightly the wisteria hanging off her robes literally blooms. Weird.

A-Qing would recognize that way of speaking if she was blind and deaf. “You mind-jacked a goddess?” she asks not-Fuxing, genuinely alarmed.

“Better me than anyone else,” says Fuxing.

“Who even are you,” A-Qing demands, and then backtracks when Fuxing opens his mouth. “Oh, fuck off. You’re Li Miyu, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Fuxing says proudly. He does a twirl, showing off his purple qixiong ruqun. It’s actually really nice, with faint flower patterns and a neat black sash, but those words will never leave A-Qing’s mouth.

“Well, the heavens aren’t on fire yet, I’ll give you that,” says A-Qing. “So what’s the deal? Why are
“Ah, you say that sarcastically, but it’s more literal than you think,” Fuxing declares.

“What.”

“You see, Li Miyu is Luxing’s attendant and Ying Huohua’s best friend! The power of friendship is truly astounding.”

“What the fuck,” says A-Qing.

“It’s been very confusing so far,” Fuxing agrees.

A-Qing holds up a hand in a gesture of *hold the fuck up*. “Wait. You’re Luxing’s attendant? How hasn’t anyone figured out that— “That he’s nine kinds of messed up in the head? “That you’re not actually Li Miyu?”

“You underestimate me,” says Fuxing, raising a single plucked eyebrow.

“What did you do?” A-Qing asks dubiously.

“Nothing! Why are you looking at me like that?” Fuxing has the audacity to ask after yet a little more of A-Qing’s will decays. “Li Miyu is colourful character to begin with. I just…” A pause. Why did he pause? “I just added a few more shades.”

“Because you’re shady as hell,” A-Qing insists.

“Your trust in me is highly appreciated,” says Fuxing.

Sneaking out of the temple with Ying Huohua’s best friend and apparent bodyguard is, in hindsight, not a smart move. But time is short, and who knows when they’ll all get to meet up again?

So here they are, five not-people, standing in an obscure corner a few blocks away from the temple.

“Well,” Xue Yang begins, “now what?”

“Now we figure out where to go from here,” says A-Qing.

There’s a moment where all of them stand in a cult circle and internally go, *hmmm.*

Then the moment ends, and Fuxing says, “Certainly we don’t need to be subtle if these are all memories.”

“Ohugion,” Mo Xuanyu quickly says. “Um, it does actually matter. Xue Yang almost got eaten alive just now.”

That, while disappointing, isn’t surprising in the slightest. “I was gone for fifteen minutes,” A-Qing tells Xue Yang accusingly.

“Pardon me, princess, but I didn’t know Luxing was everywhere,” Xue Yang sneers.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that if you act too out of character, Luxing might, um. Eat you,” Mo Xuanyu explains.

“Eat you how?”
Xue Yang clears his throat. Bad start. “La dee da,” he proclaims loudly. “Hey everyone, my name’s Xue Yang, also known as Jiangzai because life hates me, and I’m actually from, like, a thousand years in the future! With this knowledge, I can say with confidence that you all die horribly!”

In an attempt to make this experience even more traumatizing than usual, a big, gaping void with a million eyes and a full mouth of teeth for each of said eyes creeps into existence beneath their feet.

“Mm, on second thought, that was all a lie,” Xue Yang decides, clearly disturbed.

The gaping maw swirls closed. A-Qing really wishes gods would stop turning themselves into eldritch demons when they get upset.

“Point taken,” she grudgingly allows. “Then we just need to allocate tasks accordingly.”

Xue Yang raises his hand. “Ooh, me first. I’m a merchant and maybe a mercenary. Nobody gets a better impartial viewpoint than I do.”

“Because you’re the paragon of impartiality,” A-Qing says flatly.

“As long as everyone gets stabbed the same, what’s the problem?”

“Moving on,” says A-Qing. “I’m a street rat. Since I’m a brat, I can basically do anything as long as it doesn’t piss people off too much.”

“What a challenge.”

“Shut up, I’ll kill you.”

“I’m, um, a Northern noble,” Mo Xuanyu continues, interrupting A-Qing’s attempt to wring Xue Yang’s neck. Understandable, but still a shame. “I probably have access to a lot of resources, but I need to get used to them first. I’ll try my best.”

“Hanguang-Jun might be able to help me,” A-Qing points out. “Nothing wrong with a friendly priest, right?”

“I will ensure Yufeng-Zhe remains in good health,” Hanguang-Jun promises, which is probably a really polite way of saying he’s going to make sure A-Qing doesn’t bark up the wrong tree and end up crushed by it.

“Meanwhile, I’ll be partying it up in the heavens,” finishes Fuxing. He smiles something bright and half-knowing, which is basically a fist magnet. “Things should be very, very interesting.”

“Don’t piss off any gods,” A-Qing warns.

“I wonder what the current Fuxing is like,” Mo Xuanyu ponders aloud.

“Curious how these kingdoms don’t exist in any records in our time,” says Xue Yang. “I have a good guess as to what happened to all these people. You know. Given the premise of war and all.”

Silence.

Wow! Don’t you love stray thoughts? They’re so wonderful. Really makes you contemplate your measly mortal existence.

“Then we should try to piece the story together before this war kills us all,” Fuxing suggests.
A-Qing sighs. “All in favor, say ‘aye’.”

Everyone echoes a firm “aye”, with the exception of Hanguang-Jun, who simply nods.

By the time they’ve all gone their own ways, Ying Huohua and not-Li-Miyu have already jumped back into the heavens. A-Qing loiters on top of the temple because she can.

Here, where nobody can hear her, she says, “Okay. You can do this, Wei Chengfeng.”

That about gets her through the night.

Despite what everyone thinks, A-Qing is great at collecting intel.

What? Just because she’s small and loud doesn’t mean she can’t pry words out of mouths that don’t want to say them.

Her greatest strength, though, is her persistence.

“You came all this way without knowing this was the capital of the Southern Kingdom?” asks an astounded shopkeeper.

A-Qing dials up the stubborn brat act to eleven. “I followed the merchants,” she lies, sticking her bottom lip out in a pout. “I didn’t know what to do! How else am I supposed to feed my family?”

“This city is literally called the Capital,” the shopkeeper points out.

“So I could’ve listened harder,” says A-Qing. “Whatever. Your war talk got me all nervous.”

“The war’s been over for ten years.”

“Well, you guys sure don’t act like it.”

A-Qing gets kicked out. She continues the conversation at the next shop down.

The shopkeeper sniffs righteously at the whole war-tension-ominous-looming-cloud thing. Oh boy, here we go. “It’s not our fault the Northerners stole our goddess,” he says, one part condescending and two parts acerbic.

“My goddess?” A-Qing repeats. “Ying Huohua?”

“They must have fooled her into accepting the proposal,” the shopkeeper insists.

“Cool. What do you mean, ‘stole’?”

“Luxing would never accept it!” the shopkeeper raves on, ignoring A-Qing completely and waving a knife around in the air with vigor. What is with people and knives? “He’ll make things right! He’ll defeat the invaders and bring back our noble goddess!”

“So is this war over or not,” A-Qing says flatly.

“If only their general hadn’t ascended as well,” accuses the shopkeeper at absolutely nothing. “Then we would be at peace!”
Now that’s an interesting tidbit right there. “What general?” A-Qing demands. When the shopkeeper doesn’t respond, she smacks her hands on the counter. “I said, what general?”

Apparently this crazy guy’s had just enough of her, because she gets thrown out again. No biggie. A-Qing tries at the shop across the street.

“You don’t know the legend?” asks the shopkeeper, astounded. “I thought just about everyone knew.”

“I’m new here,” A-Qing says simply.

“Oh. Well, you know Luxing, right?”

“Hard not to, given. You know.” A-Qing gestures at the world at large. “Everything.”

“Okay, well, do you ever wonder how he ascended?”

The only ascension A-Qing knows about involves a siege, a lot of fire, and the cultivation world simultaneously freaking the fuck out and sending in the whole nine yards to murder a single depressed lad. Hell if A-Qing knows anything about whatever higher power makes the labels of godhood. “I don’t know. Did he die or something?”

“No,” says the shopkeeper, somewhat offended. She wipes her knife with a huff. Seriously, what’s up with the knives? “He was a brilliant general for our army! He led our kingdom to incredible victories! He turned the tides when all hope was lost!”

“So he literally did his job,” A-Qing summarizes.

And she’s kicked out again. These people are way too sensitive for their own good. Fortunately, a big city means lots of people to bother.

The steamed bun vendor frowns when A-Qing jumps into conversation. “The most impressive thing wasn’t necessarily Luxing’s achievements on the battlefield,” he states. “He was originally a peasant boy from a poor village. He jumped through the ranks, and by the time he was eighteen, he was already a general.”

“So he’s a hotshot,” A-Qing considers. “Huh. Then what’s this about an enemy general who also ascended?”

The vendor’s frown somehow gets deeper. “The corpse goddess,” he says, in the same tone he would say the greatest disgrace to ever walk the earth. What’s his problem? That’s a pretty badass nickname. Ominous, but badass. “Why do you care about her?”

“Because I’m a tiny girl in the middle of a city enveloped in the tensions of a war I’m worried might not be truly over,” A-Qing says indignantly. “Give me a break.”

“She’s the greatest disgrace to ever walk the earth,” the vendor sneers, and shoos A-Qing away.

All in all, A-Qing might be a bit brash sometimes, but she sure knows how to keep pushing until she gets what she wants.

Hopefully Hanguang-Jun’s having better luck. With this thought in mind, A-Qing nabs a steamed bun from another vendor who she hasn’t pissed off and heads to the temple.

Hanguang-Jun greets her at the door. What an excellent parental figure! Fuxing could learn a thing or
two, like how not to convince his kids to make explosive talismans. Weirdo.

“I hope you’ve had better luck than I have,” A-Qing tells Hanguang-Jun, once they’ve found a quiet place to chat. “So far, all I’ve been hearing is that the people here in the Capital really hate the enemy general, whoever she was.”

Hanguang-Jun frowns. “Luxing was a general,” he says, connecting the dots real quick.

“Apparently.”

“That does not bode well,” Hanguang-Jun states.

“It doesn’t, but nothing about this does. Wait, is there a bigger reason?”

“Ying Huohua is betrothed to a Northern god.”

A-Qing neatly collects her feelings in a simple but empathetic, “Oh, shit.”

So that’s why everyone said Ying Huohua had been stolen. Are they that against a divine marriage? What does it matter to them? The gods don’t stick their fingers into mortal affairs unless their own affairs happen to topple all over humans and their icky, tiny existences.

This era is probably a period of time in which people are unaware of this fact. Promising.

“The gods have been very vocal about the arrangement,” Hanguang-Jun goes on to say. “Many disapprove. Tensions are rising not only among the civilians, but the heavens.”

“And what about Shouxing?” A-Qing adds, with growing horror. “She must be angry, too. The person she loves is going to be married off.”

“I have not heard about Shouxing.”

“Me neither. But she has to be up there, and she’s probably pissed.”

“Most worryingly,” Hanguang-Jun continues, and that’s really bad news, because everything’s already pretty alarming, “the royal court believes that the balance of power will sway once the marriage takes place.”

A-Qing has to sit and process that for a second. “What the hell,” she says, once she lets her brain eat the words up. “The gods are too busy messing everything up in heaven to bother with earthly matters!”

“Perhaps matters are different in this era,” Hanguang-Jun offers.

“Times change, but people don’t,” A-Qing says, with as little reverence as possible. “And gods are just shiny people. The fuck are the royals doing? Don’t they understand that they’re just feeding into the tension?”

Hanguang-Jun lets out a half-breath, half sigh, “History repeats itself,” he says.

“And hindsight is always a bitch,” A-Qing concludes.

On that bright note, there’s nothing the two of them can do but keep digging to find the truth. Maybe Fuxing’s nine kinds of fucked up in the head, but that’s at least two kinds fewer than all the other gods, who can’t get their egos out of their own asses.
Not to be crass, but grow the hell up.

A-Qing shares lunch with Hanguang-Jun at the temple, waves goodbye, and tells him to stay low. He returns the favour by telling A-Qing to stay safe.

And then it’s back to incense-choked halls for one of them and lively streets for the other.

Hopefully the others are having some better luck. Then again, given fate and all that nonsense, they’re probably two minutes away from putting their heads through a wall.

______________________________

Xue Yang is two minutes away from putting his head through a wall.

You really can’t blame him. For a second there, it really seemed that fortune took a turn in his direction! The only way that could ever happen was if fortune got absolutely smashed, broke every single empty jar over her head, and then spun a great big roulette wheel of who to not screw over and landed on Xue Yang.

But nooo, fortune’s a bitch as always.

“The corpse goddess,” Xue Yang repeats, tapping his fingers along the scroll he’s been staring to death for the past hour. What a fun name. It has a very nice aesthetic with very interesting connotations. “Why does the Southern Kingdom call a goddess by such a rude name?”

“Because she refused to fall in battle,” Nameless Merchant A says. She probably has a name, but who cares? Not Xue Yang.

“I’m envisioning a pincushion right now,” says Xue Yang. “Is that right?”

“Frighteningly so,” says Nameless Merchant A.

“Ahh. Seriously?”

“It was crazy. People call it ‘the flesh-feeding frenzy’. That’s how wild it was.”

“And this woman, who was very much human at the time, lived.”

“Cultivators are whack,” Nameless Merchant A supplies.

Xue Yang sighs. Taps a bit more. “Yes, they really are completely and utterly fucking whack, aren’t they?”

“Uh-huh,” says Nameless Merchant A. “And why don’t you know all this already? Weren’t your parents scholars or something?”

“They could have been many things,” Xue Yang says, “and now, they happen to be dead.”

“Sure. Now hurry up and finish tallying all those numbers.”

“I’m going to slit your throat while you sleep,” Xue Yang makes sure to cheerfully add.

“Have fun with that,” says Nameless Merchant A with an eye roll.
Xue Yang frowns as she marches off to join the other Nameless Merchants. What’s with people nowadays? Don’t they fear death anymore? If they don’t, that certainly explains some things.

People should really go back to being god-fearing cowards. That makes things much more entertaining. Alas, time only goes in one direction, except now, because time is just like destiny and fate and death and doesn’t give a shit about the instruction manuals it comes with unless it’s screwing people over.

With all that said.

This jolly brigade of merchants isn’t so jolly after all. Xue Yang discovers with very quickly with a few simple questions.

“I thought the war was over,” he comments casually, directing another cart full of cheap blades over to the caravan. “For two kingdoms at peace, the Southern Kingdom certainly covets their arms.”

Nameless Merchant B snorts. “Hell if I know what’s going on between them,” he says. “But the Southern Kingdom has always had an itchy sword hand.”

“Seems like they’ve scratched all the way to bone if you ask me.”

“The pay is good,” Nameless Merchant B points out. “So it doesn’t concern me. What’s it to you, anyway?”

Xue Yang wishes he could say, despite my upbringing and my semi-homicidal tendencies, even I can acknowledge the fact that war is a sad, stupid thing in which sad, stupid humans fling themselves over each other for pride and honor that doesn’t exist, resulting in a ridiculous amount of collateral damage and loss of talent, and frankly, the others would be very, very pissed.

He doesn’t. He could, however, point out that the outbreak of war would drastically increase this entire caravan’s chance of being murdered. He stays silent, on account of his trying to behave.

Yes. That’s right. He can behave when he wants to. The others are just too irritating to get on his good side.

“This seems like a very dangerous idea,” Xue Yang tells Nameless Merchant C as he looks over their latest contract. The Southern Kingdom appears to be going to great lengths to quietly collect resources for putting out a new declaration of one sword per civilian. Curious.

“You do what you have to do,” says Nameless Merchant C, with a tight smile.

Xue Yang is pleased to know that everyone here is considered just as severely fucked up as the next person. “It seems dangerous to be funneling all these weapons to the Southern Kingdom,” he points out helpfully. “When war breaks out—and we all know it will because someone broke a cup or something ridiculous like that—we’ll be caught right between it all.”

“They’ll be too busy trying to murder each other to get the middleman,” Nameless Merchant C argues. “We just have to make sure not to break the cup.”

“I think you’re missing the big picture,” says Xue Yang.

“I think you should shut up and finish up those numbers,” says Nameless Merchant C.

All these assholes deserve to die, and Xue Yang can’t wait to stand over their bodies and tell them, I told you so.
Unfortunately, he happens to be separated from the most powerful members of the unlucky luck squad, and Xue Yang has had enough death for one life.

That said, he can’t help but feel that his unfortunate flesh vessel only has one ending set in stone, and said ending will come rather quickly.

Xue Yang taps his hands along the scroll. Numbers really are evil. He would destroy them if he could.

So.

He might as well try to make whatever life he has remaining in this memory as entertaining as possible while also not getting eaten by Luxing.

Certainly that will help him relieve some stress.

This might sound really depressing, but Mo Xuanyu has never in his life been so loved by his blood family before.

It sounds sad, doesn’t it? But it’s fine! If anything, he feels terrible for hijacking a body that doesn’t belong to him. All he can do is try to fumble his way around the manor, acting as, uh, nobly as he can. Literally and figuratively.

“Young Master,” calls a servant, peeking her head into the study and thereby scaring Mo Xuanyu half to death. “Would you like your meals to be brought to you?”

“Oh, yes, that’d be nice,” Mo Xuanyu hastens to say.

Everything’s going quite swell, actually. It seems that Mo Xuanyu’s unfortunate body buddy is hideously shy, so no matter how terribly he acts out of character, no one can really judge him since they have no idea what said character actually is.

Depressing, but fortunate! Now Mo Xuanyu can spend all his time in the library, trying to filter out all the important information that’ll hopefully tell him a bit more about how not to die in this era!

Not that he has much hope of the aforementioned not dying, but figuring out what’s going on with the gods would be a nice tradeoff.

It takes him all of five minutes to nab a scroll off a shelf, skim through it, and immediately regret his existence.

“So Shouxing was originally the righteous general of the Northern Army,” he says to his helpful assistant, who’s more of a bodyguard-slash-babysitter. He tries not to sound like he wants to die too much.

The assistant raises an eyebrow. “Um,” she begins, probably thinking that Mo Xuanyu’s out of his mind. She wouldn’t be wrong. “That’s right. Is there a problem?”

“Not at all,” Mo Xuanyu lies. “So... the general of the Southern Army...”

“Luxing? What about him?”
“Oh, nothing,” says Mo Xuanyu, trying not to choke on his words with little success. He clears his throat. “It’s just. Um. You know, two golden gods of luck, kind of eternal enemies.” He makes a vague explosive gesture. “Fire, explosions, death, the end times. You know.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Young Master,” the assistant assures him. “The war has been over for ten years.”

It would probably be rude to point out that this peace is all one big facade. “Um, okay,” Mo Xuanyu tries instead, “but it doesn’t seem like the Southern Kingdom is too fond of. You know. Peace.”

“It’s natural for them to be a little cautious,” says the assistant.

“They had knives in their eyes,” says Mo Xuanyu. “Knives,” he repeats, when the assistant shrugs helplessly.

“It’ll pass,” the assistant declares with completely unfounded confidence. “Once the union between Ying Huohua and the venerable Shouxing is complete, our kingdoms will be joined in peace.”

There’s no reason for Mo Xuanyu to be even remotely surprised, but he kind of is? This is all very stressful.

“Are you not at all worried that a war might break out again?” Mo Xuanyu asks.

The assistant gives a don’t worry about it kind of wave. Why is she not worried? Why is nobody worried? They should be very worried. Mo Xuanyu doesn’t like it when he’s the only one that’s worried. It makes him feel like he’s slowly going insane. Or maybe he’s already taken the leap and this is all one massive delusion.

Positive thoughts, Mo Xuanyu. Positive thoughts. Sure, Luxing and Shouxing might have been mortal enemies when they were, uh, mortal, but now they’re immortal enemies! May we have a round of applause, please?

“I’m, like, pretty stressed out right now,” Mo Xuanyu tells the assistant delicately.

“I understand,” the assistant says severely, not understanding at all. “The festivities are pretty chaotic at the moment. But don’t worry!” she quickly adds. “All you need to do is smile and wave when the citizens come to pray. You’ll be perfectly fine, Young Master!”

Smile and wave? At what? Only representatives need to smile and wave. Is Mo Xuanyu a representative?

“You’re sweating a bit,” the assistant points out unhelpfully. She frowns and examines Mo Xuanyu’s pale complexion. “Are you feeling unwell?”

“I’m,” says Mo Xuanyu, struggling greatly to grasp words in his vocabulary to properly demonstrate how much he wants to lie down and be swallowed by the earth, “fine. I’m just. Confused and stressed.”

“We’ll be here to support you,” the assistant says confidently. “Just leave all the hard work to us, Young Master!”

The sentiment is very much appreciated. Unfortunately, the looming cloud of death and destruction is a bit too large and dark to feel anything but despair at the moment.

As Mo Xuanyu flips through record after record, trying his best to piece together a story that’s
already been broken, he can’t help but think:

Huh. Maybe I’m not the one who’s crazy. Maybe I’m the only sane person in a world gone mad.

But how silly would that be? Really! The world would have to work incredibly hard to go crazy all at once!

And that’s exactly what Mo Xuanyu’s stressed out about, because he knows that people will work unreasonably hard to make the unjust world they’re born into, which is messed up in a million ways, into a place that’s messed up in a million and one ways. All those being unique and frighteningly substantial in their own right.

“Mother,” says Mo Xuanyu, one night at dinner. He almost swallows his tongue over that one word. “Um, I wanted to ask about the Southern Kingdom.”

“If course,” says the mother. “What did you want to know?”

Other than everything? Not much. “I’m curious about their... economic situation,” Mo Xuanyu says gingerly.

“They’re very wealthy, as you saw when we visited,” says the father. He nods to himself in an act of self-confirmation.

“Yes, but their military appears to be in very good shape as well,” Mo Xuanyu continues.

Another confident nod. “They make sure to keep to keep on guard in case anything should happen.”

“Okay,” says Mo Xuanyu. “So shouldn’t we be worried in case they attack us?”

“Our gods will be united soon,” says the mother, soothingly. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

This is a case study in which one person takes two and two to make four, whereas the other person makes twenty-two.

It’s incredibly, really, how people can be so blind when they desperately want to believe in something that doesn’t hold ground in reality. That’s why demons and monsters and all that fancy, paranormal stuff don’t scare Mo Xuanyu anymore; whereas creepy-crawlies are slotted into good or bad from the moment they pop into existence, humans get to decide exactly where they land.

That’s exactly what makes people so terrifying: choice. Imagination. Freedom. And, of course, brains whose normal state is choosing to hiccup instead of. You know. Not doing that. Mo Xuanyu finds it unsettling that the pure, untarnished human state is one of constant diaphragm contractions. It makes life a little more exciting, in a sense. In other news, he is now terrified of being struck with chronic hiccups every time he drinks water too quickly. Life is full of tiny injustices, and they're all out to get him.

There’s nothing else Mo Xuanyu can really do but hole himself up in the library and, as Wei Chengfeng would say, do his best to beat life over the head with a bat he stole from life itself. So he dives into transcripts and documents and historical records, trying to find anything about any gods and stars and all that good stuff.

The assistant helps immensely. She’s lost in a world of her own along with the rest of the family, but at the very least, she’s honest and supportive. That’s more than anything Mo Xuanyu can ask from any household.
To be completely honest? Things are going okay. Life is pretty peaceful. The festivities climb and climb and climb until the wedding celebration is a mere day away.

Mo Xuanyu’s combing through records of past conflicts on the land when the assistant slams the doors of the library open.

“Oh, hello,” he greets, a little unnerved. She looks panicked. Why does she look panicked? That’s not a good sign.

It’s here, of course, that everything eats itself alive.

“Ying Huohua,” the assistant barely manages to get out.

“What—what about her?”

“The goddess is dead!”

Ah.

In hindsight, he really should have seen this coming.

It turns out that being a minor goddess is probably the best thing anyone can ever be. Ever.

Is that statement a little redundant? Perhaps. But Wei Wuxian is having the time of his life in the heavens, and it’s all because nobody cares about him and his sorry status as a god of idioms. This fact, combined with an unnamed law of the universe that makes it so all people are loved the same, it’s just that the love in question might be concentrated in some places and scattered in others, means that Ying Huohua greatly appreciates his—Li Miyu’s—presence.

“Shouxing and Luxing don’t seen very friendly today,” Wei Wuxian points out as they’re strolling through the gardens. Since when did the heavens have such tantalizing real estate? Probably before the entire market literally crashed to the ground. Ah, but the point still stands. “You’d think they’d have settled their differences by now.”

“They’re both incredibly stubborn,” Ying Huohua says, heaving a sigh.

Wei Wuxian peers over to the main hall. It appears to be on fire. Impressive and also very worrying. It’s something A-Qing would most certainly do in her free time.

That doesn’t bode well because gods of luck should be far more mature than mortal girls who like explosions a bit too much. But as they say, colourful personalities are nice sometimes. As long as they’re tasteful, of course.

“I wish they would sit down and talk to each other like respectable adults,” Ying Huohua says petulantly, once they’re seated at a charming little pavilion. “Is that so hard? I don’t think it’s hard.”

“It’s more difficult that you might assume,” Wei Wuxian offers. Down, personal bias, down. “Emotions are complicated things. Pride is a very powerful stimulant.”

“Personally, I think it’s more of a depressant,” Ying Huohua comments. “But I see where you’re coming from.”
“If anything, I think they should take your feelings into account just a tiny bit more,” Wei Wuxian says lightly. “Don’t you think so?”

Ying Huohua sighs. “Yes, that certainly would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, there’s lightning now,” Wei Wuxian points out. They both stare at the glaring streak in the sky. On cue, a violent bang of thunder breaks the otherwise tranquil air. Fun! Thunder in the heavens! What a not-at-all-ominous omen!

Ying Huohua winces a bit. “Again with the lightning,” she mutters.

“Not a fan?”

“Oh, don’t tease me,” she says. “You know I’ve always been. Um. Not scared. What’s the word?”

“Anxious?” Wei Wuxian suggests.

“Anxious,” Ying Huohua easily agrees. “Yes. I get anxious whenever storms come around. They’re pointless things, really. And they’re so loud.”

“But your brother seems to be very, ah, storm-happy.” Storm-happy. Is that a word? It’s probably one of those words you tuck back in your vocabulary to pull out in very specific instances, said instance being to describe a god of status, rank, and storms. Because storms belong on that list for some reason.

“Yes, well, I suppose that’s already been established,” says Ying Huohua. “Isn’t it silly? They think that just because they’re gods now, their responsibility over things has somehow changed.”

“You think it hasn’t?”

“You think it has?”

Wei Wuxian ponders this over for a bit.

Hmm. He hasn’t traveled the land and seen the world and all its people with his own eyes for nothing, has he? That would be a shame. He can’t give an answer that would disgrace A-Qing. Goodness, would she be angry if he did.

“I guess it really hasn’t,” he says decisively. “People can manage themselves just fine.”

“And that’s what I’m trying to say,” Ying Huohua explains with great relief. “I keep telling them, it’s okay! You did well. Stop trying to take responsibility for all the unfortunate things that sometimes happen. You’ll drive yourself crazy!”

“It’s a hard-learned lesson,” says Wei Wuxian. “Not to repeat the pride thing again, but alas: it cometh before the fall!”

“This is your 我行我素 thing again, isn’t it?”

“Sure it is,” Wei Wuxian lies. His what now? At least they’re words, which he tends to be good at. “Trust in yourself, let your heart be your guide! But pride works as an irritant sometimes. Or a fuel.”

“Oh both,” Ying Huohua adds.

“Oh both,” Wei Wuxian agrees.
A rather uncomfortable silence settles down between the two of them.

Wei Wuxian asks, “Are you not scared of Luxing?”

“My brother?” Ying Huohua says incredulously. “Why would I be scared of him?”

“Oh, you know,” says Wei Wuxian, gesturing casually. “Brothers do silly things for their younger siblings. Like sacrifice themselves, or sacrifice the world for them. All that.”

“He would never do such a thing,” Ying Huohua answers firmly. “He’s my brother. Things...” She trails off, swallows, and takes in a deep breath. “Things might have changed, and we might not be children any longer, but he’s still my one and only brother. No matter what happens—even if the earth burns, the sun devours itself, the heavens part—he would never hurt me.”

Plunge a knife into Wei Wuxian’s heart, why don’t you.

“That’s wonderful,” is all he can say without wincing.

With all that said, there’s nothing two minor goddesses can do except wait until the daily argument blows over and everyone returns home angrier than they left.

That’s what Wei Wuxian would like to say, except—surprise!—Li Miyu is somehow Luxing’s most trusted attendant, which is just so weird.

And not to be rude at all, but Luxing reminds him very much of an explosive talisman. Not one of his own; no, one of A-Qing’s. The ones that are rigged to explode when someone touches them the wrong way. Do you see where the metaphor lies? It’s not a very subtle one, but it seems that these gods despise subtlety, so no harm done.

“Good evening,” Wei Wuxian says as he slides into Luxing’s quarters. Ooh. Big and shiny. Very god-like. Would’ve been nice to have in present time. Anyway. “I hear you and big, bad Shouxing had another argument.”

Luxing turns and gives him the longest, flattest gaze Wei Wuxian’s seen since he last saw A-Qing. “You don’t say,” he snarks, sounding every bit like the twenty-something year old he is. He has a weighty presence, but he also looks very out of place in that brilliant battle gear and shiny adornments.

Oh god. Is this kid younger than Wei Wuxian? Yikes.

“Yes,” says Wei Wuxian, slotting that unwelcome fact somewhere else for now. “It was hard to miss, with the thunder and lightning and fire. You know.” He makes a grandiose gesture. “A replication of the end times.”

“What does that woman want?” Luxing demands from the world at large. He bangs a fist on his desk. Temper, temper. “She has an ulterior motive and she smiles and pretends as if she isn’t stealing away my sister!”

“Oh, about that,” begins Wei Wuxian. “Can you spend some more time with this aforementioned sister?”

Luxing pauses. Narrows his eyes. Wei Wuxian takes a few steps back.

“Is something wrong?” he asks, in a tone that says, I’ll murder you if you failed her.
“Not between us,” Wei Wuxian quickly says. “But she would like to speak to you about her feelings. You know what those are, don’t you? Feelings?”

“Yes, I know what feelings are,” Luxing snaps.

“Not fond of them, I assume.”

“Why are you always like this,” says Luxing, currently in the midst of attempting death via popped blood vessel.

It is unbelievably relieving to know that the whole snarky-self-righteous god act is working. Who would’ve guessed a goddess of idioms and riddles would be good with words? Truly a brilliant move, Wei Wuxian.

“Ah, but au contraire, I’m actually a very kind and soothing person,” says Wei Wuxian. He wiggles his fingers gamely. “Can you feel my soothing vibes? I’m directing them toward you. Ooh, venerable Luxing, go talk to your sister. Do you hear them?”

“Sometimes I wonder why I ascended with you,” Luxing mutters.

That’s a curious tidbit. Why did he? And who is Li Miyu, really?

“You did,” Wei Wuxian begins, and fails. When Luxing gives him a weird look, he declares, “Of course you did! I’d be breaking down temple doors making sure you actually ate dinner. I’d drill prayers in your head nonstop. I’d be your worst nightmare!”

“Bold of you to assume you aren’t already,” Luxing snarks. Before Wei Wuxian can pretend to be offended, the shiny god starts removing his shiny gear. “Just… tell my sister to wait a little longer.”

Of all sentiments, that one’s among the worst to reflect back upon. “Can’t you spare even a few minutes?” Wei Wuxian asks.

“It’s complicated,” is Luxing’s answer.

“A complicated,” Wei Wuxian says dubiously.

A sigh. “You wouldn’t understand,” says Luxing. “Having siblings is... it’s complicated.”

“Oh, it sure is,” Wei Wuxian agrees. “You never know what to say, and it feels like when you finally get it out, it’s always too late. And then you want to protect them, but they want to protect you, and you would give everything for each other and learn to hate each other if they gave everything up for you.”

A cute little silence falls face-first from god knows where. Luxing has this strange expression on, like he can’t quite process what just happened.

Eventually, with no shortage of suspicion, he manages to say, “I didn’t know you had siblings.”

“I’m the goddess of idioms and riddles,” Wei Wuxian says with a flourish. “It was just a little joke. Except I would like you to speak with your sister.”

“Which idiom is this?” Luxing asks flatly.

Wei Wuxian smiles. “雪上加霜. Are you familiar with it?”

“Am I familiar—seriously? Do you not remember any of the war?”
“Ease up a bit, general,” says Wei Wuxian. “It’s just a joke.”

Luxing lets out a deep, tired sigh.

“I’ll stop pestering you for now,” Wei Wuxian allows. “Shouxing plucked every one of your rigid strings today. Ah, but you cut her fingers deep, didn’t you? Regardless, even gods need to sleep. Tatta!”

And just like that, before Luxing can say anything else, Wei Wuxian darts out of his chambers and into the darkness of the night.

Now, what would Li Miyu do in this situation?

Keep Luxing’s secrets to herself? Tell Ying Huohua about it all? Ask Shouxing for her mercy?

Hmm. Curious. Freedom of choice is a dangerous game to play. Alas, Wei Wuxian now has to play that game, and he has a feeling that he knows what the real Li Miyu chose to do.

It’s very easy to do nothing. And that’s why everyone chooses that path.

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**The Tale of the Children**

Okay, so maybe some rash judgements were made. But only a few!

The Capital is a big place with big people. Apparently A-Qing just had some awful luck with the first lot she encountered.

This lot? They’re one hell of an upgrade.

“You’re, I don’t know, ten years old,” A-Qing hisses to a tiny boy that, as she mentioned before, looks like he’s ten years old.

The boy ignores her in favour of checking his map under the barely-existent light through the floorboards.

“If I’m being generous,” A-Qing makes sure to add. “You could end up getting stabbed. Do you know what happens when you get stabbed? You put your hand against death, and your hands are tiny miniatures. Pathetic replicas made of wiggly flesh. A one-to-four ratio. Understand? They say your hands are the truest vessels of the soul because they execute your will, whereas your feet are closest to hell, because they walk you to death. Now look at your tiny hands and tell me that you think any of this is a good idea.”

“I’m cooler than that,” the ten-year-old hisses back. “Now be quiet.”

“You puny ignoramus,” A-Qing manages to squeeze in right before a group of guards marches past. Above their heads, she might add. That probably lends some context to the situation at hand.

A-Qing ducks down. The kid follows. They hold their breath and wait to see if it’s their lucky day to get skewered through the floorboards.

It isn’t. The guards saunter right past, leaving nothing but the faint grating of their armor and the
assorted clinking of their metal trinkets.

“I heard these kids have been trying to break into the palace,” one of the guards says with a great, big laugh. “Can you believe it? I mean, how far could they get?”

The others join him in his shameless display of disrespect for the younger generation. They wander off, clearly unwilling to give two shits and do their jobs properly.

Fair enough. That makes matters much easier. Not that A-Qing ever wanted to be in a situation where she would have to wish for such a thing, but life, fate, destiny, yada, yada, yada. All spatial-rending, script-writing deities can die under her foot.

“I told you we’d be fine,” hisses the boy. “Now will you just shut up and follow me?”

“And I told your sister I’d make sure you don’t get executed,” A-Qing snaps back. Seriously, what’s with kids these days? No respect for their elders at all. “In case you couldn’t tell, what you’re doing right now—you know, the whole breaking into the royal palace thing? That’s illegal. Do you know how to write illegal?”

The boy mutters something under his breath, and, most notably, exclusively to himself.

“Illegal,” A-Qing repeats firmly, “is written as 非法. Right? Do you know how to write?”

“I know how to write,” says the boy.

“Yeah? Great. How many strokes are there in 非法?”

“Huh? Why do you care?”

“I said. How. Many.”

“Sixteen,” the boy answers after a moment of silence. “Why?”

“Because that’s how many kinds of fucked up you are,” A-Qing declares.

And since the boy’s under a self-written contract of silence, all he can do is silently fume under the incredible burn of A-Qing’s vicious humour. So what if he’s only ten? All kids grow up someday. Given the fact that a literal war is creeping up to the horizon, it’s better now than later. Hell, who knows if later even exists for any of them?

A-Qing gives the boy a shove forward. He hisses like a drenched cat. “Just lead the way so we can get out of here as soon as possible,” she tells him. “Don’t you have a magic map? What’s taking so long?”

“It’s because you’re bothering me,” the boy accuses venomously. “Who told you to come, anyway?”

“I literally just said it was your sister. Maybe all the talent in your ears went to your hands instead. Haven’t you considered that as the reason you have magic hands?”

The boy takes a deep, rattling breath. Ha! Take that, foolish facade of adulthood obscuring the fragile emotions of childhood? “You’re so annoying,” he says simply, then darts ahead.

Perhaps it would be nice to give some more background information as to what’s happening at the given moment.

So. The Capital’s a big place, right? Big place with big people who do big deeds. That’s been
established.

But take a good, long look under the surface.

They’re there, under the floorboards of every building. Even the shiniest and fanciest palaces.

Who are they?

Rats.

That’s right. Underneath all the hustle and bustle, there’s a whole community of street rats, barely sixteen at oldest, running around the streets and trying to make sure their comrades-in-arms live to see tomorrow. They have a base of operations and everything, though in reality it’s just an abandoned plot of land at the edge of the city that was overlooked by zoning laws. You’d recognize their turf immediately by the garlands of cloth and fabric and silk, all coloured and patterned uniquely. Why do they put them up? Hell if A-Qing knows. But it makes them happy, apparently, cutting off a piece of a noble’s identity and trying to see if it matches up with any of the previous scraps.

Is it cute? As an isolated incident, sure.

Is it depressing? As an analysis of how utterly fucked up the Capital is, then no shit.

It’s undeniably weird, given the fact that there doesn't seem to be any adult vagrants wandering around the streets. Then again, it’s possible that they all found work later on.

Whatever the reason is, A-Qing somehow got herself welcomed into the community with warm arms, and now she’s obligated to make sure these stupid kids don’t end up getting themselves killed because of some—magic map, or whatever.

Their specific words were something along the lines of, the goddess, Ying Huohua, has been seen in the palace! If we can speak to her ourselves, maybe she can save us!

A-Qing didn’t have the heart to tell them that gods are beings that blunder always, leaving mortals to deal with the consequences.

Anyway. Swap to present time, and the kid that’s closest to the gods is being accompanied by a girl who might end up being a god. One of those facts is more well known than the other.

“This way,” whispers the kid, turning his head in a vague direction of whatever ‘this way’ is. As far as A-Qing can see, it’s just more darkness.

A-Qing scurries after him. “How much further?” she hisses.

“Only a little,” the boy answers.

“Your magic map better end up working, or—”

“For the last time, it will! I drew it!”

That argument is much more sound than it might appear. There are all sorts of weird things in this world, and then there’s this ten-year-old kid, whose hands can bring to life drawings and characters and all things strange and wonderful.

It sounds a lot prettier than it really is.
The reason being that he’s wanted by the royal guard for god knows what.

A-Qing says that, but she has a sneaking suspicion that he’s onto those royal bastards.

But he’s a kid. So what if he has weird powers? Cultivators have weird powers too, don’t they? So let the kid draw his dumb pictures and write his stupid words. Don’t make him write something ridiculous like瘟.

(Wēn. Simply put: plague. Here’s a fun little fact. That character’s made of two parts—on top, you have疒 and below that you have皿. The 疒 part is straightforward, as a radical for ‘illness’ or ‘to lean on’. The 皿 part is a bunch of fun. Guess what? It means ‘kind’, or ‘benevolent’, or ‘humane’. Isn’t it strange how even that character is composed of囚 for ‘prisoner’ and皿 for ‘dish’... in other words, ‘to feed a prisoner with a dish’? Certainly human kindness isn’t that petty, right? Our standards aren’t that low, right? Regardless of what it all means, isn’t it funny? Pestilence, illness, and plague, crushing the so-called innate goodness of human nature. Well, you and I should know very well, as humans ourselves. When the world’s ending around you, do you really have time for others? Not to be crass or anything.)

The two of them crawl under the floorboards, taking seemingly random turns until the boy looks up and nods.

“This is it,” he says.

“You’re sure?” A-Qing asks dubiously.

“My maps are always right,” the boy answers confidently.

No wasting time then.

A-Qing pushes up on the boards and realizes that whoever designed this place was kind enough to slap a secret entrance onto whatever’s above them. The light hits her eyes hard, and she squints as she slammers up into—a random room? A bright one, that’s for sure. Lots of natural light and lots of gold to go with it. There’s a giant red curtain of sorts draped around steps leading up to a fancy chair. Throne. Whatever. They’re synonyms.

A-Qing hauls the kid out of the floorboards and kicks the trap door closed. “This is it,” she tells him. “What do you want to do?”

“Talk to the goddess,” the boy answers, as if A-Qing’s completely out of her mind.

“Great. How?”

“She’s right there!”

Cue grandiose gesture toward the fancy chair.

A-Qing narrows her eyes. Huh. There does, in fact, appear to be someone in the chair. You’d think the presence of a god would be pretty stifling. How’d she miss that?

The slim figure in the throne shifts. “Who are you?” she asks, in the same tone she would say, oh god, a rat.

Okay, you prejudiced asshole. Maybe death really does boost up maturity, what with the eternal reflection on past sins and all.
“We’re the abandoned children of the Capital,” says A-Qing, since the boy’s too busy prostrating himself. “We’ve come to ask for a favour. Just a small one.”

“Yes,” the boy says reverently. “If you could... please grant us your mercy and give us all futures... we’d be forever grateful.”

“That one doesn’t seem very grateful,” the figure points out disdainfully.

“I refuse to owe anyone anything until I see it happen,” A-Qing says.

“Shouldn’t you be more respectful before the gods?”

“Respect is a dwindling resource in this day and age. I’m reserving it for people who deserve it.”

“That’s—blasphemy...”

“Why the weird pause? And what’s my behaviour got to do with anything? We just want to ask you if it’s possible. Send us on our way if it isn’t.”

The figure shifts. A-Qing narrows her eyes. She’s beginning to get some really strange thoughts, and all of them are lining up to point at something awful.

“I will give you my blessing,” says the figure. “You have Ying Huohua’s word... and Luxing’s. Your future will be bright, and you will lead this kingdom to prosperity.”

“Oh, thank you,” says the boy, bowing even more reverently. Careful there. You’re going to put your head straight through the floor.

“It is my pleasure,” says the figure.

Mmm, yup. A-Qing doesn’t like this one bit.

“Well,” she says, lifting the boy to his feet, “we’ll be going then. You know. Guards and all. Nice meeting you.”

Before anyone can protest, A-Qing kicks the trap door open, leaps in, and pushes them forward as quickly as she can.

“Move,” she urges the boy. “Come on! Magic map, let’s go! Activate!”

The boy grumbles but leads the way out with impressive speed. By the time they hear guards rushing around, they’re already outside palace grounds. Maybe the reason the Southern Kingdom has so many militia is because they all share one brain cell.

They make it back to home base in record time, and the boy starts bragging to everyone even faster. It would probably be heart-crushing to suddenly say something like, yeah, I think we just got duped by an imposter.

A-Qing knows gods. Well, she knows a few. One. Whatever! She knows them. That Ying Huohua didn’t feel—what’s the word? Real? Genuine? Even remotely kind or elegant?

“Hey there,” she says to the boy, when she catches him alone later in the night. “So, about Ying Huohua.”

“What about her?” asks the boy.
“I’m about one-hundred-and-ten percent sure she was a fake,” A-Qing says elegantly.

“You’re what.”

“Fake,” A-Qing repeats. “You know how to write that?”

“Yes, I know how to write—” The boy’s face twists. “No! Get to the point. What do you mean?”

“I mean,” A-Qing declares with laudable professionalism, “that the palace is up to some sketchy shit, and we should stop poking our heads in unless we want them cut off.”

“You’re crazy,” the boy accuses.

“Most people come to that conclusion sooner or later,” says A-Qing. “Better sooner than later. Anyway, you should watch out. Tell the others, too.”

“Where are you going?” the boy demands as A-Qing starts to step away.

“Off to see the jolly man,” she tells him. “Don’t get murdered while I’m gone.”

And then she books it to the Temple of Luxing.

What? They just broke into the palace, saw the world’s worst casting choice for Ying Huohua, and narrowly dodged death by guard spear. It’s about time to consult with someone more capable.

A-Qing hops onto the temple roof again and loiters around until she spots Hanguang-Jun’s not-form wander past.

“Hey,” she says in greeting, swinging down. “Can we talk for a bit? It’s kind of important.”

The two of them find a quiet alleyway to talk. It’s kind of creepy how quiet it gets sometimes without all the festivals. You’d think it’s the setup for those horror stories parents tell kids in an attempt to get them to behave: *it was a quiet night like this where an axe-murderer decided to chop up some naughty kids...* 

“I’ve got bad news,” A-Qing begins.

“I do as well,” Hanguang-Jun says.

They kind of stare at each other for a second. Great. At least neither of them get to be the bearer of bad news when they’re both stuck in the same sinking ship.

“I’ll start,” A-Qing offers. She clears her throat. “So there are a bunch of street rats that steal stuff from nobles. One of them decided to sneak into the palace and beg Ying Huohua for her mercy.”

“Ying Huohua has no place in the palace,” Hanguang-Jun points out. He quickly concludes, “She was an imposter.”


“The palace has been acting against the temple,” Hanguang-Jun starts, once he’s confirmed that A-Qing’s bad news segment is over. “They demand for the homeless children to be indoctrinated.”

That doesn’t sound ominous at all. “Why?” A-Qing asks suspiciously.

“Their representative refused to say,” says Hanguang-Jun.
“Oh, that’s really bad,” A-Qing says, with growing horror. “Wait. Hang on. Do you think...”

She trails off and exchanges a glance with Hanguang-Jun. That’s some serious disapproval-slash-worry in his eyes.

“Religious martyrs,” she says simply.

Hanguang-Jun nods.

“It’s times like these I wish I could be a conspiracy theorist,” A-Qing laments.

“The court is preparing to declare war,” Hanguang-Jun states, getting straight to the point. “They plan to take advantage of any and all resources they consider disposable.”

It’s a silly thing to considering lives disposable. Like, sure. A-Qing gets it. Not all lives are equal across the board.

Don’t get her wrong! Everyone deserves to live, and nobody has any right to treat others as if they don’t have that right! But... what’s the right way to put it?

Everyone starts off with a handful of change. Okay? You can get more if you convince others to give some of theirs to you. On the flip side, you can also sell yourself to others. Not all lives are equal across individuals in a sense of the wholeness of morals and dignity and maybe even intangible things like the soul—but what does that matter? A person’s a person no matter what they have or what they lack.

So, dipshit, grow some empathy and get your head out of your ass!

“Starting tomorrow, the children will be housed on temple grounds,” Hanguang-Jun warns her.

“Oh fuck, that’s fast,” A-Qing mutters. “I’m guessing they’re going through with a ‘kill all who resist, but quietly and out of sight’ policy.”

“Most likely.”

“No, that’s fine. Pickle me in fine wine and poke my nerves to see me twitch, why don’t you. Fuckers.”

“Take caution,” Hanguang-Jun makes sure to say. The sentiment’s nice. “The court has refused to comment further, and their word holds more weight than the temple’s.”


“I know,” Hanguang-Jun assures her.

“Great. So, tomorrow. Fingers crossed.”

And would you look at that! Time passes. Tomorrow comes. A-Qing wakes up early in the morning to see royal guards circle around home base and herd all the kids down to the temple. It’s like one of those processions you see for mass executions.

Promising!

A-Qing, of course, is marching along with them. She’ll dance her tiny feet if she has to, but nobody says she has to be happy about it.
“Welcome to the Temple of Luxing,” says the head priest, with a very unconvincing smile. “We welcome you with open arms and pray for your salvation.”

It would sound a lot more genuine if he wasn’t literally reading off a script. The kids eat it up anyway. A-Qing sits there and silently fumes.

At the very least, she’ll get to talk with Hanguang-Jun more. And that isn’t a low standard at all. A-Qing’s just pissed because it’s the only standard she has left.

For a while, things seem alright. Isn’t that great? The kids get classes, they learn how to read and write, they basically become mini-priests. Most importantly, they have food and shelter. The royal guards look terribly proud of themselves when they come by to visit. Imagine providing for someone’s most basic needs and gloating because of it. That’s basically a criminal offense. A-Qing would deck them if she could.

Hanguang-Jun and A-Qing do their best to pry out information where it doesn’t exist. How are these people so content with being clueless? It’s like peeking out your window and seeing waters knee-deep, and then saying, huh. That’s kind of neat.

Life goes on. A-Qing is highly suspicious.

And then, in a total dick move, life decides to pave everything over in a very unprofessional hard reset.

It begins one morning when literal fire starts raining from the sky.

Fire is nice. Rain is nice. Fire raining from the sky is, as you can probably guess, not so nice.

A-Qing wasn’t having a good day to begin with. She doesn’t appreciate this sudden turn of events.

“Okay, I think now’s the time to get worried,” A-Qing says to Hanguang-Jun, when they both hurry to each other. Isn’t that cool? Great minds think alike while on fire. Anyway.

“The Northern Gods have descended,” Hanguang-Jun summarizes quickly.

A-Qing looks up. It’s hard to tell what’s what given all the chaos, but she spots what seems like a floating army. In the sky. On fire. They’re decked out in divine regalia, which is pretty telling.

“Well, that’s one thing out of the way,” she says. “Do we know why they’re flipping their shit, or should we call this an unprovoked act of incendiary violence?”

“There must be a reason,” Hanguang-Jun states. He does this while calmly patting out his burning sleeve. “But no matter what the reason is, this is where the heavens begin to split.”

“I can believe that.” You know. Fire, destruction, screaming, the end times. All that.

The two of them hide out in their usual quiet place. Once the chaos dies down, they hurry back to the temple, where everyone is still losing it, but without being on fire.

“This was an unprovoked act of incendiary violence,” one of the priests howls.

“Objection,” A-Qing shouts. “We’re humans. What do we know about gods? Shouldn’t we see what Luxing has to say first?”

Her offer is considered. Usually, she’d be turned down, but there’s so much logic and sense in it that the priests go ahead with it.
The kids huddle nervously in the temple. Their perception of gods and how merciful they are has probably warped significantly since this morning, and A-Qing has to commend them for how quickly they adapt to understanding why you should never meet your heroes. Maturity hits like a brick over the head sometimes. The metaphor there being that you should hit maturity over the head with a brick first.

Now, the reasonable question to ask here would be: what does Luxing think?

A-Qing mentally compares Luxing with the Fuxing she knows. Crazy? Check. Too young to be a god? Check. Mature beyond their years but also a chaotic gremlin? Check, check, and check.

Fuxing might be a weird god, but he’s a good person. And that’s what matters at the end of the day. Or the end of the world. Which one’s which? Well, it doesn’t really matter now.

So she does the one thing a reasonable person should never do.

She gets her hopes up.

Luxing ghosts their prayers until one day, he doesn’t.

It happens when everyone’s in the temple enjoying the nice weather, which at this point is anything that doesn’t involve dangerous things falling from the sky. Standards, standards, standards.

A-Qing’s in the middle of destroying someone at tongue twisters when a voice she can only assume to be Luxing’s echoes out:

**Ying Huohua is dead!**

That about sets the mood for the rest of—well, forever. Forever in this case being however long they have left.

In hindsight, A-Qing should’ve seen this coming. She figured out the broad strokes before, but come on! What the hell is she supposed to do with abstract art? Interpret it like some pompous art curator who wants to make a quick buck off absolute nonsense?

“Ying Huohua’s death is the catalyst for a war in the heavens and earth as well,” is how Hanguang-Jun summarizes it.

“And I bet both factions blame each other,” A-Qing adds.

“Which will only further the discord and lead to the total destruction of both kingdoms and the current pantheon.”

They’re rudely interrupted by another light drizzle of flames. Either Luxing’s seriously slacking on the job or the arguments up there are getting really intense. One is far more likely than the other.

Conveniently, the royal guards take the opportunity to herd all the kids into a safe location. Three days pass before they’re allowed out.

“You know what,” A-Qing says to Hanguang-Jun, “I have a really bad feeling about this.”

“As do I,” Hanguang-Jun agrees.

It’s nice to know that they’re in agreement. It’s unfortunate to know that the only reason they’re able to come to such a conclusion is that everyone else has probably read the room and arrived at the same utter of, *oh, shit.*
A big, warm bonfire sits in the center of the plaza. It could probably roast fifty chickens at once, which would be a nice surprise. Or, you know. It could almost, maybe, possibly roast a bunch of miniature-sized children. Depends on the occasion, really.

Looks like the court’s decided to go ahead with the latter. That’s a shame. A-Qing likes chickens, but she doesn’t like them that much.

“What are you doing?” the kids start asking, because that’s a perfectly valid question when a bunch of armed guards are marching you toward a bonfire. “Where are we going?”

The guards don’t smile. Good for them; that’s five points off their psycho tracker. They do, however, say, “Thank you for your service to our kingdom.” That slaps ten points on, making it an overall increase of five.

“You can’t be serious,” says A-Qing. “Are you actually going to immolate a bunch of kids?”

“You’re innocent and pure,” the commander says. “You will become gods and bring peace to our people.”

“Oh, fuck off,” A-Qing snaps. “I don’t know what kind of bullshit you’ve been eating, but kids feel a lot more than you’d think. And when they get angry, they get straight up vengeful.” She gestures out toward the inferno. “You toss us in there, and we’ll come back as malevolent spirits and tear this entire kingdom to pieces!”

A silence settles down.

The commander tells the guards, “Throw her in.”

It’s when a nameless guard tries to bind her arms that A-Qing trips him on his ass and steals his sword.

She mutters a single, “Sorry about this,” before she reverses her grip on the hilt and drives it through the poor sod’s mouth.

The guy dies with a blade down his throat. Nasty way to go, but you do what you gotta do. Also, these people were okay with toasting a bunch of prepubescent kids, and that’s just... not cool. The highest tier of not-coolness.

“Run!” A-Qing yells at all the other children, who proceed to take off in every direction imaginable.

Aaaand cue bloodbath.

The priests, in a surprising but definitely not unappreciated display of solidarity and basic human empathy, start fighting back against the soldiers. They put a denk in the ranks, but there’s only so much a haphazard team of children and holy men can do.

A-Qing catches sight of Hanguang-Jun. She uses both hands and cleaves her sword through a soldier’s torso. Where the hell is this kingdom getting their ores, and why are they so nice?

“This is bad,” A-Qing says to Hanguang-Jun.

“We must reveal the truth to the civilians, or the court will twist this rebellion in their favour,” Hanguang-Jun says. He then proceeds to twirl his blade through a soldier’s chest. He might not be nearly as powerful as he is in his normal body, but every bit helps.
A-Qing does her best to keep up. Her tiny arms and tiny hands can’t do much, but a sword is a sword no matter who’s cutting. “The kids,” she says, panting a bit. Curse you, puny flesh sack! “Do you think we can get the kids out?”

They take in the situation, glance over the bodies on the ground, how many of them have the royal sigil, how many don’t. Some of them are small. Too small. Humans really do suck sometimes.

“Unlikely,” A-Qing voices for both of them. She sighs. “I’ll try my best, since I’m the fastest climber. Cover me?”

“Of course,” Hanguang-Jun agrees easily.

And they hack and slash their way through anyone that gets a bit too close for comfort.

There’s something pretty awful about cutting down actual living humans. Most of A-Qing’s nastier adventures have been, uh, rather sparse in the execution department, but she’s been there.

You learn a shocking amount of human anatomy just by sticking a sharp stick into someone’s gut and pulling out. Is that knowledge you want to know? Unless you happen to be a doctor, probably not. Even then, the hope is that whatever doctor you’re seeing doesn’t have homicidal tendencies. That would be rude not to disclose to your patients. Like, most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God. Unless I’m in that twitchy mood, in which case all bets are off and you’d better hope I’ve put you under before I put you down.

You know? It doesn’t roll off the tongue as nicely. A-Qing thinks this as she downs another guard and rudely mutilates his tongue, as well as the interior of his mouth. Street rats don’t have too much choice when it comes to fighting honorably.

For a memory, this all seems very real. There’s a quote about perception somewhere there, but she doesn’t have time to dig it up.

“Thanks,” she says to Hanguang-Jun as she’s tossed up onto the gates. “If I don’t come back, assume I’ve been murdered.”

Hanguang-Jun nods. It’s nice to have a familiar face through all this gory business.

So A-Qing turns and clambers up the roof. Her hands are slippery, no surprise there, but she manages to get herself nice and elevated above the mess below her.

It’s there that she comes face-to-face with a whole slew of reinforcements waiting outside.

“No,” she says distantly, as, like, five archers take aim at her. “I feel like I’ve been saying this a lot recently, but in hindsight—”

And twing.

That’s the sound of a bowstring humming back. There’s also a thunk, which if you couldn’t guess, was the sound of one particularly skilled archer landing an arrow right between A-Qing’s eyes.

Well. Not her eyes, mind you. Her flesh vessel’s.

What follows can be aptly summarized as a severe turn of tables. The screaming kids scream until they physically can’t. The priests are put down. A-Qing’s soul gets happily ejected from her body.
when they toss it into the bonfire.

She hovers there and waits morbidly for Hanguang-Jun.

He joins her a few very badass minutes later. Basically, the lesson here is that you should never piss off Hanguang-Jun no matter what form he takes, because he’ll destroy you. Simple as that.

“Well,” says A-Qing, staring down at the unfortunate scene below them, “I’d say we got a good chunk of the story right there.”

“The court will blame the deaths on the Northern Kingdom,” Hanguang-Jun elaborates. “And the children—”

He’s rudely interrupted by what sounds like a million puppies being kicked at once.

It’s the worst and most disturbing sound A-Qing has heard so far, and she just put down a handful of guards by feeding them cold, hard steel. In one word: yikes.

From the inferno crawls a... thing.

That’s the only descriptor A-Qing can come up with. You know that feeling when you see something so indescribably eldritch and awful that your mind just melts for a second? Well, A-Qing’s trying and failing to catch her brain matter in a bucket, because holy hell, that’s pure, undistilled nightmare fuel right there.

It’s a terrible thing made of a million arms and a million legs, all moving in tandem like a ball of writhing maggots. It has something of a mouth, or an opening of sorts, and when it opens up wide, it’s like staring down a column of teeth. An exclusive tube of pearly whites.

The first unlucky guard to invade the thing’s personal space gets swallowed and churned up in the teeth tube. And, uh, you can kind of hear his screams all the way.

Wow. That’s not even comically horrific. It’s just plain old horrific.

“Oh, that really sucks,” A-Qing says, trying to keep the horror down. “I expected vengeful spirits, but not...” What’s a word that isn’t too offensive to describe an undead monster born of the wrath and terror of a bunch of innocent kids? “This poor thing,” is what she lands on.

Hanguang-Jun observes the scene with his lips pressed flat into a rigid line. That’s fair.

Their souls dangle there until the poor thing storms into the temple and works methodically at destroying the foundations and setting the entire building ablaze. Now that’s what you call resentful energy. Or is it smoke? Probably both.

The poor thing lets out one last howl, and the image snaps out of existence.

A-Qing lets out a deep breath.

“I guess that’s it for us,” she tells Hanguang-Jun.

“We need to look for the others,” says Hanguang-Jun.

You know, before all this, A-Qing might’ve said that she trusted everyone to look after themselves. Now? She’s not so sure. Sue her.
“Let’s go,” she says, and the two of them dart off into wherever the wheel of time has popped off the axel next.

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**The Tale of the Merchants**

“Ying Huohua is dead?” Xue Yang repeats, moderately surprised.

Nameless Merchant A nods. “Murdered by an unknown assailant,” she elaborates. “It’s chaos up there and all around. Shouxing and Luxing are really making a show of it all.”

“That’s a strange way to honour your loved ones,” says Xue Yang.

“Gods are surprisingly self-centered,” Nameless Merchant A says blandly.

Xue Yang taps his hands on his scroll. Hums in agreement. “Remove the ‘surprisingly’ and I’m all for it.”

Nameless Merchant A rolls her eyes and wanders off to check on their wares. Again. Why is that woman is neurotic?

The numbers on the scroll need further analysis, but as far as Xue Yang can see, they all end somewhere along the lines of *you’re fucked.*

How, you may ask, did he arrive at this conclusion?

It’s a simple matter of tallying up all their transactions from the past three days, which also happens to be when the Northern gods set fire to the Temple of Luxing and murdered a fresh batch of priests and children. After that, you just have to make sure you move the ones, double-check your work, round up to the nearest whole number, and then look up at the top of the page, where it helpfully says, Hey! War ahead! Thanks for being part of the dumb shits who helped arm the zealots, but we would like to see your heads removed from your shoulders sometime soon!

Translated into everyday terms, Xue Yang would call his ingenious sight common sense. Unfortunately, this sight seems to be a dwindling resource in the current era.

There’s another worrying fact.

Xue Yang is growing suspiciously attached to these idiot merchants-slash-mercenaries.

“I don’t kill people because I like it,” Nameless Merchant A explains. She pokes at the fire with a stick. “But you do what you have to do. Our villages... we come from the outskirts. The border between the Northern and Southern kingdoms. It’s a bad place.”

“Hmm,” says Xue Yang, absent-mindedly.

“It’s a generic reason, I know,” says Nameless Merchant A, taking the words right out of Xue Yang’s mouth. “But it’s a reason. That’s how some people sleep at night.”

“How noble of you.”

“You’re just the most charming brat around, aren’t you,” Nameless Merchant A says blandly.
“Don’t get me wrong,” Xue Yang tells her. He gives a dramatic flourish worthy of A-Qing’s undying rage. “I don’t particularly care if you kill people. You don’t need to feed me a tragic backstory; I’ll just get sick on it. Whether you’re killing because you like it or because you want the money, it certainly doesn’t change the end result, does it?”

“It does for one party,” Nameless Merchant A points out.

“Ah, that’s what you think,” says Xue Yang. “That’s what we call ‘dirty money’. Do you know what happens to dirty money?”

Nameless Merchant A sighs. “Someone comes to clean it sooner or later.”

“Oh, a smart one, too.”

“Oh, please. Like you’ve got a right to talk.”

“Too the past me, yes, I’d agree,” says Xue Yang. He gestures at his sixteen-year-old body. “But to this me? Well, I haven’t killed a single person. As far as I know,” he adds. He’s appreciate the benefit of the doubt in this particular instance, given... circumstances.


“Why, thank you.”

“And who, exactly, are you doing all this for?”

Curse this woman and her questions. What sensible person asks that to a psycho kid twirling a knife?

“You do what you have to do,” says Xue Yang. He stabs the knife into the parchment and smiles with all his teeth. “Right?”

“Don’t cut up the records,” Nameless Merchant A snaps. That’s where she leaves the conversation before checking over their wares. Again.

The specific wares she keeps looking over appear to be the blades. Specifically the blades. Why is it the blades? Not that Xue Yang cares or anything, but that’s certainly a strange fixation. Perhaps it has something to do with a tragic backstory he doesn’t care to hear.

Anyway.

When you travel with mercenaries, you run across death quite frequently. Rather, you chase death quite often. Every now and then, the merchants will take on a job that gets messy. Not in a metaphorical sense as much as a literal one.

As the accountant—who leaves a sixteen-year-old to run the numbers? Who thought this was a good idea? As the accountant, Xue Yang has more numbers to run than people to shank, and it’s a real disappointment sometimes. Alas, fate and behaviour and morals and all that.

“Tell me more about your family,” Xue Yang says one night, because he’s officially stopped caring about pretenses. Numbers do that to you.

“Oh, just humour me,” Xue Yang says with a sigh. He gestures helplessly at all the papers before him. “My brain’s about to fry itself! O, sweet release!

“I’m beginning to see why your friends abandoned you,” Nameless Merchant A snarks.

“Abandoned?” Xue Yang repeats, with a dramatic gasp. “No, no. We were quite literally forced apart. But enough about me. Tell me about all your wonderful aspirations and goals and dreams and all that bullshit.”

Nameless Merchant A glares for a bit longer. Then, upon realizing that there’s nothing to gain out of terrorizing the accountant, she huffs. “I need to tend to the fire anyway,” she says, picking up a stick and, as she mentioned, begins poking at the fire. “It’s not like a brat like you could do anything.”

“Yes, yes, I’m very helpless,” Xue Yang lies.


Now, Xue Yang said that he couldn’t care less about tragic backstories, and he stands by that statement. Every backstory is tragic in some manner, and it seems that people get off on comparing them to see who’s suffered more. That’s just creepy. Isn’t that creepy? Imagine comparing life-threatening wounds while they’re still bleeding. Like, okay everyone, keep it in your pants. Or under your clothes. What the hell?

Personally, Xue Yang’s of the opinion that you can tell your tragic backstory to others if they want to hear it, but nobody has to understand it. That’s what makes it fun! Watching faces twist in shock and horror as their tiny, sad brains bend over backwards trying to make sense of something that doesn’t make sense. Pain is incomprehensible, dears, is what Xue Yang wants to say. But he doesn’t, because it’s more entertaining when he just shrugs as says, well, you see, he took a finger.

Nameless Merchant A doesn’t talk like that. It’s a small mercy Xue Yang didn’t know he could be grateful for.

“I told you that I came from the borderlands,” says Nameless Merchant A. She prods absent-mindedly at the fire. “Not the best place to be during a war.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“Soldiers trampling your fields all day, battles just outside your door—sometimes, I have to wonder how those stupid kingdoms have so much endurance. It would be commendable if it wasn’t so utterly brainless.”

“Yes, well, war, and all that. Pride’s one hell of a drug.”

“You’re telling me. Young people get sick on it until those young people die, and then other young people start realizing that joining the army might not be such a good idea.”

“Common sense, among other things, is a dwindling resource in war.”

Nameless Merchant A snorts. Crosses her arms. Says, “Dwindling? No. It’s there, alright. Pride just crushes it, pushes it down into the dirt until you’re lying dead and still next to it.”

What an apt metaphor. “You have some strong opinions,” Xue Yang points out. “Any reason why?”

“Other than the fact that I had to watch idiots get shovelled from battles half-dead and then shovelled
home completely dead?” A pause in which Nameless Merchant A picks at her fingernails. “My older brother was a soldier. Didn’t get very far.”

“Ooh. Poor career choice.”

“Can’t blame him. We needed the money; he got some. Then he went and died.”

“Not the best long-term solution, in hindsight.”

“Which is why I said, hell no, I’m not dying in some unnamed field for a kingdom I don’t give a shit about. Turns out a lot of people share the sentiment.”

A good handful of those people are wandering around the campsite at the moment.

“I don’t know what you expect me to say, because I don’t have anything to say,” Nameless Merchant A finishes. Already? That was fast. “I’ve got a village I need to feed. That’s about it.”

Xue Yang considers her very short story for a moment. Then, because it’s been a long day, he says, “There’s a legend where I come from. Would you like to hear it?” Then he amends, “Ah, whatever. Listen anyway. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

Nameless Merchant A offers a sigh, but doesn’t argue.

“There was once a youth. Let’s call him a virtuous lad, shall we? In town one day, he comes across a strange old woman, and she asks him to sell her his shadow.”

“His shadow,” Nameless Merchant A intones, clearly unimpressed. How rude!

“Indeed. The very shadow that stitches itself to your toes when you’ve got light around. This woman says, sell it to me for ten pieces of gold. The lad, being a sensible young man, agrees without a moment’s hesitation. For ten pieces of gold.”

“And then?”

Xue Yang grins. “What would you have done?”


“Oh, I like that answer,” Xue Yang chirps. “Some people say, ‘it depends which is more valuable: your money or your life!’ And that’s a fun question to poke at, but it’s so incredibly vague. Money could mean one gold coin or a million, and it’s not like all lives are equal, anyway.”

Nameless Merchant A gives a half-snort of agreement.

“Putting that aside,” Xue Yang continues, “the young lad couldn’t imagine that his shadow was more valuable than ten pieces of gold. It’s just a shadow, right? What would not having a shadow do? It certainly wouldn’t inconvenience you.”

He lets that thought sit for a while. Nameless Merchant A stares at him out of the corner of her eye.

“But there’s always a twist,” Xue Yang declares with a vicious grin. “The lad is persecuted by the townspeople and his own family. Isn’t it strange to whisper to others, that boy doesn’t have a shadow? It creates discord. Suspicion. And you can’t blame them. Of course it’s creepy not to have a shadow. In fact, it’s much better to have a creepy shadow than none at all. In other words, the lad sold what ought to be for ten pieces of gold.”
“And,” Nameless Merchant A says tightly, “what’s your point?”

Xue Yang shrugs. “I thought it would be a fun thought experiment. You know,” he says, gesturing to Nameless Merchant A in whole, “the boy who sold his shadow and the lady who sold her only way out. Don’t you feel a connection?”

“I didn’t sell it,” Nameless Merchant A snaps.

“Mm, no, but you did barter it away,” Xue Yang sings. Before he can be rudely interrupted, he claps his hands in front of his chest to denote that this conversation is over, over, over. And how did he get so distracted anyway? “But don’t mind me. I’m sixteen years old and have no idea what I’m talking about. Time for bed!”

Then he stacks all his papers and rolls them up into a haphazard bundle, tosses them at Nameless Merchant A, and dives into his cot.

Whether he’s gotten his point across or not doesn’t really matter at this point. The end of the line is just up ahead, and he sincerely hopes it won’t be too painful or anything. At the very least, it better be kinder than how A-Qing and Hanguang-Jun met their ends.

Time passes. Morning rolls around. The merry band of merchants-slash-mercenaries make their way into the capital of the Northern Kingdom, which nobody thinks is a bad idea when war is sitting right on the horizon. It’s probably waving a farewell right now. Goodness, these people aren’t very perceptive.

Everything seems to be alright as they pass through the gates. In fact, everything seems wonderful up until the palace gates close behind them and Xue Yang wonders, hmm. How much chaos could I cause before I go out? Because if I’m going out, it should be in glorious fashion.

It’s when they’re all invited into a room surrounded by guards that the others start catching on.

And then the commander makes things very clear by declaring, “You allied yourselves with the Southern Kingdom and continued to arm them during peacetime!” followed by a dramatic unsheathing of his blade.

Xue Yang turns to Nameless Merchant A, who seems quite pale. “See,” he says blandly, “this is exactly what I meant.”

Then he tackles the commander, steals his sword, and lops off his head in one swing. Oh? Nice blade, nice blade. Shame it won’t last much longer.

Things really devolve from there. Fun!

Mercenaries don’t often come equipped with large reserves of mercy, you see. When they’re pushed into a corner, they push back, like sensible people. That’s why Xue Yang thinks it’s utterly ridiculous for the guards to seem so surprised at first.

What? If you stab someone before checking to see if they had a knife on them, then you’d better be prepared to get stabbed. Metaphorical knives are fun to mold into any argument.

But the thing about palaces is that they have guards. Lots of them. While the merchants do a frightening amount of damage, there’s always another idiot soldier ready to poke his head up and have it removed from his head. This head-removing process takes energy, which, unlike the soldiers, isn’t infinite.
“Keep this in mind for your next life,” Xue Yang tells the merchants as soon as one of his arms flops to the ground. “Stick with one side and go all the way. At least you won’t get rudely murdered like this.” He peers up at the guard who seems ready to stab him through. He raises an eyebrow, and the dumbass flushes. “Well? Get it over with. Then that’s—”

*Three out of five,* he doesn’t get to say, because the rest is lost to foamy gurgles due to the infliction of sword-through-chest. Yum.

Just like that, Xue Yang is politely ejected from his flesh container. He dangles around as just a soul, watching until the end as each and every one of the merchants are put down.

That’s it for this story, then.

What a shame. He really liked that sword.

So what helpful information has he learned from his ordeal?

Not much. Ying Huohua was murdered by a mysterious assailant, yes, and the hostility between nations is at an all-time high, yes, but what else is new?

Xue Yang sighs. He doesn’t like getting killed for nothing. Even Fuxing and A-Qing had the decency to give him a part two. This is just insulting.

Well, there’s nothing to learn from hanging around here. He might as well go see just how fabulously the rest of his wonderful team meet their ends.

“Don’t put a teenager in charge of the numbers next time,” Xue Yang sings to what’s left of the merchants.

And then he darts off into darkness.

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**The Tale of the Nobles**

Today is off to what Mo Xuanyu can only call a bad start.

This entire week has been an ordeal. First, he catches wind of a massacre in the Southern Kingdom that’s somehow been pinned on the Northern Kingdom, and then a merchant rebellion in the palace, which is about four blocks away.

So that’s Yufeng-Zhe, Hanguang-Jun, and Xue Yang, all taken out due to the death of a single goddess.

Wow! Great! That’s just… so wonderful!

That doesn’t bode too well for Mo Xuanyu. At least some things never change.

“Please don’t worry,” the assistant tells him soothingly for what must be the sixth time today. “No matter what happens, we’ll protect you.”

“I’m very grateful for the sentiment, but I’ve come to terms with the end, and I’d rather you help me with my research than comfort me,” Mo Xuanyu says, because even he can get impatient sometimes.
Or maybe he’s just stressed. It’s been a very stressful week.

The assistant sighs a deep sigh in the language of nihilism. Thankfully, Mo Xuanyu happens to be fluent.


With their impending doom accepted and filed away in the corner, Mo Xuanyu tries to make the best of the time he’s got left. There’s nothing he can do except listen as closely as he can and dig through years and years of records to find anything that can piece the story together.

Well. There are a lot of pieces already, but Mo Xuanyu has to do something.

Whispers of war and betrayal and murder fall over the city. It’s not a particularly good feeling. Ying Huohua’s death really rattled—well, everyone, but they’re acting so... so... foolish. Not to condemn them or anything, but communication skills are vital in every field.

“I want to know about Fuxing,” Mo Xuanyu tells the assistant one day. “Can you tell me about her?”

“The venerable Fuxing?” repeats the assistant. “Of course. What would you like to know?”

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“The venerable Fuxing is the oldest of the gods,” the assistant provides helpfully. “As such, she prefers not to meddle in affairs too much.”

The dots aren’t connecting. “But she has the most responsibility as the eldest,” Mo Xuanyu says desperately. “She should be... telling people how to act and giving council. Right?” he adds, with emphasis. That isn’t an unreasonable assumption, is it? The Fuxing that Mo Xuanyu knows isn’t that old, and he still gives council. So why doesn’t—

“Last time she gave council to anyone, she destroyed a country,” says the assistant. She winces. “Uh, that was how she ascended, actually.”

Those words didn’t just align themselves that way, did they?

“Oh. Okay,” is all Mo Xuanyu can manage without choking on his own tongue.

“The venerable Fuxing was originally a royal advisor,” the assistant elaborates, though she doesn’t seem very comfortable doing so. That’s fair. “She helped usher in an age of prosperity for her kingdom and was the first to ascend.” A pause. Oh, that’s a bad pause. “And then...”

“She kept meddling?” Mo Xuanyu suggests weakly.

“More or less,” the assistant allows. “But she saw everything from the heavens. She couldn’t understand the little things, how individuals moved and felt and thought. One thing led to another, and the kingdom fell.”

This is a question Mo Xuanyu will most likely regret asking. He takes a deep breath, and then he says, “Where is the kingdom now?”
“Gone,” the assistant answers curtly. “Fuxing wiped it from existence.”

Ah. Because she can do that, apparently.

It’s interesting how the Northern and Southern Kingdoms don’t exist even in legends in current time. Almost as if they were vanished from existence.

Promising! Very promising!

“Oh, and I forgot to mention it, but Fuxing ascended with a friend,” the assistant adds. “I can’t remember her name, but I believe she was a cook who worked in the palace.”

That makes two of the oldest gods sitting around as the younger generations run rampant, then. It doesn’t put any of the gods in a very good light. Mo Xuanyu thinks the heavens should invest in group therapy. It doesn’t have to be much! Maybe once a week. Or once a month. What’s a long time for a god, anyway?

Ha ha, gods needing counseling... fun thoughts. Very fun indeed.

“Gods are a troublesome bunch,” Mo Xuanyu says, and laughs, and wheezes out a breath.

“You seem pale,” the assistant points out.

“You do too,” Mo Xuanyu replies.

They’re both right. Both of them are, in fact, quite pale. That’s a reasonable physical reaction to confronting your own mortality and fleeting legacy upon this wobbly, crumbling earth.

“I’m beginning to lose faith in the gods,” the assistant says, almost out of nowhere, but in reality, it’s probably an opinion that’s been brewing for a while now. It’s just been taken off the fire to be served at this particular instance in time.

“I don’t blame you,” Mo Xuanyu tells the assistant, who seems ashamed to death for admitting it. “Um, to be honest, I don’t hold the gods in high regard, either.”

The assistant looks at him like he’s gone insane. Maybe he has. “Even though your family funds the Temple of Shouxing?” she asks incredulously.

“It’s just money,” says Mo Xuanyu.

“Is it because of the war?”

“Um,” Mo Xuanyu begins, wringing his hands a bit, “it’s a bit more complicated. And. You know.” He gives a helpless gesture of bigger-than-him. “Probably a bit blasphemous.”

“I think we’ve wandered past the blasphemous part,” the assistant points out.

That’s probably a subtle way of saying that what’s said between them stays between them.

Mo Xuanyu coughs into his fist. “Right. Um, okay. So... the gods. We aren’t sure if should worship them anymore.”

“That’s right,” the assistant says, in quiet tones of keep going. There’s nothing to lose, then. Except maybe their lives, but even that isn’t too big of a deal if it’s already been chiseled into the great slab of history.
On that depressing note, Mo Xuanyu says, “I don’t think gods should live in the heavens.”

“Pardon me?” the assistant politely asks after tripping over her own tongue.

“Here’s the thing,” Mo Xuanyu begins. “The heavens and earth are two completely different places. The heavens are where you go when you’ve done great deeds worthy of great rewards. So some higher power says, congratulations! You’ve been promoted to a god! And tosses you up there with all your memories, desires, goals, fears, on top of a new set of incredible powers. Divinity included.”

“Okay,” the assistant voices hesitantly. “What of it?”

“That’s where the trouble starts,” Mo Xuanyu tries to explain. “When you make mortals into gods and separate them from the world they love most, won’t their desire to protect it increase exponentially because they themselves aren’t there to protect it themselves?”

“But they are,” the assistant argues. “They can descend—and they did! Our gods raided the Southern Kingdom in search of the perpetrator!”

“And what did that do but bolster the tension?” Mo Xuanyu points out.

“It was for our sake,” the assistant tries weakly.

“It was for their own sake,” Mo Xuanyu says firmly. He taps his finger on the table as if to say, the end is nigh, but hell if I can’t make some meaning out of it. “That’s why putting gods in the heavens is such a bad idea. They want to protect mortals, they really do, but they also have their own troubles. Their status as gods is because of their actions, so when another god challenges that status, they’re also putting their deeds into question. And we all know that pride cometh before the fall. Why should gods be exempt from that?”

Silence. Apparently Mo Xuanyu’s word vomit actually has something worth considering, because the assistant’s brows furrow as she decodes the meaning of life.

“So,” the assistant begins slowly, “you’re saying that if we put all the gods on earth, we wouldn’t have this problem.”

“There’s no precedent, so I can’t be sure,” Mo Xuanyu lies, and immediately hates himself for it. He hastens to say, “But! Um, if gods did really roam the earth, then they would understand humans better. No, they would be human, in a sense. And they would realize that nobody needs gods to survive.”

“Nobody needs what now?”

“Nobody needs gods to survive,” Mo Xuanyu repeats. This is the one fact he won’t let crumble in his hands. Like a stale cracker, his traitor brain supplies. Back on topic, foolish pink flesh bag! “Humans can handle themselves for the most part. Mistakes are made, and people die, but the heavens aren’t the be-all, end-all.”

“You say that, but then... why do gods even exist?” the assistant asks, lost beyond comprehension.

All Mo Xuanyu can offer is conjecture. What does he know about the world? A helpful sum of zero, probably. But for as much as he doesn’t know, he knows an equal amount. So that amounts to a metaphorical value of one. Right?

Positive thoughts! Positive thoughts will get him through the week, to the end, and then to where his friends are. Hopefully they aren’t watching him pretend that he’s some important scholar, giving a
life-changing lecture to someone who could probably use a good meal and a nap. They could all use that.

Anyway.

“It’s nice to believe in a greater power,” Mo Xuanyu admits. “But before you run to the gods, try fixing things yourself. As much as you’re running toward the future, they’re searching for all the innumerable people they want to save. And... if you can find that strength to continue onward, then that gives them the time to save people who need a bit more help.” His bottom lip wobbles a bit. Is he getting emotional? Why is he getting emotional? This is silly. Maybe he really is crazy. “So we all have our own little parts to play, and if we try our best, we can make the world a bit easier to live in for everyone.”

“You sound like you’re about to start crying,” the assistant says, and chokes.

“Oh no, please don’t cry,” Mo Xuanyu begs, and immediately starts sniffling. “Oh, this is weird. And emotional. I’m sorry.”

“You’re so wise, Young Master,” the assistant sobs.

“Nihilism makes me say weird things,” Mo Xuanyu hiccups in answer.

And the two of them sit there and lament the state of the world and how foolish it is. Then they dab their tears away, have a great big sigh, and shake hands.

“I can’t imagine this will end well,” the assistant says gravely.

“It won’t,” Mo Xuanyu agrees. “But let’s try anyway.”

Fatalistic conversation aside, life is pretty peaceful. Or rather, as peaceful as it can be.

Both kingdoms declare war on each other, and Mo Xuanyu finds a sick sort of familiarity in it. At least he has a good idea of what’s to come. That’s fun, right?

Battles start and end. People die. Mo Xuanyu sits and twiddles his thumbs.

And then he hears something about Ying Huohua supporting the Southern Kingdom and hang on a second, isn’t she, you know, kind of dead?

Last time Mo Xuanyu checked, gods don’t have reserve lives they can casually pull out of their robes. That would be way too handy and most definitely cheating.

“Oh, this is getting a little ridiculous,” Mo Xuanyu says as he watches the Southern army storm into the city with an apparent goddess on their side. Said goddess is being carried in on a great big throne, which immediately raises some red flags. Other than the ones the Southern Kingdom is totting, that is. “It’s actually almost offensive at this point.”

“I think now’s about when most people would die,” the assistant adds helpfully.

Right. The death thing should be loads of fun to deal with.

Mo Xuanyu turns to the assistant. He bows to her and receives a bow in return. “Thank you for keeping me company,” he says, as sincerely as he can manage. “Let’s try and meet up in the next life.”

The assistant gives a wide grin. “I’ll see you later then, I guess.”
And then the Southern soldiers break down the door to the manor, round up all the nobles and their servants, and methodically run them through.

In no time at all, Mo Xuanyu is left hovering over the ruins of the estate, heaving sigh after sigh as he watches the worst part of humanity destroy itself.

He can almost hear Xue Yang making this-is-the-worst-timeline jokes. He would appreciate that a little, actually. His spirits are, as they call it, dampened. Flattened at this point, really.

But he did manage to get some important information! Fuxing and her cook friend’s insecurity and inaction, the imposter Ying Huohua, and the inevitable hard reset. That has to count for something in the grand scheme of things! Maybe. Probably. Ehh.

No matter how all this has ended, at the very least, Mo Xuanyu gets to go look for his friends again.

“Good luck, Fuxing,” Mo Xuanyu says to the pomegranate-red skies. “Keep on keeping on.”

And then he image fades, Mo Xuanyu darts off into the darkness, and there’s nothing.

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**The Tale of the Gods**

It takes far too many thunderclaps and explosions for Luxing and Shouxing to finally come to a delicate peace of sorts.

Really! They aren’t children anymore. What’s with the sky-rending arguments? You’d think they were born yesterday with sort of behaviour, and in the grand scheme of things, they might as well have been, but still! Goodness. Wei Wuxian is ashamed for them.

“I feel like I should give you a sticker,” Wei Wuxian says seriously to Luxing. He ignores the fuming. It’s second nature by now. “One of those star-shaped stickers that say ‘there was an attempt’. For each time you don’t yell at Shouxing, I’ll reward you with another one. At the end of the month, you can trade them in for sweets. What do you say?”

“I am going to shove my sword down your throat,” Luxing says, with promise. Wow, what a temper!

“Ease up, general,” says Wei Wuxian. “I’m genuinely very proud of you.”

“If I could throw both you and Shouxing out of the heavens, I would.”

“Ahh, but you mustn’t treat your voice of reason so cruelly,” Wei Wuxian wails despairingly. “And Shouxing’s trying her best, too! Won’t you show some mercy?”

The brush in Luxing’s pen snaps in half. It then proceeds to be torn to shreds by lightning. “Get out before I stab you,” he grits out, with impressive control.

“Your trusty assistant hears you and is excusing herself,” Wei Wuxian says quickly, and darts out the door.

Since Luxing doesn’t want to enjoy Wei Wuxian’s company, perhaps Ying Huohua will be more willing to entertain him. Or tell him anything as to what’s going on. Those gods of luck are
surprisingly tight-lipped, and he doesn’t like how he can write himself onto that list. Alas! Secrets, pride, all that wonderful baggage.

“I see that Luxing and Shouxing have finally worked something out,” Wei Wuxian tells Ying Huohua as they wander through the gardens. They do that a lot. Is that why so many of the gods can’t see that the humans down below are self-destructing? Food for thought.

“Finally,” Ying Huohua adds with cheer. “I made them sit down with each other and dissected them with words. It was entertaining!”


“They were so ashamed of themselves after I told them that their quarrelling was going to be the end of the heavens as we know it,” Ying Huohua elaborates. “They’re taking responsibility for all the wrong things, and they just realized that. Isn’t it silly?”

Oh, now that hits in all the wrong places. “Very silly,” Wei Wuxian lies, and laughs for good measure.

But hey! At least the heavens aren’t being rattled by very loud sounds of collateral damage. That’s certainly an improvement. Not much of an improvement given later events, but lulls of peace are nice no matter where they fall. Or perhaps they make the loss even worse? It’s truly up to the individual to decide. Wei Wuxian thinks you should accept what scraps are tossed your way no matter how much you’ll regret it later on.

Then again, Wei Wuxian and good decisions aren’t a combination that holds any ground in reality. So.

With Luxing and Shouxing getting along, things can proceed in the heavens! Good news for once! Everyone’s practically vibrating in excitement for the wedding, and as Ying Huohua’s best friend, Li Miyu is more or less obligated to let herself get dragged into all the action.

As they say: go with the flow. And Wei Wuxian is going.

“Here’s what I’m seeing,” Wei Wuxian tells the tailors, who nod and jot down notes eagerly. “I want a tasteful but glorious display of That’s Right, I’m The Most Beautiful Woman In The World And I Damn Well Know It. I want Luxing to be convulsing on the ground. I want Shouxing to be drowning in her own tears.”

“Maybe just a few adornments,” Ying Huohua mutters. “I said, ‘just a few’.”

“Darling, you’re a jewel, but you deserve this,” Wei Wuxian tells their resident bride-to-be. “Destroy their expectations. Crush them.”

“Can we avoid crushing anyone today?” Ying Huohua asks blandly.

“But that’s the best part,” Wei Wuxian whines.

“Wait, why are you here again?” the tailors ask Wei Wuxian once he’s done rambling.

And then he’s promptly kicked out, cue explanation of how Li Miyu is a minor god with basically no important role in the heavens, etc, etc, etc. Wei Wuxian thinks they should’ve given him a warning. Even A-Qing has that growling, hissing, fur-all-puffed up battle mode stance, and that is most definitely warning enough. Or maybe it’s basic human instinct to back down from a furious girl with a sword.
Anyway!

What else goes into divine weddings? Food, decor, venues, all that business. Fortunately, Luxing is filthy rich and incredibly protective, though now that Wei Wuxian thinks about it, the use of the word ‘fortunately’ is a matter of debate.

He says this because they’re having a wonderful trying samples when Luxing breaks down the door, shiny golden gear and all, and demands that he handle the rest, because older brothers apparently do that? Weird.

Wei Wuxian probably did something of the sort once or twice. He watches Luxing flush pomegranate red and blow every single one of his fuses before internally swearing never to do it again.

“Brothers,” Ying Huohua says disdainfully, once they’re resting in the gardens. Again. Wow, there are a lot of gardens and all of them are so... expensive? Luxurious? Pompous? Wei Wuxian thinks there are better things to be investing into, like mental health.

“Brothers,” Wei Wuxian cheerfully replies. “What about them?”

“They’re so overbearing!”

“That they are,” Wei Wuxian agrees. “But we already know that, right?”

“I just—” Ying Huohua gives a helpless gesture unto the world. “He’s so anxious nowadays! He was so much calmer before.”

“Before you ascended, you mean.”

“Before we both ascended. I thought it would be fun at first, but this is so...” Another vague, ballooning gesture. “I wish we could just build a better world together. I didn’t want so many politics involved.”

“Politics, unfortunately, can be injected to just about anything,” Wei Wuxian points out. “It’s just a matter of how long it takes for them to punch you in the gut. Of all dirty fighters, the law fights the dirtiest!”

And then he laughs, because he deserves it.

What? He ended up getting murdered because of politics. There’s some sort of societal law that states that if you get killed by an ironic twist of fate, you get to laugh morbidly in the face of it if you manage to pop yourself back into existence. And so the concept of politics is Wei Wuxian’s personal stand-up-comedian that he never hired and refuses to leave until it gets paid, and there’s no way he’s making that mistake twice.

Apt metaphors make the world go round. “Ah, but divine politics are like bundles of explosives,” Wei Wuxian says to a frowning Ying Huohua. “Poke it the wrong way, and everything gets levelled.”

“Politics and brothers,” Ying Huohua mutters. “One begets the other.”

“That is a very sudden connection to make. Shouldn’t it be ‘politics and gods’?”

Ying Huohua gives him an unimpressed look. “You don’t agree?”
Wei Wuxian thinks it over and comes to the startling realization that his life is the poster child for that statement. He then decides that he doesn’t want to think about that ever again, so he clears his throat loudly and says, “How’s Shouxing taking all this?”

“She’s much calmer than Luxing, but she gets quiet angry. So.”

“Oh, I don’t like quiet angry,” says Wei Wuxian. “They’re like loud angry, but a million times creepier.”

“But they aren’t actively antagonizing each other, which is nice,” Ying Huohua points out. “I think we could all do without the sporadic explosions and storms.”

“The metaphorical quiet before the storm, then.”

“I sincerely hope not,” Ying Huohua says flatly.

This conversation is taking a very depressing route, so Wei Wuxian decides that it’s about time they left the gardens and did literally anything else.

He says, why don’t you show me your dance again? You know, the one you do to summon all those flowers.

And Ying Huohua goes, you’ve literally seen it a thousand times.

So Wei Wuxian says, well, a thousand and one won’t hurt, right? I’ll tell you a really fun story if you do. I’m hideously bored, you see.

It turns out that both of them are hideously bored, so Ying Huohua dances the steps to a very familiar dance (same fans, same sash, same steps, different body) and they make flower crowns, because that’s what you do when you have too many flowers. He thinks that’s more reasonable than funneling them over to the Other Side in exchange for awful, awful skeleton hounds. Not that he’s particularly upset at any one person or anything. Not at all.

And that’s exactly the story Wei Wuxian tells to Ying Huohua. His own tale, while dramatic, isn’t nearly as exciting as a tiny wind-swept girl barrelling her way through life like a ball of fire. Sometimes literally, but Wei Wuxian chooses to leave those segments out. Pyromania is one of A-Qing’s more... unique traits.

She didn’t get it from him, did she? That would be bad. That would take a sledgehammer with Wei Wuxian’s credibility.

“You’ve met this girl before,” Ying Huohua tells Wei Wuxian once he wraps the story up in a nice ribbon of and then she travelled the world, making people happy until the end of her days, which he doesn’t think is too outlandish.

“I’ve met her once or twice,” is Wei Wuxian’s answer. “She’s a real treasure to work with. She insists on throwing herself off towers because ‘it’s more efficient than taking the stairs’, apparently, which is a new development. You should have seen Lan Zhan’s face—”

Oops.

“Lan Zhan?” Ying Huohua repeats, confused. “Who’s that?”

Surely it isn’t too out of character to spin a side story onto this one.
Wei Wuxian beams. “My partner!”

There’s a moment in which it appears that Ying Huohua is unable to engage her brain’s higher functions.

“You,” she finally manages, “you—when did you—”

“A secret is what makes a woman a woman,” Wei Wuxian declares.

“That’s not an idiom!”

“No, but it sounds cool, right?”

“You said that all men were trash and that they couldn’t be trusted under any circumstances,” Ying Huohua accuses. “You said you would rather throw yourself out of the sky than marry a man!”

Well, this just got very awkward. “Ah, you see,” Wei Wuxian begins, not entirely sure where he’s supposed to go from here, “Lan Zhan is the sort of wonderful person who respects the individual’s right to choose and actually respects women.” Which is the bare minimum in any human being, but alas. Men. They truly are animals.

Ying Huohua gapes. “Men like that exist?” she asks, astounded.

“I know,” Wei Wuxian agrees. “It might as well be one of Fuxing’s miracles.”

“If she actually worked them at all,” Ying Huohua says, and sighs. She leans her weight on the table as if she wants nothing more than to just melt away into the cracks in the wood. Perhaps she should consult A-Qing if she’s seriously considering it. “I assume Fuxing’s just making sure nothing breaks too terribly.”

“Preventative measures would be better, in my humble opinion,” says Wei Wuxian.

“Yes, but questioning the ineffable and all,” Ying Huohua snarks, then waves her hand at the sky. “Fuxing didn’t do so well last time she meddled, so maybe this is her way of showing mercy.”

Ah, yes. The whole hard-reset habit she has. Well, to be accurate, it can’t be called a habit since she’s only done it once. But once is one time too many, don’t you think?

“Itchy fingers?” Wei Wuxian asks simply.

“Best not to try her,” Ying Huohua answers.

Nothing keeps gods in line like a god that can destroy them all. Except that doesn’t seem to have worked very well. “Hands-off parenting leaves a lot up to luck,” Wei Wuxian decides to say. “Perhaps Fuxing ought to get a planner of sorts. Or maybe make group therapy mandatory.”

“But why do that when she can sit wherever she is and do whatever she wants?” Ying Huohua asks, with cutting sarcasm.

“Government reform aside, we should probably head back before Luxing loses it,” says Wei Wuxian. The sun’s starting to go down, which—so strange.

Where’s the one manning the sun? He’s a big name up here, isn’t he? Unless he retired, in which case, the sun is now an astral body of its own and not an astral chariot. That’s nice to know. Gravity is far more trustworthy than humans, given the fact that it has laws and actually sticks to them. An instruction manual that works in whole, if you will.
“Bold of you to assume he hasn’t already started losing it,” Ying Huohua mutters. She sighs, tidies herself up, and pushes herself off the table. “Well, I’m sure we can talk again tomorrow. As always. And as usual.”

That sounds rather depressing. Wei Wuxian feels validated as a god of his current time in comparison to these poor folks.

Before Ying Huohua can wander off, he says, “Hang on a second.”

Ying Huohua blinks twice. Cocks her head in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

Other than everything, very soon, all at once? Not much.

“I just wanted to wish you the best of luck with your wedding and future life,” says Wei Wuxian. “Finding the right person for you, especially after the odds have always been against you, is just...”

“Relieving,” Ying Huohua finishes. Her expression softens. “Yes,” she says, “Flowers are—they’re temporal things. Bound by time. But love is a weird thing that way, isn’t it? Because it doesn’t fit into the spaces built by time and space.” With a hand over her heart, she declares, “It only exists here, and nobody can say why, or how, or when it got there. But it grows and breaks and heals just like all of us, no?”

Silence.

“That was simultaneously the most straightforward and most poetic analysis I’ve ever heard,” Wei Wuxian tells her, still stunned.

“I try,” Ying Huohua says, and laughs. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow,” Wei Wuxian agrees, “where you will honour me with your infinite wisdom, and I will sit like a good little girl and we can gossip all we want.”

“No snarky comments?”

“You drive a hard bargain. But yes. No snarky comments.”

“Love really has changed you,” Ying Huohua notes, with some residual shock. “Miracles really do exist even without Fuxing’s meddling.”

“You just have to learn how to do your own meddling,” says Wei Wuxian.

A great flash of lightning breaks through the sky. Both of them sigh.

“See you then,” Ying Huohua says in place of goodbye, or farewell. Wei Wuxian waves back cheerfully.

In hindsight, maybe goodbye or farewell would have been more appropriate.

Because the next morning, at the break of dawn, Ying Huohua, the brilliant goddess of lanterns and flowers, is discovered dead in her room.

Well. Wei Wuxian says dead, but murdered is far more accurate.

“Nobody heard anything?” Wei Wuxian demands of any and all bystanders. “Not a single thing. While she was apparently being stabbed to death.”
“Thirty-three stab wounds,” the god of deduction offers from where he’s examining the scene of the crime.

“That number is out to get all of us,” Wei Wuxian mutters.

“I—I really didn’t hear anything!” all the would-be witnesses sob. “I don’t know how any of this could have happened!”

“Unfortunate, but not unexpected,” the god of deduction says. “Anyone with the guts to murder a goddess right before her wedding day had to have a solid plan.”

“Oh, I like you,” Wei Wuxian tells the god of deduction. “What’s your name again?”

“Huo Xiansuo.”

“Excellent. I very much appreciate your help.”

“You were her best friend, weren’t you?” Huo Xiansuo asks, with somewhat narrowed eyes.

“I know where this is going and would like to say that I am kind of offended you would suspect me as I shared a very emotional heart-to-heart with her last night, but I also understand that this is vital to the investigation and thereby will provide an alibi as a cooperative suspect,” says Wei Wuxian.

With that bump in the road over with, there’s nothing left to do but piece together the story and try to figure out why the gods are such a hot mess in this era.

“Oh,” Wei Wuxian notes aloud as he’s examining Ying Huohua’s body. “Well. That’s unfortunate.”

“What?” asks Huo Xiansuo. “The situation or something in particular?”

“Her soul appears to have been cracked in a few places.”

“Definitely damage left by an immortal being, then,” Huo Xiansuo notes aloud. “No resentful energy, so unlikely to be a demon or a ghost.”

They’re doing a very good job of tiptoeing around the subject. Wei Wuxian decides he might as well leap in if nobody else is going to. “So which god do you think killed Ying Huohua?”

Everyone goes silent.

And then the yelling starts, which really isn’t that surprising at all.

Baseless accusations are thrown around. Luxing and Shouxing are brought up, which calls into question the independence of all the gods who ally themselves under one of two golden gods like it’s some sort of personality test or sorting hat. Wei Wuxian would like to helpfully point out that things are more complicated than that.

And then everyone bolts off, probably to report in to their respective factions, because it’s always good news when the heavens are in a constant state of phoney war.

“This is bad,” Huo Xiansuo says simply.

“Oh, absolutely terrible,” Wei Wuxian agrees. “Shall we take bets on quickly it’ll take for one of our noble gods to pin the blame on humans? I’ll go first. All in on tomorrow, because that’s how little faith I have in them.”
“Took the words right out of my mouth,” Huo Xiansuo says. He stands, lifts his robes as to not compromise the crime scene, and then tells Wei Wuxian, “If you sketch out the room, I’ll get an autopsy started.”

And that’s what they do, as the two gods in all the heavens who haven’t lost their heads. Wei Wuxian makes sure to encircle everything with cinnabar before Huo Xiansuo comes to clean up.

Bodies are moved. Clues are noted. This bodes very poorly.

It takes surprisingly long for Luxing to show up. When he does, however, it’s rather dramatic. Tragic, yes, and Wei Wuxian sympathizes. He’s been in those shoes, kind of. Sort of. Either way, he’s no stranger to the dead sister bad roll. Perhaps these gods should get new dice to play with if they’re already this deep into the game.

Wei Wuxian and Huo Xiansuo do their best to keep collateral damage to a minimum, but alas: Luxing. Just Luxing. He’s two handfuls’ worth of insecurity and emotional constipation, and does his best to demonstrate just how despairing he is.

“Sit tight, general,” Wei Wuxian tells Luxing once the lightning’s stopped. “We’ll figure this out.”

He wisely decides not to ask about Shouxing. This turns out to be a very good move, as another god runs up and declares something about how Shouxing’s already started raiding the Southern City in search of conspirators, which is just—wow! We’re jumping over the moon to try and land on conclusions, are we? Impressive, impressive. That’s some tenacity right there.

“You can’t possibly be thinking of doing the same thing to Shouxing,” Wei Wuxian tells Luxing when he spots the poor man donning his shiny gear.

“I’m nothing like that treacherous woman,” Luxing spits.

Treacherous. Uh-oh. “Pardon me, general, but I think it’d be best to finish the investigation before, you know. Smiting humans. Or gods. Smiting in general.”

“Oh, I’ve had an investigation performed,” says Luxing. “Who could have gotten so close to my sister to kill her without a sound?”

“Maybe you should sit down and read a book,” Wei Wuxian urges. He dances around the room and picks up the first novel he can find. *The Mysterious Death of the Eight-Day Bride.* Holy hell, that’s a bad roll. “Or maybe I can fetch you some tea,” Wei Wuxian hurries to say instead.

“My sister would have never stooped so low as to marry the enemy,” Luxing sneers, completely lost to reason, apparently. “She was always so good... so unalteringly brave... she tried to give herself up for peace, and where did it get her?”

This is a case study of denial. “Mm, I don’t think you’re seeing the big picture,” says Wei Wuxian.

“She must have seen something evil in that woman—something that would destroy our kingdom!” Luxing declares. The use of the first person plural pronoun is concerning. Grammatical analysis aside, the amount of sense this is making is dropping into the negatives, which isn’t a very good sign.

“I really don’t think anyone’s trying to instigate a war,” Wei Wuxian tries to say. “How about we fetch Fuxing? She’s the boss around these parts, right? She can tell everyone to calm down and threaten them with permanent erasure otherwise, like a good parent would do.”

“Get out,” Luxing roars at that point, and Wei Wuxian flees through the nearest window.
A-Qing was right. Windows really are the best exit/entry points when the residence in question belongs to someone you’re pretty sure could murder you.

At least Huo Xiansuo is still up to game! That counts for something, right? It should. Wei Wuxian would be very sad if it didn’t.

“Shouxing’s side thinks that Ying Huohua and Luxing got into an argument over the marriage, and Luxing ended up killing her,” is how Huo Xiansuo greets him.

“I know we don’t care too much about pleasantries, but I feel like ‘hello’ would have been an adequate substitute,” says Wei Wuxian.

“With that said,” Huo Xiansuo continues, “We can now say for sure that the humans are going to pick off right where Shouxing and Luxing left them.”

“Ah. The war, you mean.”

“The war, indeed.”

“That’s a bit of a problem,” Wei Wuxian points out.

“That’s a fair conclusion to arrive at,” Huo Xiansuo says, in a tone that implies, no shit, genius, which is unspeakably rude. Who’s from the future again? That’s right! Not Huo Xiansuo! “The heavens are tearing themselves apart as well. Now, how do we go about solving this problem?”

They don’t. That’s the problem. “Let’s try to find the culprit and put this all to rest,” Wei Wuxian says, because it’s the only thing he can say.

It’s a sad thought, but it’s probably true to Li Miyu. Can you blame her? She wouldn’t know what to do at all. Does she try to placate the gods and get nothing out of it? Does she try to solve a mystery that defies all logic and sense because gods are like that? Does she try to calm the humans and soak up all the blame like a sad sponge?

It’s an unwinnable situation. Wei Wuxian feels awful for this poor girl. He feels even worse when he makes an unwelcome connection with someone close to him in his own life—watching family get torn apart by politics and human nature and all that good stuff.

This is, as the kids would say, quite the predicament.

And then things get worse, because there’s always room to make things worse.

The war gets off to a great start once the Temple of Luxing falls, which... well. Hopefully they’re alright. And then a bunch of merchants get slaughtered in the Northern City. And then the Southern Army storms the Northern capital and makes hell out of it.

Wei Wuxian isn’t sure which gut-punch did it, but then the gods are at war, and that’s just the worst kind of news to wake up to.

So Wei Wuxian cleans himself up, has breakfast, and walks in on Huo Xiansuo banging his head against a wall.

“We’ve reached levels of stupidity previously unheard of,” he says sadly. Smack, smack. “Shouxing must have an unreasonable level of confidence in herself if she thinks she can do anything about Ying Huohua’s soul.”
“This is a plot twist I should have seen swinging toward me, yet my brain is rattled nonetheless,” Wei Wuxian declares.

Now that Shouxing has happily spirited Ying Huohua’s body and fifty-percent-off discounted broken soul away, all Wei Wuxian and Huo Xiansuo can do is sit and wait until some sort of revelation either makes everything whole again or beats the dead horse until it dies. Again.

“I hear Shouxing’s been trying to give Ying Huohua her immortality back posthumously,” Wei Wuxian says one day, once the spoiler alert has officially been annulled by its coming into existence.

“So that’s where the Southern gods have gone to,” Huo Xiansuo muses. “That explains a lot.”

“It would be quite rude to tell Shouxing that it’s never going to work.”

“Denial is one hell of a drug,” says Huo Xiansuo.

They sit, and sit, and sit, until they literally can’t sit any longer, because the heavens decide to crack one day and spill all those little gods who want nothing to do with the war onto the earth, because that’s what happens when your temper tantrums get too out of hand, apparently.

Huo Xiansuo gets caught in the crossfire almost immediately, which is a damn shame.

And Wei Wuxian? Well, he’d love to try and put a stop to it all, but in a surprising turn of events, Shouxing and Luxing decide to put an end to it all themselves.

It’s an epic battle atop a stretch of land untouched by humans. Maybe that’s of symbolic importance?

Either way, they face off at the highest peak on the mountain range for eight days and eight nights. Wei Wuxian would love to make it sound more dramatic and worthy of a climax, but he’s too busy dodging lightning and golden spears to get a good look.

He does, however, get front-row seats to watching one of Shouxing’s spears cut a great big abyss into the land. Then Luxing tries to one-up her and hammer out an entire forest and a half a little ways next to the river and below a cliff.

Huh. Curious landscape, right there.

Aaaand cue dramatic ending.

May we have a somber rain to help accentuate the mood, please?

Yes. Thank you.

Of course Shouxing would carry Ying Huohua’s soul on her own person, because who else would she trust? This turns out to be a bad choice, as Luxing gets hold of it and holds it above his head.

It rains. It pours. He cries out, “Your big brother won’t let this madness go on any longer! I can’t ask you to forgive me—but I pray for your peace and salvation!”

And then he throws down a blade of lightning. Something shatters quietly in the distance. Shouxing screams.

From there on out, Wei Wuxian only really catches the ending.

Here it is, summarized all nice and neat:
From Shouxing, a simple,

*I'LL NEVER FORGET THIS!*

And from Luxing,

*I'LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU!*

Shouxing and Luxing both fall. The former falls up on the mountain, where she sort of sinks into the earth and disappears. The latter manages to crawl all the way into the forest that still stands, where he drops like a rock.

This is all very sad and all, and Wei Wuxian would appreciate some time to process it.

Unfortunately, this is when Fuxing decides to push the hard reset button, and—

Well.

Wei Wuxian isn’t entirely sure what happens, but wow, it really stings. Imagine someone sticking their hand around your heart, squeezing because they’re a tease, and then ripping it out of your throat. That’s more or less what it feels like, and after Wei Wuxian’s done convulsing on the ground, he thinks,

Huh. I don’t remember it being this quiet before.

No gods. No divinity. The ambient buzzing of the heavens is just... gone.

Wei Wuxian looks over his hands. Li Miyu’s hands, that is.

They look a little godly, with the warm hue and all. But otherwise: pretty human. Soft, plush, malleable, that sort of thing. Like a tiny flesh bag in a world that’s been completely erased.

A bit overkill, but hey, you make the best of what you have left.

That’s what Wei Wuxian tells himself as his soul is rudely ejected from Li Miyu’s body, but somehow still tethered to it. He checks over his own ghostly hands: yup. Very ghostly. Very spirit-y. Very Wei Wuxian-y. Now what?

Turns out that this is an epilogue of sorts!

So when Li Miyu pushes herself up and musters up the last of her strength to slip into the Other Side with Luxing via creepy, ancient well, he knows he’s in for a ride.

“The gods are gone,” Li Miyu tells a barely-coherent Luxing. “It’s over.”

“No it’s not,” says Luxing. He makes a vague gesture only those half-out of their minds can manage. “My sister... her soul. I broke it. Find it,” he demands.

“I’m tired, I’m not even half a god anymore, and I am very fed up with you,” Li Miyu says blandly. She tosses her outer robes on the delirious god and marches off to lean against a tree. “For the love of all that is holy—which is, like, a tiny bit of me and half of you—get some sleep.”

The poor guy passes out for a whole ten years. That’s one hell of a power nap.

Li Miyu, being the resilient, independent, and crippling insecure woman she is, goes out searching. Her form wavers like crazy in the real world, so she slaps together some sort of circle-shaped spell
that’ll go by the word *array* in a few hundred years to make sure she doesn’t pop out of existence. She travels to places that couldn’t care less about any southern or northern kingdoms and spirits people away. Anyone who doesn’t have a home to return to, a place to belong, or a name to treasure—she picks them up, dusts them off, and tosses them in the well.

She tries to, rather. Because gods aren’t great at spiriting away when they’re more ghostly than divine, and names are a whole lot easier to carry than an entire soul. All that emotional baggage and memory is way past the weight restriction, thank you very much.

“*You’re 星火燎原,* she tells the first of many. “*Things should get lively soon, so sit tight.*”

“I have literally just been born into existence and have no idea what you’re talking about,” the newly-named Huo says flatly.

“What luck I have with colourful personalities,” Li Miyu says to herself, and then hops off to do some more name-stealing.

By the time Luxing wakes up, it’s to a small village populated by a good handful of idioms.

“You’re looking?” is the first thing Luxing says, which is awfully unkind. No thank you or anything? Gods are certainly entitled.

This is exactly what Li Miyu tells Luxing. She makes this point very clear, then says, “*Now use your godly powers as domain ruler to make this place more habitable.*” When Luxing sits there and gapes, Li Miyu smacks him over the head and demands, “*Give us houses, golden man!*”

“Okay, fine,” Luxing says petulantly, waving his hand and raising a city from the ground, complete with glaring signs and narrow alleyways. Because that is the way of fallen gods. Freaky.

“You have horrible taste,” Li Miyu accuses. “*But I’ll let you off this time.*”

Time passes. Unlike Shouxing, Luxing actually manages some semblance of a normal civilization. People are mostly happy even though they’re scripted to act and think a certain way according to four characters that make up the whole of their beings. It’s pretty cool.

Time passes. Li Miyu keeps bringing back names. Her appearance deteriorates a little, but hey! It’s what’s on the inside that counts.

Time passes. Luxing takes the occasional power nap, which goes from ten years to twenty to fifty.

Time passes.

Time passes.

Time passes, passes,

And there’s this funny thing about time. See, no matter how desperately you believe in one thing, or how closely you hold something to your heart, if you’re living the same life over and over again for a thousand years—

Here’s where the neat thing is—
You start to forget.

That’s a perfectly normal thing to do! Forget, that is. Can you blame them? Poor Li Miyu’s been name-hunting for forever and a half, and Luxing isn’t even conscious most of the time. It’s the unwinnable situation thing poking its unwelcome head through the door again.

So when Li Miyu starts losing herself, it’s an inevitable side effect of this sad, sad story.

Now, what do you do when you want to convince yourself that everything’s okay, and this entire mess isn’t your fault?

Why, fill in the blanks with false memories, of course!

Li Miyu? Don’t know her. 火中取栗, also known as cat’s-paw, is who this wonderful girl is. It’s not a fun name, but it’s a name, right? And that’s the only thing that matters. Because if you have a name, maybe you can start to build up a soul, and once you’re a real person with a name and a soul, you can go look for memories.

Wandering around the world in search of names is kind of tiring when you have to sprint after people because they’re too busy screaming at your creepy appearance, so why not terrorize them instead? Passive horror always works. That’s why most crime novellas fall through, in Li’s humble opinion. Fortunately, she has the patience of an immortal fisherman, which she’s convinced are the most patient people on earth. That’s the metaphor.

And Luxing, the big, bad god who also serves as her manager, is pretty lax most of the time.

“Just the name,” he’ll mumble when he’s actually conscious. “Just the name... is all I need. No ugly soul. No ugly memories. No ugly emotions. The name... is all that’s left.”

Whatever you say, weird eldritch boss man. Wow, you have a lot of eyes. Is that a questionable aesthetic or a tragic backstory?

Luxing gets depressed when Li asks those kinds of questions, so she just stops asking. Instead, she’ll hold up names and go, “Is this one it?”

And Luxing will say, “Can’t you tell?”

And Li will argue, “How am I supposed to tell when I don’t know what I’m looking for?”

And then he’ll get depressed again and fall back asleep. A spectacular manager, that guy.

So Li keeps trucking on, because if she doesn’t do her job, who will? The people in town might not like her so much—though she blames that in part on Luxing; ever since he moved out into the mountains, her reputation really took a hit—but hey! The food’s good, she doesn’t need to pay rent, and you don’t need health care when you don’t have a body to be inflicted illness upon. Win, win, win!

One day, she clambers out into the world and thinks, hmm. It’s been a while since I last looked in places closer to home. Maybe I should go see what those funny humans are up to now.

She catches sight of a river and decides to follow it. That’s how you get places, right? Right.

So she walks, and walks, and walks, up until she runs into a particularly interesting group.

She bumps into them when they’re in the middle of what seems to be a particularly heated argument.
They’ve got these pretty purple robes on, except for one lady, who’s in black and red instead.

“You’re making a mistake,” says the woman in purple, who smells a little like lightning. Like the boss! Hopefully she’s more competent than he is.

“It’s going to be alright,” says one of the men in purple. They’re both soft and have this fluffy feeling to them. Like Ying—

Who?

Weird. Anyway, they’re having a grand old time arguing, and it’s then that Li decides to ask for directions.

“Pardon me,” she says gleefully as everyone jumps and unsheathes their swords, “but could I get some help? I have no idea where I am.”

The party of four looks her over. They’re probably decently creeped out by the whole bride appearance. Not even Li herself knows where it came from, but you know what they say about human subconscious and all that. Do you? Because she doesn’t.

It takes a while for the silence to lift, but when it does, the woman in black and red raises her brows and says, “You’re a god.”

That is a major jump to make, but it’s not like Li’s offended. She’s pretty much a god’s assistant, so she’ll take it. “I’m just here to visit,” she says cheerfully. “But then I got lost. Where is this?”

“Yunmeng,” the sharp lady snaps. “What? Do you have business here?”

“I’ll decide that as I go along,” Li answers. Then she blinks. “So, are you guys busy? Or can you show me around a bit? That’d be nice. I’d appreciate that,” she adds.

The four exchange Looks.

Then the soft purple man that smells faintly of lightning says, “We’d be happy to.”

“‘Happy’ used liberally,” the sharp lady mutters.

So they all take a day trip to this wonderful place called Lotus Pier, which, as the name implies, is home to a pier with lots of lotus flowers. People are decently freaked out at first, but then they see Li’s new friends, and they kind of relax. Just a little.

A lot of stuff happens that day, but here’s the short and long of it:

The soft purple man that smells a little like lightning is called Jiang Fengmian or something. He’s the boss around these parts, and his co-boss is the sharp lady, Yu Ziyuan, which is a very badass name. Soft purple man B is Wei Changze, right-hand-man to Jiang Fengmian. And black-and-red lady is Cangse Sanren, cultivator extraordinaire and chronic rule-breaker.

Together, they’re the semi-dysfunctional Lotus Pier crew! Or something like that!

That’s what Cangse Sanren tells her, at least. Li rather likes Cangse Sanren. She’s funny, strong, and witty.

So Li decides to share a secret ability of hers.

She studies Cangse Sanren’s palm. Rough, calloused, all sorts of cut up.
“Hmm,” says Li. “You’ll be blessed with one son. His life will be one crazy ride, but try to stick with him.”

“I can do crazy,” Cang Sanren tells her. “Crazy’s kind of my specialty, actually.”

“Oh, good,” says Li, relieved. “Because he’ll go from 随遇而安 to 我行我素, and he’ll cross paths with 落英缤纷 who’ll become 重温旧梦 and then 心如止水. And then your son will manage to come around to 知足常乐.”

Cang Sanren whistles. “Wow. That’s a boy devoted to making the world a more colourful place right there.”

“But the most interesting life is his own, and his partner’s,” Li finishes.

“You’re a wise one,” says Cang Sanren. “I could even believe you were a god.”

Oops. Looks like the secret slipped, huh?

Li decides not to take any of their names since they all seem pretty tight-knit, and that would be a horrible way of repaying their kindness. She waves them goodbye at the end of the day, purchases some souvenirs, and nabs a random civilian’s name on her way back.

And here’s the thing about making friends after a thousand years of solitude.

Friends? Of course they were friends. In fact, Li was a disciple under Yunmeng Jiang before she got recruited to her current job! Not much of a promotion, and maybe her family name is a bit weird, but everyone has their own situations.

Thus, Li, also known as cat’s-paw, a stolen name from Lotus Pier who drags names into this world to become idioms, is written into the story.

And there she stays, because where else is there to go?

The job doesn’t pay, but it gives her something to do. Since the city at the edge of the woods seemed reasonably populated now, why not give their people a try as well? Surely they won’t miss one or two stolen names.

There should be a title card here or something.

You know, like this:

**SO, LONG STORY SHORT, PEOPLE HAVE BEEN GOING MISSING BECAUSE OF A NAME-STEALING BRIDE.**

Right?

Right.

Li Miyu—

Wei Wuxian—

is finally detached from the poor lady’s body with a solid *snap*, and goes spinning into the darkness.
And that’s the whole story.

More or less, that is. A-Qing just wishes that it had a backlog or something, because this is a lot to process at once, and it’s not like she took notes.

“I guess that’s it,” A-Qing says to her memory-touring comrades, and most importantly, a bespeckled Luxing.

Luxing blinks open all of his bleary eyes. God, that is so unspeakably creepy. Not to body shame or anything! Who wouldn’t be freaked out at a giant, writhing, wormy thing with as many eyes as he’s got hairs?

To reiterate: creepy.

“Name?” is the first thing that comes out of Luxing’s mouth. Or the thing that looks like his mouth.

A-Qing decides she doesn’t want to think about the specifics of half-god, half-demon physiology, so she says, “Sorry. Not today.”

“I would like to add ‘not ever’, if at all possible,” Fuxing adds.

Luxing blinks. The trees sway. Are the two correlated? Best not to ask those kinds of questions, really. “Find her name,” Luxing urges. “Only... the name. The rest... doesn’t matter.”

“First of all, reduce, reuse, recycle, you googly idiot, and second, you can’t take back something that doesn’t exist anymore,” A-Qing snaps.

“Not like there was much to take back before,” Xue Yang chirps.

“Can you think just once before you talk,” says A-Qing, in full monotone.

“Could Li Miyu even have stolen Ying Huohua’s name?” Fuxing wonders aloud, which is just—there’s a time and place for everything, and now isn’t the time or the place? The fuck? He hums to himself, then says, “I imagine it would have been emotionally and mentally devastating to return with Hui Hua’s name.”

“Any name would have been emotionally and mentally devastating,” Mo Xuanyu points out. “No emotions or memories, right?”

“Hanguang-Jun is my new best friend due to the fact that he has chosen to remain respectfully silent,” says A-Qing, with some genuine despair.

“Ying Huohua has passed,” Hanguang-Jun tells Luxing.

Everyone’s a bad influence in their dumb group. There’s no way A-Qing’s the most sensible one out of them all, is there? That would be horrible. She’s crazy enough by herself. Why does she surround herself with even more crazies? Is this doing something permanent and irreversible to her psyche?

Those are terrible thoughts that bode very poorly, so she stops thinking about them altogether.

A-Qing heaves a sigh that feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, then mutters, “What he said, I guess.”

Luxing blinks. Blinks again. Recalibrates his brain to perform higher cognitive functions. Says,
“What?”

“Ying Huohua and Shouxing have both passed on,” A-Qing elaborates. “Get it?”

Another blink. “I don’t understand,” Luxing says miserably.

“It means they’re done and dead,” Xue Yang offers, and okay, dipshit, you might as well have gutted him with a rusty hatchet, what the hell? “Banished from this earth, moved onto the great beyond, waiting for their paperwork to be filed for rebirth.”

“Oh, that takes a while,” Fuxing says severely. “I’d know. I died before.”

“I did too,” Xue Yang says, then narrows his eyes suspiciously. “How’d you file it so fast? You don’t have assistants.”

“Uh.” Shifty eyes. “A-Qing’s my assistant.”

“Fuck you, I can’t revive people,” A-Qing says, with great offense. “Don’t drag me into your crazy. Did you forge documents or something?”

Fuxing puts on a great big smile. It’s the sort of face that basically says, put your fist here. “So, Luxing,” he says, swerving madly past that question. “Can you calm down a bit now? Just a bit. You can hang out here, but no more name-stealing, please.”

“Am I an illegal ghost?” Xue Yang whispers in the corner. The metaphorical corner. You know, the one no one cares about.

“It’s okay,” Mo Xuanyu assures him, patting him on the back.

Luxing watches them with something akin to someone who just got woken up and told that his entire family was murdered. Not surprised, but just so very done with all this depressing nonsense.

“Oh,” says Luxing, doing his best to frown with the... body... he has. “They’ve already gone ahead?”

“More or less,” A-Qing answers.

“Did they leave any words for me?”

Damn Luxing and his heart-wrenching questions. “Not that I know of. Sorry.”

Another sigh. The poor guy really needs a break. “I didn’t expect anything, anyway,” he says sadly, like that makes things better. “I guess it’s over.”

“More or less,” A-Qing repeats.

“Well, I certainly don’t want to be here anymore,” Luxing mutters to himself. He stands up, basically taking all the shadows with him, and shakes the numbness out of his stubby worm legs. “It was nice meeting you. Tell the people they can stay here if they want, or do whatever. Either way, I’m leaving it up to you now.”

Maybe A-Qing’s just imagining things, but the you part sounds like it’s directed toward herself and Fuxing in particular. That’s weird and also kind of ominous, but hey: familiarity is nice.

“Fingers crossed for better luck next time,” Fuxing calls after Luxing as the latter waddles into the trees.
Something of a snort shakes the trees. “Someone ought to,” is the very last thing a thousand year-old god says of a legacy that died as he was born.

And then the shadows vanish, the wind stops howling, and Luxing fades away.

Huh.

That was a lot easier than last time, wasn’t it?

Grief hits hard, but it hits differently for everyone. That’s probably the moral of the story or something.

“Well,” says Xue Yang, effectively splitting the silence in half, “should we go check on our good friends in town?”

The first thing they A-Qing does when they get back to town, as anyone could’ve guessed, is tell Li all about their fun adventures in memory land. The others are gracefully staying out of it by her own suggestion, because A-Qing calls most of the shots around here. How horrifying is that prospect? Pretty damn horrifying.

“That’s a really funny story,” Li says brightly, even after A-Qing has spilled the beans and practically drowned her in them.

“It isn’t just a story,” A-Qing insists. “It’s what really happened!”

Li considers this for a moment. What’s there to be confused about? Beans! The beans have been spilled! All of them!

“I mean, you seem to think all that really happened,” Li allows. “But I don’t think so.” She smiles, hands on her hips, and proudly declares, “So let’s just believe in our own little truths, okay? Our own little worlds!”

“You really don’t want to remember?”

“I’m happy the way I am,” says Li, with a wide grin. “So the boss retired, huh? Cool. Guess I’m not stealing names anymore.”

Denial is a powerful drug and all that, but to each their own. It doesn’t sit well with A-Qing, but hell if she gets to tell people how to live their tragedies. “What are you guys going to do now?”

“We’ll try to figure out how to build new souls ourselves,” Li says, like it’s the easiest thing in the world, which, uh. No. It’s not.

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” A-Qing says dubiously.

“Sure it is,” is Li’s chipper response. “People can do anything if they put their minds to it. If all the gods and two kingdoms can get themselves wiped out in a month, who says we can’t level up to become real people?”

A-Qing stares at her for a good while. She can’t tell if Li’s playing with her or being completely serious, but she’s beginning to accept it at this point.
“You do what you have to do,” A-Qing says, and sighs. “Life’s weird like that.”

“The weirdest!” Li agrees brightly.

And that’s about where this spectacle ends. A-Qing waves a goodbye-for-now and turns to meet up with the rest of her rowdy crew, and then Li suddenly says, “Oh, right!”

“Something I should know before I go?” A-Qing asks and immediately hopes she doesn’t regret it.

Li nods vigorously. Then she smiles with all her teeth and says, “Tell Cangse Sanren to take good care of her son, alright?”

A-Qing kind of regrets it.

“That boy’s going to see a world that’s broken but so incredibly beautiful,” Li tells her with all the earnesty in the world. “He’s going to do great things—I can tell!”

Like a responsible adult, A-Qing swallows the lump in her throat. “Yeah,” she agrees, endlessly grateful for her foresight in telling the others to wait elsewhere. “I’ll be sure to tell her.”

Li offers one last carefree smile, and then A-Qing’s off to the races.

To Yinhe, that is.

Same thing.

What’s the first thing any self-respecting traveller does in Yinhe?

Find a nice place to enjoy dinner and spend the night. You know. Like a regular human being.

That’s exactly why all five of them are seated around a nice, round table, made of some wood that smells like flowers and scratched with all kinds of ores.

The reason A-Qing’s paying so much attention to the table even with all the nice food atop said table is because Mie Yu’s decided to bless them with her company, and conversations get really weird around her.

Fuxing and Xue Yang tense a bit as well, because they might be batshit, but at least they’re the kind of batshit that knows there’s something weird with Mie Yu.

So when Mie Yu downs her drink in one go, sighs, and says, “You know, they used to call me Fuxing,” pretty much everyone wants to immediately be put to sleep.

“They called you what,” is Xue Yang’s scandalized response.

“That explains a lot,” Wei Wuxian-Fuxing mutters to himself.

“I am so incredibly lost,” Mo Xuanyu says despairingly.

Hanguang-Jun simply nods, because—just because. He’s the goddamn light-bearer.

“What in the fresh hell,” is A-Qing’s eloquent declaration.
Mie Yu nods casually, as if all their reactions are just as valid as the next. What? No, don’t tell Hanguang-Jun his reaction is okay. Then he’ll keep on being calm and make everyone feel like they’re out of their minds.

“Wait,” Fuxing suddenly says, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “When we first spoke—when I first came to Yinhe—were you testing me?”

Mie Yu shrugs.

“I hate pop quizzes,” Fuxing mutters. “They’re easy, but I hate them.”

That’s great, but A-Qing has larger concerns, such as this one: “Why didn’t you do anything?”

And Mie Yu sighs. It’s a little one, almost an exhalation of breath instead. Two words: Not. Helping.

“You just sat there and watched as everything died, and when you actually did anything, it was to make sure everything was dead for sure,” A-Qing snaps. “Do you realize what you did? Even if you messed up before, you didn’t have to do a full one-eighty! That’s, I don’t know, number one on How Not To Be A Good Parent 101!”

“I feel like the first one would be ‘don’t sacrifice your firstborn to demons’,” Xue Yang points out very unhelpfully. “Right? That seems reasonable.”

“I’m gonna put my fist through your face.”

“Bitch, you can try.”

“First off, that’s number four—” Mie Yu gestures to Xue Yang, and then to A-Qing, she says, “And secondly, I know. I messed up. I was scared and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Um,” Mo Xuanyu begins weakly, “Maybe try anything?”

“Hindsight is really cruel like that,” Mie Yu admits sadly.

Hanguang-Jun, who’s been silently absorbing this entire conversation and all the lines between what’s spoken, decides to break the ice with a sledgehammer. “Why did you purge the heavens of all its gods?”

“Oh, that,” Mie Yu says, which definitely isn’t such a simple question that it deserves such a casual response. “At some point, I realized isolating the gods in the heavens didn’t make them any less human. They made mistakes, they quarreled, they were greedy beyond comprehension... so I thought, well. Since we’ve fallen this far, we might as well start anew.”

“That is definitely not how I expected my thoughts to be put into practice,” Mo Xuanyu says, with great apprehension.

“So I rewrote the script.” Mie Yu continues. “Made it so the new gods would be born into the same world they saw and loved as mortals.” She takes a long, hard look at Fuxing, then declares, “I think we’re off to a good start.”

“Aw, shucks,” says Fuxing, because he’s like that.

Then Mie Yu turns to A-Qing and tells her, “Sorry for the sword trials.”

And like any sane person, A-Qing says, “What.”
“Those trials where you knocked Jiangzai into shape? I’m sorry. I left those with a little piece of me to test the very first god to be born again. But, as you can see...”

A stupid girl with an ego bigger than her big-ass head decided to stick her hands into the story and slap everything around like putty. Because A-Qing’s nickname is also She Who Brings Canon Divergence, Plot-Twister.

“What the hell,” A-Qing mutters, mostly to herself.

“By the way,” Fuxing adds, “did we ever figure out who killed Ying Huohua?”

Mie Yu hesitates. Oh, that’s bad. She didn’t hesitate to lay it all down before. So why now?

And then she clears her throat. Awkwardly. Very, very awkwardly. “You see,” she begins, “When I ascended, I had a friend—”

“Nope,” A-Qing declares, smacking her hand on the table.

Mie Yu stares at her. “Pardon me?”

“Sounds familiar,” A-Qing says flatly. “Don’t like it.”

“She was jealous—”

“Like I said, sounds familiar.”

“And was vying for Ying Huohua—”

“Been there, seen that, but like, not nearly as fucked up. Still.”

“And when she couldn’t have her—”

“She knifed her, right?” A-Qing sums up elegantly.

Mie Yu shifts where she sits.

“The thirty-three stab wounds was kind of overkill,” A-Qing notes. “We’re agreed on that, right? Right.”

“To be fair, she’s much better behaved now,” Mie Yu says for what it’s worth, and hang on a second, what the hell does that mean?

“What,” says Xue Yang, for them all.

Mie Yu gestures behind her and at the bane of Xue Yang’s existence: the aforementioned patricide girl.

Patricide girl catches their shocked gazes and waves back cheerfully.

“Oh my fucking god,” Xue Yang says, and immediately pales.

Yeah, that’s a fair reaction.

Fuxing turns slowly toward Mie Yu. Equally as slowly, he asks, “Are all your kitchen staff, um, gods reborn?”

“Something like that,” Mie Yu says flippantly.
“Why is this town literally the weirdest place in all of existence,” Mo Xuanyu says despairingly.

“I mean, Shouxing and Luxing really did a number on the land,” Mie Yu supplies. “And then I came here after my mortal parents got eaten by skeleton hounds, because the Trader has something of a grudge against me. That’s a lot of semi-divine influence in one place.”

“Why is the Trader in this story now?” A-Qing demands, because this is spiralling into nine kinds of crazy and she hates, hates, hates it with all her heart.

“I think it’s safe to assume that everyone was in love with Ying Huohua to some extent,” Mie Yu says, though she doesn’t seem very pleased about it.

“When did they even have time to meet each other?” A-Qing studies the look on Mie Yu’s face, then says, “Oh, fuck off. In Shouxing’s realm? Seriously?”

“Ying Huohua, when she was Hui Hua, passed time by telling the Trader stories,” Mie Yu tries to explain. “And then the Trader exchanged those stories to denizens of the Other Side. They spread like wildfire, brought a real touch of divinity to that weird world, and even more people fell in love with her.”

Note: falling in love is like dumping a vat of wine in yourself and leaping into the flames. A-Qing will keep that in mind so she doesn’t fuck up like literally everyone around her. Except maybe Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun? She doesn’t know anymore, and frankly, she’s content to let them to their own crazy, shameless things, because love is weird as shit.

“That’s why the beings of the Other Side respect you so much,” Mo Xuanyu tells A-Qing. “Right?”

“Respect. Yes, that’s good,” A-Qing says hurriedly. “Just respect! Only respect!”

“Well,” Mie Yu begins.

“Shut,” is all A-Qing can get out before she needs to breathe again.

Mie Yu shuts her mouth and decides to smile faintly at them all instead. It’s not a good alternative. “Well,” she tries again, with a different tone of voice, “I’m just happy to finally tell you all the truth behind our awful story. If you think about it, everything up until now might’ve been a prologue of sorts.”

“A prologue?” Fuxing repeats, then starts grinning like an idiot. “To what story, I wonder.”

“I suppose we’ll have to wait and see what kind of story you children make,” Mie Yu declares, and stands. She gives them the same smile she’s worn her entire life—the one that they can now all read as I used to be a god, and now I’m human, and now I know there’s no difference between the two. “Who knows?” she says teasingly. “Maybe I’ll get to read all about it thousands of years from now.”

That’s a personal attack on A-Qing’s less-than-commendable writing skills, and everyone knows it. “How am I supposed to chronicle all this chaos?” she says petulantly.

Xue Yang pats her hand supportively. “I’ll be your editor if you want,” he says, and then laughs when A-Qing bats his hand away with a hiss.

“I will teach you, if you like,” Hanguang-Jun offers.

Well, they’ll end up in Gusu eventually, won’t?
That’s cool. Those wacky juniors are hilarious. That old Lan Qiren guy is going to have a cardiac event one of these days, and nobody has any right to be surprised.

“You should all head to bed soon,” Mie Yu tells them. “It’s been a long day.”

And they do. What? It really has been a long day. Memory-hopping does that to you. The Other Side is full of terrible things and revelations that make A-Qing want to stitch up the holes between their worlds to just let everyone be, but it’s also not as fun that way. You can’t have your cake and eat it too, which is a stupid saying.

Just go make another cake.

Their jolly brigade departs the morning after. Like always, Mie Yu sees them off to the gates.

“You’re splitting up here, aren’t you?” she asks A-Qing, because the others are too busy trying to put a stop to a knife-wielding tentacle box Mo Xuanyu made last night, because that is a normal thing to make.

“Yeah,” A-Qing answers. “We’ve got different ends to grab. If all goes well, two years from now, we’ll be able to tie the ends together and finally put an end to all this.”


Hell knows they’ll need it.

Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun can handle themselves just fine. They’ll probably be fine as long as Fuxing doesn’t do anything stupid, like get himself killed again. Hanguang-Jun’s practically indestructible, so hopefully he’ll be able to help.

As for Mo Xuanyu, Xue Yang, and A-Qing... whatever. They’ll make do. Explosions solve problems, right? Right. So that’s all their problems solved.

Just as A-Qing’s ready to rejoin her stupid allies, Mie Yu says, “I suppose I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” says A-Qing. “All things start and end in Yinhe, I guess.”

“And later, and later, and later,” Mie Yu sings, whatever that means.

On that note, A-Qing waves a goodbye-for-now to Fuxing and Hanguang-Jun, who remind them not to resort to arson too quickly, which doesn’t mean they’re fully condoning it. Loopholes! Awesome!

A-Qing turns to her new-and-improved party of three.

Mo Xuanyu smiles brightly. Xue Yang yawns.

She tells them, “This should be fun.”

And as they go, it’s almost as if someone’s singing. A-Qing isn’t sure if she’s imagining it or not, but sounds a little like—

Ash blossoms fall amidst a desolate spring,
A stone-cold heart catches fallen stars,
The fools weeping crimson and laughing cold
Have nothing but bleeding fingers and broken souls!

Hark! The song of the golden gods, three strong, three fallen
Pierces through the endless abyss and goes unheard!
Ten thousand flowers for the hands clasped in prayer
That wilt and are born again!

An end to all; an end to me,
A prologue, epilogue, interlude in time,
In which the children of the world find their way
And brave tomorrow to make yesterday!

Behold the courage of the new day!

—Or something like that.

And now?

Well.

It’s probably time to dance with some dragons. And, you know. Hopefully not get killed.

Chapter End Notes

i wrote this in nine days. yes. i wrote 45k in nine days. because that is a thing regular human beings should do.

this chapter is part 2 of 2, so going forward from here, there’s 1) an end to most things and 2) an epilogue! i can’t say how long either of them will be because i’ve lost my ability to predict wordcount entirely, but i imagine the epilogue will be decently long? i say this knowing that 30k for a chapter is already unreasonably long so i really have no idea anymore....

the exchange between xue yang and nameless merchant a about the lad who sold his shadow is heavily influenced by a scene from monogatari, in case any of you noticed! and as you can probably tell. the disaster trio is very chaotic. all of them are enablers and think they have common sense when in reality they lose all of it the moment they start agreeing that incinerating someone is a good idea. but i love them and their dynamic, especially because they get to live the life would’ve never gotten otherwise!!

and!! please check out this incredible art of fuxing! wwx because oh my goodness he looks so beautiful and all the little details and wow!! just wow!!

if you have any questions, feel free to ask me at my curiouscat!

i’m also on twitter, so you can also talk to me there!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!