Cradle

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/17893868.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/M, Gen, M/M
Fandom: 魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 | Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Character Study, Kinda, Headcanon, For Want of a Nail, Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies, Slow Burn, Slow Build, Yünmeng Shuāngjiè, BAMF!Wei Wuxian, Asexual Character, Bisexual Character, Original Character(s), YilingWei, Adopted Sibling Relationship, Adopted Children, MXTX cameos, murder case, Stealth Crossover, Alice in Wonderland References, Emotional Manipulation
Series: Part 1 of YilingWei
Stats: Published: 2019-02-23 Updated: 2019-12-21 Chapters: 28/? Words: 173519

Cradle

by Dragonesque

Summary

After barely surviving the assassination attempt at QiongQi Path, Wei WuXian and the Wen Sect remnants are left to figure out how to protect themselves and their new lives. Meanwhile, the Jiang siblings and an unharmed Jin ZiXuan try to figure out who's bright idea was that stupid ambush. In Gusu, Lan Wangji panics at the idea of Wei WuXian's near death and tries to figure out whether to insist to stay by the Yiling Patriarch's side or hang back in the Cloud Recesses.

And Wei WuXian struggles with the idea of whether becoming a teacher, teaching demonic cultivation and setting up his own sect might not be a bad idea after all...
Hi, I'm here to practice my writing so any feedback regarding absolutely anything at all would be helpful.

I'm currently writing an original book but I've been feeling a bit stressed since I can't really get much feedback on it yet and, no offence to any of you out there, but I still don't want to release it out onto the internet.

As for this story: I've been contemplating for a while what could have diverted the downward spiral WWX went into that lead to his death along with the differences between normal cultivation and demonic cultivation and how that would look in a sect if WWX actually went and built one. So, here it is.

As for the diversion point, while thinking about the above, I came across this story which I fell in love with. Unfortunately, it's only a chapter long and hasn't been updated since I found it so I'm continuing on my own. https://archiveofourown.org/works/16538405

Originally, I intended to write from the divergent point, that is JZX's not-death. But since this author wrote his own version that I can't really compete with I'm just going to go from here.

Enjoy!

- Inspired by For the Want of A by scratchienails
The first thing Wei WuXian was aware of was pain. He groaned, trying to get his head to work through pained fog to figure out what was happening. Suddenly, he felt small hands on his arm.

“Xian-Ge-Ge! Are you awake? Xian-Ge-Ge!”

A-Yuan?

Wei WuXian opened his eyes and tried to blink the blurriness out of them so he could see A-Yuan’s pudgy baby face. Wei WuXian blinked again. It looked like A-Yuan had been crying? But he looked happy now? What had upset him this time?

“Ah!” Wei WuXian hissed in pain. He’d tried to sit up and talk to A-Yuan at the same time and so wasn’t able to hold back the pained cry. Pain slashed up and down his back and even seemed to linger deep within his chest. Immediately A-Yuan’s eyes began to water; looking five seconds away from bawling and sending Wei WuXian into a mild panic. Wei WuXian hated seeing people cry.

Well, that answered that question. The next one was: what happened?

A-Yuan brightened again, “Aunt! Ge-Ge’s awake.”

“You’ve said that before, A-Yuan,” the voice of the ever-reliable Wen Qing came from beyond Wei WuXian’s vision range. Something was wrong here too. Wen Qing sounded tired and barely able to keep her normal harsh tone out of her voice like she normally did with her youngest relative.

Wei WuXian tried to shift around to find her. A harsh intake was heard before a thud of something falling and a hand holding him down. Wen Qing’s weary, wide-eyed face entered Wei WuXian’s field of vision.

“Stay down,” Wen Qing commanded, “You’ve taken three arrows to the back and they weren’t in easy places to remove especially after A-Ning jostled you so much to get to me on time. A-Yuan go fetch some water for him to drink.”

The teary face nodded and Wei WuXian could feel him crawling over him, gently at that, to obey his aunt. That was when Wei WuXian registered that he was in his bed in the demon-slaughtering cave. A bed that was much comfier than he remembered. But Wei WuXian was focused on what Wen Qing had told him.

Arrow wounds?

He stared blankly at Wen Qing’s face for a moment as she checked his pulse. Suddenly he remembered everything that happened and he nearly lurched upright.

“Jin ZiXuan! Is he…?”

Wen Qing gave a ‘hmph’ before seating herself on the edge of his bed, which was more like a rocky ledge. She couldn’t seem to resist checking up on him, examining his eyes, forehead and hands. Wei WuXian just let her do it. He was familiar with ways of worried fussing, although with his Shijie they usually focused on feeding him and Jiang Cheng.
“He’s completely unharmed and so is that wretch, Jin ZiXun. A-Ning was able to communicate a little once you were more stable,” Wen Qing said checking him for a fever.

Wei WuXian let out a breath that seemed to feel deeper coming from his sore chest. The last thing he remembered was Wen Ning jerking away from giving Jin ZiXuan a killing blow.

A killing blow. Had Wei WuXian really lost control of himself enough to nearly make his Shijie a widow so soon?

“You’ve been unconscious for a little over a week now.”

“What?”

Wen Qing nodded grimly, “We’re in an even more tumultuous situation than when we first came here. A-Ning has been repelling raids from the LanlingJin Sect and other smaller sects under their protection.”

Wei WuXian wondered how many of those had once been under the QishanWen Sect’s protection judging by the bitter look on her pretty features.

“Does A-Yuan know?”

“No,” Wen Qing shook her head, a ghost of a smile on her lips, “He’s been in here keeping a watch over you.”

She hesitated for a moment then added in a lower voice, “He was afraid you weren’t going to wake up and someone would bury you deep in the ground so no-one could see you and everyone would forget you. His words,” she added at Wei WuXian’s confused expression.

Wei WuXian’s expression underwent a myriad of expressions in response to that.

“Nightmares?” he guesses.

“He sleeps easier with you. As long as he doesn’t interfere with your healing it seemed fine to let him stay here. I’ve taught him how to check for your breathing and pulse. It helps when he wakes up from a nightmare. It’s been useful for keeping him out from underfoot and knowing about the raids as well. Everyone we can spare has been making bows and arrows,” Wen Qing added. She seemed to want to catch him up on everything that has happened while he was lingering in unconsciousness.

“How are they getting fletching?”

“One of the women has been sneaking into Yiling and trading for things. Thankfully butchers and cooks do not care so much for the feathers they pluck from their meat.”

Wei WuXian stared at Wen Qing in surprise. Since coming to the Burial Mounds the Wen Remnants have been almost insular. They were skittish and frightened; banding together in comfort. Once the barrier of walking corpses had been put into place they had relaxed somewhat; taking this space as a place where they could rebuild their lives. As Wei WuXian intended it to be. They’d certainly been skittish of him but, Wei WuXian thought, that is completely understandable. The Yiling Patriarch has been their living nightmare for so long and after the LanlingJin Sect’s treatment they had no reason to expect that he would not want anything for them but bloody death.

“Someone left?” Then a thought occurred to Wei WuXian, “How did they get back in past the corpses?”
“A-Ning brings her back inside when she’s ready,” Wen Qing said, “and, apparently, those corpses are only commanded to attack when approached from the other side.”

“Yes,” Wei WuXian said, “I told them that.”

Back in the beginning, he’d told them bluntly exactly what he could and could not offer to these frightened refugees. He included what the protections consisted of and made it clear that if they wanted to leave, they could do so. He wasn’t there to keep them prisoner. But if they left they were on their own. Surprisingly, no-one left.

“Luo Yaling has been very brave and very useful,” Wen Qing tells him quietly, “She’s traded for fletching and medicine. She’s also been able to tell us what’s been going on outside the mountain. She even witnessed cultivators leaving in a huff after a failed raid.”

A part of Wei WuXian desperately wants to ask of news from the outside; wants, desperately, to know of Shijie and Jiang Cheng. How had they reacted to this event? He never got to see Jin Ling… Jin ZiXuan had Jin Ling’s gift. Would he give it to his son? But he deliberately puts such thoughts out of his mind. It’s enough, for now, to know that he did not kill Jin ZiXuan and that there are enemies trying to get through his protections.

Then he blinked, picking up the first bits he’d missed while focussing on the second part. He’d thought all the people here had ‘Wen’ as a family name. But then, it’s not as if he could remember everyone’s name. But he thinks he’ll try to remember this one. She must have been terrified to go outside the protections on her own, especially now.

“‘Luo’ Yaling? And do we need medicine that badly? I thought you’d made enough.”

“Luo is her maiden name,” Wen Qing informs him primly and then gives him pointed but weary look. When she next speaks her voice is low, “The wounds became infected.”

Oh. Wei WuXian sucked in a pained breath and nodded in thanks. Most cultivators couldn’t get infections. Their circulating spirit energy reduced that risk to practically non-existent.

“You’ve,” Wen Qing starts but hesitates, thinking over what to say. Wei WuXian immediately felt trepidation. Wen Qing was many things that contrasted with hesitant: blunt, harsh, unyielding, brutally honest, ruthlessly efficient, fierce - the list could go on.

“You’ve suffered from infection before,” Wen Qing said more firmly. For a moment Wei WuXian was confused. Had he been gotten an infection from the Wen brand in the cave of the Xuanwu? But then he remembered.

“It was before I came to YunmengJiang,” he told her quietly. She eyed him shrewdly then gestured to his right shoulder. Wei WuXian glanced down automatically. He was dressed in sleeping clothes and there were bandages underneath. He wondered if he should be bothered about Wen Qing seeing his nakedness, but she was so clinical about it that there was no point in teasing her. Besides she’d been forced to see his naked torso before in a time when Wei WuXian did not have the mind to tease anyone.

“After my parents died, I ran out of food and money quickly. One more penniless, dirty child on the street wasn’t noticed by anybody. Either you survived or you didn’t and, back then, I wasn’t willing to lay down and die. There were plenty of kids and animals like dogs who did the same. I got into multiple fights with them and managed to walk away, win or lose. But this one dog was larger and meaner than most. Have,” Wei WuXian stumbled a bit here. He’d never told anyone this. Uncle Jiang knew the basics and told his family. “Have you ever seen a dog with a rabbit? Or favoured
toy? They just…”

Wei WuXian couldn’t continue and instead made a motion as if shaking something side to side.

“Been afraid of dogs ever since,” Wei WuXian tried to pass it off, “I knew something was wrong with the bite. But I was just so focused on finding food. I don’t even remember it, but I must’ve holed myself up somewhere. When I was able to walk without getting dizzy, I just went straight back to finding food. Uncle Jiang found me not long after.”

At least, Wei WuXian thinks it wasn’t that long. According to the doctor who’d examined him he’d still had some lingering infection alongside malnutrition and other small problems that the wealthy never had a problem with.

“I can understand why some people fear you so much,” Wen Qing informs him. Wei WuXian blinks.

“Demonic Cultivation? Mountain-load of resentful energy? Army of corpses?” Wei WuXian pointed out. He’d thought the reason people feared was fairly obvious. OK, maybe not the resentful energy thing. People don’t seem to consciously notice that, but the rest…

“Because it’s ridiculously hard to kill you,” Wen Qing said.

“Arrows. Infection,” Wei WuXian waved at his ridiculously sore body. He remembered a time when he healed faster than this.

“You’re still alive. To get even that far, they had 300 men, 200 of which were archers, all armed with swords against a man whose only weapons against other men were a useless flute and my brother. And this was after they had to find and dig out every single corpse they’d buried in Qiongqi Path and who knows how far around it.”

“That does seem a bit excessive,” Wei WuXian admitted. He hadn’t thought they’d want him dead so badly.

“A bit,” Wen Qing snorted inelegantly, “and yet, here you are. Alive and about to make a full recovery.”

‘About to make a full recovery’ still leaves me feeling very sore.”

“I seem to remember something about ‘injured and trapped in a cave with the XuanWu’,” Wen Qing was musing aloud now, clearly ignoring him.

“The beast didn’t attack unless we went near it. I had a small pouch of herbs, but I did have to share with Lan Zhan. Honestly, if it weren’t for Jiang Cheng’s stubborn tenacity, well, Lan Zhan would’ve survived, I think. Although he may have been slightly traumatised by being trapped with my corpse until help arrived.”

“That’s not funny,” Wen Qing said flatly. Wei WuXian gave a momentary look of contrition. “Then there’s your survival in this place let alone combined with Demonic Cultivation itself. I seem to remember rumours about Wen Chao stabbing you as well.”

“Yeah, before he threw me in here,” Wei WuXian confirmed, “I didn’t think telling him about how I’d become a malevolent ghost after he killed me would frighten him that much. I was already at his non-existent mercy.”

Wen Qing looked like she was about to respond to that. But then A-Yuan came inside, holding a
bowl with every bit of concentration to ensure it wouldn’t spill. Wei WuXian almost cooed at how cute he was. Wen Qing helped him sit up and drink. A-Yuan took the first opportunity to crawl back onto the bed and stared wide-eyed at him.

“Were you worried about me?” Wei WuXian teased him lightly.

Tears filled his eyes and the child nodded. Wei WuXian’s smile softened.

“I’ll be alright,” Wei WuXian said. Teasing the child about his death would be crossing a line and Wei WuXian wasn’t comfortable presenting an immortal front to the child either. Not after Qiongqi Path’s ambush. “Your aunt has rarely come across something she can’t heal.”

“Shut your mouth, Wei WuXian,” Wen Qing says, not bothering to turn around to face him, fiddling with bottles and containers of medicine instead. Wei WuXian laughed and then coughed when laughing made his chest hurt. Had an arrow hit his lungs?

“I see you’ve made yourself quite the nest here,” Wei WuXian teased the boy, wanting to move on to something a bit lighter. It was true. Between where Wei WuXian has been lying and the wall is a pile of blankets and small toys, mostly the grass butterflies A-Yuan is so enamoured with. In fact –

“No!” A-Yuan denies loudly. He looks guiltily at the paint specks and tries to surreptitiously (Read: very obviously) move the blankets to cover the evidence. Wei WuXian does his best not to laugh. Holding in his laughter seems to be eliminating the pain from his wounds but only by replacing it with the pain from holding in laughter. His ribs feel like they will burst.

He lets out a chuckle anyway and snatches one of the painted grass butterflies. It’s the most sloppily painted one, likely the culprit who caused the paint spill in the first place. He reaches up to place it on his head but drops it with a hiss when pain hit. A-Yuan blinked up at him with wide eyes then looked at his dropped butterfly. Carefully, the child picked up the butterfly and leaned up to place it on Wei WuXian’s head with all the solemnity of someone placing a crown on a new monarch’s head.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian told him gravely.

“Sometimes I wonder just which of you is older,” Wen Qing told him.

“Shijie said I was only one year old because I was too young to be three!” Wei WuXian told her cheerfully. He grinned wildly at the myriad of emotions crossing Wen Qing’s face clearly trying to decide whether or not Wei WuXian was telling the truth. A-Yuan let out a giggle.

Finally deciding that, yes, Jiang Yanli most likely had said that about the man in front of her, Wen Qing could only mutter: “One day, I have to meet this woman.”

“And then Jiang Cheng came in, told me to get off the floor and to go get Shijie’s cooking,” Wei WuXian reminisced. This had been his last day at Lotus Pier. “Only, when I went to the kitchen, I’d
realised he’d already eaten all the meat. So, I walked back in and he told me it was my own fault!”

Wei WuXian gave a wounded look to A-Yuan who was giggling at the story. His expression was clearly speaking of how wronged he had been.

“Truly, your…” realising what he’d been about to say, Wei WuXian switched tracks rapidly and hoped no-one would notice, “My shidi can be quite cruel sometimes. Nothing tastes better than Shijie’s Lotus and Pork Soup!”

Wei WuXian had been about to refer to Jiang Cheng as A-Yuan’s uncle. But this was wrong on two levels. Wei WuXian was not A-Yuan’s parent and he was not Jiang Cheng’s brother. Wei WuXian had not had a slip like that in years regarding Jiang Cheng. This was also the first time he’s had a slip up regarding A-Yuan - barring the half-wishful jokes he’d made towards Lan Zhan that time.

“Truly, Jiang YanLi must be a saint or some incarnation of the Goddess of Mercy,” Wen Qing deadpanned.

“That’s what I keep saying!” Wei WuXian said, “But the only person that ever seemed to get it was Jiang Cheng. Though I suppose Jin ZiXuan had better have realised by now since he married her. Actually, the two of you tasted Shijie’s soup from that time. Remember? Wen Ning brought some back.”

Wen Qing eyebrows flew up. “So, that’s where that was from. It was very good.”

“I remember! I remember!” A-Yuan was almost bouncing in excitement, “It was the best thing I’ve ever tasted!”

Wen Qing gave Wei WuXian a shrewd look, “You’re one of those overprotective siblings, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

Wen Qing didn’t answer. Wei WuXian exchanged confused looks with A-Yuan. The conversation appeared to be closed. Instead, Wen Qing fusssed over her medicine, threatened him about even thinking of leaving his bed and left. Wei WuXian was still exhausted from recovering, so even though he’d only woken up not long ago he quickly fell asleep, A-Yuan curled into his side in a one-armed embrace.

Wei WuXian woke to Wen Qing covering some bandages in thick medicinal paste. A-Yuan still a warm solid presence under his arm. It was night-time. Wen Qing told him that his bandages had to be changed and had enlisted Uncle Fourth to help.

They were thankfully able to manoeuvre around the sleeping toddler. Wei WuXian couldn’t help but notice the newly carved bow over the man’s shoulder. Uncle Fourth smiled wanly and promised him some alcohol when he could walk without falling over which Wei WuXian naturally took offence to. He was given food by a concerned woman, who also had a bow on her back and a quiver around her hips. Finally, he was left alone with the sleeping A-Yuan and contemplative Wen Qing.

After finishing the food, Wei WuXian looked down at the sleeping, trusting toddler. The warmth and weight of the child made Wei WuXian’s heart clench in pained affection. Children should not be made to live in fear or tragedy. A-Yuan was the youngest child among the Wen sect remnants. The next eldest was ten to eleven years older than him. There were only a handful of teenagers and young adults combined. After, there was another age gap with the rest being older than Uncle Fourth at forty-five. Most were medics or cultivators who had little talent or preferred working with objects
that made cultivating so much easier such as pre-made talismans or special protective clothing. They were the non-combatants of the Wen Sect and the ones who tried to remove themselves from Wen Ruohan’s ambitions as much as they could.

None of them deserved any of this.

But having A-Yuan here with Wei WuXian made him feel affection, fondness and a strange subtle fear born of how fragile A-Yuan sometimes seemed in moments like this.

“We need to get LanlingJin to leave us alone somehow,” Wei WuXian said suddenly to Wen Qing. He has often spoken and confided in Wen Qing and trusted her and her brother as he trusted few others.

“No-one’s gotten passed the defences yet,” Wen Qing said. Her voice was low, so she didn’t wake her nephew. “Tomorrow, if you can stay awake, we’ll gather everyone and discuss what we’re going to do next. It’s our lives too. You shouldn’t have to shoulder all such burdens alone. We’ll help. None of us are really fighters, but we’ll help in whatever way we can.”

“Don’t be silly,” Wei WuXian said, “It’s my fault we’re in this situation now. If I’d been able to diffuse those ridiculous accusations by Jin ZiXun…”

“No,” Wen Qing interrupts harshly, glaring at him through the lamplight, “This is not on you. They believe you must be either dying or dead by now and their first reaction is to try and invade us. You’re our main protector. If you were to die, we’d be easy pickings, and everyone knows it. And, from what you’ve said, it’s not just our lives they’re after, is it?”

Wei WuXian nodded grudgingly, “Perhaps we should make an escape route just in case. All of you can split up and live peacefully.”

“We won’t be together,” Wen Qing said quietly, “I know that’s selfish but…”

Wei WuXian wasn’t sure if it was. It was certainly understandable. It hadn’t taken him long to notice that the Wen Sect Remnants, even little A-Yuan, all knew each other. As in, they could all stop each other and inquire after little minutiae of their lives. Wen Qing had told him at the beginning that none of them were willing to leave each other if they didn’t have to. They were a tight-knit community that all knew how everyone related to everyone else. Wen Mao had always valued his family more than anything else. From what Wei WuXian could tell, everyone believed that Wen RuoHan had twisted these values for his own ambition.

If YunmengJiang valued ‘attempting the impossible’ and GusuLan ‘righteousness’ than QishanWen had ‘family’.

In short, none of the Wen Remnants would be as happy if they had to, not only hide who they were, but also separate from each other – the only family they had left. It humbled Wei WuXian to see them value each other so much. They were always willing to help out where they could. From what he had heard there was talk of building a great communal hall so they could all have dinner together whenever they wanted.

“I understand. Wishing for no separation from your loved ones,” Wei WuXian said quietly. He gently placed his hand on A-Yuan’s soft hair, feeling him breathe, “It’s always better to stay with the people you care about and who care about you. Happier.”

Not for the first time, he thought about his Shijie in Koi Tower and Jiang Cheng now all alone at Lotus Pier. He hoped they were happy, even without him.
Wen Qing seemed to inhale shakily but when Wei WuXian looked at her, she was staring at the opposing wall.

“What makes them want to attack us?” Wen Qing abruptly said, “We should make a list. What are the arguments going to be against us and you?”

Wei WuXian debated for a moment on whether he should let her change the subject or not. He acquiesced and said, “They’re afraid. Jin GuangShan intends for LanlingJin to take QishanWen’s place at the ‘top of the cultivation world’. But during the Sunshot Campaign, he was the only current Sect Leader who did not rise to prominence. Jiang Cheng revived YunnengJiang after QishanWen tried to destroy it and lead multiple campaigns while recruiting at the same time. Nie MingJue killed Wen Xu. Lan XiChen, Lan Zhan and Jin ZiXuan all lead multiple campaigns and quite a bit is owed to Lan XiChen’s strategies. The most prominent people apart from the Sect Leaders or their heirs are myself and Jin GuangYao who killed Wen RuoHan. Everyone knows how Jin GuangShan treated Jin GuangYao when he was still Meng Yao. Plus, Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue became sworn brothers with him but he’s the only one who isn’t a Sect Leader or even inheriting the position. To have his own position rise, Jin GuangShan has been using Jin GuangYao’s connections and accomplishments, his wealth and the fact that, as a Sect, his came out of the Sunshot Campaign with the least damage.”

“Because he waited until the last possible minute to commit. So, what you’re saying is that Jin GuangShan wants to rule everyone else but isn’t doing it as obviously as Wen RuoHan,” Wen Qing said. Anger was barely leashed in her voice. She’d been focussed on her family’s survival and therefore wasn’t up to date about the current politics. Wei WuXian wasn’t either, but he was in a better state than Wen Qing.

“Yes,” Wei WuXian nods, “Thanks to Jin GuangYao, he has influence over GusuLan and QingheNie which leaves…”

“YunnengJiang.”

“Who had me as their Sect Leader’s right-hand,” Wei WuXian sighed, “Jiang Cheng is too independent to make any kind of relationship purely out of political reasons. Even shijie’s marriage: if shijie didn’t want it, it wouldn’t happen. End of story.”

“But wouldn’t Jin GuangShan be satisfied with the marriage? Jiang WanYin’s nephew would be heir to LanlingJin earning ties to YunnengJiang. Regardless of how it would be in practice, it is an alliance. An alliance of blood even.”

“One that was never certain,” Wei WuXian said, “Which is amusing when you realise how he must have kicked himself for dissolving the betrothal between Jin ZiXuan and shijie before the Sunshot campaign when YunnengJiang would have been so far down the list to gain a political marriage. Compared to now when YunnengJiang was the only major sect not fully allied to LanlingJin.”

“That’s all good for the Great Sect’s politics but what does that have to do with us?” Wen Qing asked.

Wei WuXian considered. He felt he hadn’t fully explained the realities of how much – or how little – shijie’s marriage affected the alliance between YunnengJiang and LanlingJin. But he let it go.

“I’ll start with QishanWen,” Wei WuXian decided, “He thinks you want to build up your Sect again. To, one day, try and become the fifth Great Sect again. The best way to stop that, is to stop you. To wipe out every part of QishanWen, all of Wen Mao’s blood, so there’s no way to recover. Plus, don’t underestimate spite and the joy of having power over those who once had power over you.
Especially, since no-one would stop them. The Sunshot Campaign and its damages are still too recent. There is no-one in the world more reviled than a Wen. Except, perhaps, me.”

“But we don’t have any power!” Wen Qing said, “We were never threats! Everyone here is a non-combatant! Medics and support or those who are too old or who’d barely started cultivating?”

“It’s the name,” Wei WuXian said, “I know it’s ridiculous, but some people don’t care about reality as long as they get what they want and, what Jin GuangShan wants, is power.”

“The name,” Wen Qing muttered, seeming to think on something, “Alright, but what about now?”

“Now, you have the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation leading and protecting you,” Wei WuXian said sardonically, “They think we’ll combine and create a new Sect filled with Demonic Cultivators to terrorise the world with our army of corpses and rule with fear the way the QishanWen Sect failed to do the first time.”

“That’s so stupid!” Wen Qing blurted out. Wei WuXian laughed, a tad hysterically.

“It’s not a new fear, exactly,” Wei WuXian said, “That’s why Jin GuangShan wanted YunmengJiang brought to heel so badly before all this happened. It’s just his luck that shijie’s marriage happened after I left so he could no longer try to grasp me.”

“Grasp you?”

“Poor choice of words, maybe,” Wei WuXian sighed, “Jin GuangShan was putting pressure on YunmengJiang since he’d begun accumulating power after the Campaign ended. They were lustful of the power of Demonic Cultivation but didn’t want to sully themselves trying to use such a path. Though, I think some Jin members asked me to teach them Demonic Cultivation in disguise. That’s also why they want the Stygian Tiger Seal. It can be used by anyone without backlash and it’s almost too powerful. They were afraid I’d teach YunmengJiang how to become a Demonic Cultivator.”

“But you didn’t,” Wen Qing said. Not a question but prompting an answer.

“No,” Wei WuXian admitted, “I’m too distrustful. I didn’t help Jiang Cheng recruit. I don’t know those people. Resentful energy is too easy to misuse and the consequences too severe if they’re reckless with it. I helped with training and I taught them tricks, but I never once taught someone to use resentful energy the way I can. Jiang Cheng agreed with me and never asked me to teach this path. He said it was my decision. Although he did advise that I should consider an apprentice.”

“Wise of him.”

“But LanlingJin continued to pressure. Before the competition at Phoenix Mountain, I’d have random LanlingJin members like Jin GuangYao try and flatter me over to their side,” they’d even sent women to flirt with him for that purpose which had made Wei WuXian extremely uncomfortable for all that he’d laughed it off, “but the worst part was that they’d create absurd rumours out of nowhere about me betraying or disrespecting Jiang Cheng.”

“They don’t know you that well, do they?” Wen Qing said dryly. The second thing Wen Qing had known about Wei WuXian was his loyalty to Jiang Cheng. The first had been his kindness to Wen Ning.

“No, Jiang Cheng and most of the people who knew us, knew better. Unfortunately, after Lotus Pier’s destruction, there were less people who really knew us from before the Campaign, so those numbers were few. But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that most people began thinking
that I was only waiting for a sinister chance betray Jiang Cheng, marry shijie – which is disturbing -
take over YunmengJiang and then conquer the world with an army of demonic cultivators and their
armies of corpses. Ugh, I’m nauseas now.”

“From the lying?”

“From people sick enough to think shijie and I would marry. It’s just – no. Just, just no.”

“She is your sister, so it has that incestuous feeling even if you’re not related.”

Wei WuXian paused, “You’re the first person to say that outside of shijie and Jiang Cheng.”

“That it’s incestuous?”

“That she’s my sister,” there was a kind of vulnerable tone in his voice that Wei WuXian didn’t like.
He cleared his throat and looked at A-Yuan instead. He could feel Wen Qing’s eyes on him.

“And Jiang Wanyin is your brother,” Wen Qing said. There was a moment of silence while Wei
WuXian tried to get water out of his eyes. After a moment Wen Qing began speaking again.

“I still don’t understand why that’s a problem. From what I’ve seen you’ve always managed to
straddle the line of treating Jiang Wanyin as both younger brother and respecting him as Sect Leader.
That should be obvious enough with time,” then Wen Qing seems to realise, “Except I didn’t give
you any.”

“LanlingJin didn’t give me any,” Wei WuXian corrects, “A larger part of me than I’d care to admit
kinda wishes I’d killed Jin ZiXun when he kept blustering and delaying me at Koi Tower. But I was
trying, to use your term, to straddle the line between the power they knew I had and harmless, so I’d
appear as a non-threat. Which means not killing people. Even so, I’d been trying for ages at that
point and the rumours still hadn’t died down. QiongQi Path was a snarl in everybody’s plans. No-
one expected that I’d care about the inhumane way your people were treated and few were aware
that I had friends amongst you.”

“Do you think that they were trying to drive a wedge between you and Jiang Wanyin?” Wen Qing
said thoughtfully. Wei WuXian blinked and poked that thought.

“That’s… Huh. More than possible; it’s distinctly likely,” Wei WuXian admitted. He thought over it
some more, “Jin GuangYao is wily and desperate for approval. He’s also easily well-liked and
appears as a genuinely honest person despite his considerable success as a spy. He’s also easily over-
looked in comparison to the rest of the more arrogant members of LanlingJin. Jin GuangShan isn’t
capable of this kind of thing no matter how much he might wish, and Jin ZiXuan would never bother
with such a thing. In fact, I don’t think Jin ZiXuan has the same lofty ambitions as his father. He
wants to be the best, and wants his Sect to be the best, but he wants that acknowledged in a genuine
competitive way, not a domineering way. The point is,” Wei WuXian tried to get himself back on
track, “Jin GuangYao would have thought rumours would be a good idea to break ties between me
and Jiang Cheng especially if he heard the kinds of rumours that were prevalent about me from
before the Sunshot Campaign.”

“I heard those rumours,” Wen Qing retorted, “and, no doubt, he would have been right there after the
fight and been so sympathetic to get you on his side.”

“Sounds like you have experience,” Wei WuXian observed.

“Sometimes I wonder how Wen RuoHan didn’t kill him with how paranoid that damn tyrant was,”
Wen Qing grumbled.
Silence prevailed for a while. Wen Qing was clearly taking in all the information.

“So,” Wen Qing said, breaking the silence, “Let me see if I’ve got this straight: we’re a threat because of an irrational fear of retaliation. You’re a threat because you’ve got a power none of them can combat and now, you’re not even under anyone’s control. LanlingJin wants all the power including what you have, like that damn seal you’ve bitched about. But they’re too prideful to try and recruit you now because you’ve essentially bloodied their face by walking off with half the prisoners of war they were keeping. And, now you’ve even survived their best assassination attempt.”

“I wouldn’t say it was their best,” Wei WuXian reasoned, “It was led by Jin ZiXun.”

“As for allies, we have none because no-one wants to associate with Wen-dogs and they tar you with the same brush,” Wen Qing continued, ignoring him, “The only one that might consider allying themselves to you is Jiang Wanyin since I expect the rumours are now sympathetic to him and not degrading like they were but you’re officially on the outs. Now, I doubt they fear retaliation from him for their murder attempt on you. They will fear retaliation from you… which might actually be why they keep trying to attack us. Finish you off while you’re injured.”

“I feel like a hunted fox,” Wei Wuxian mused, “to be honest, I don’t know how Jiang Cheng will react because who knows what he will be told. He can’t get upset at something he doesn’t know about.”

“All of Yiling knows,” Wen Qing said, “Luo Yaling has not been shy in telling anyone who asks what happened. From what she says, you’ve made quite the impression. All of Yiling is fond of their Patriarch. Even that vendor you accused of selling poisonous potatoes. Now, they’re all outraged on your behalf. They’ve refused to help the raiding cultivators, including upping their prices on things and even laughed that time Luo Yaling saw A-Ning throw somebody off the mountain. Rumours will have spread and Yunmeng isn’t far.”

Wei WuXIan felt taken aback at that. They had been offended on his behalf? He felt quite touched.

“Oh will she have reacted to all this?”

Wei WuXian cringed, “She’ll be upset. Either Jin ZiXuan told her what happened or she’ll have heard the news somehow. Jin ZiXuan or Madam Jin would be the only ones who’d tell her the truth because of her ‘unreasoning affection’ for me. Jin ZiXun outright said it would be fine to kill me because they didn’t have to tell ‘Sister-in-law’ the truth. Said so, straight to Jin ZiXuan’s face; right in front of me.”

“I’m starting to think you should have killed him,” Wen Qing said in disgust.

“Which makes me wonder what they would have told her when they started celebrating my death or giving a toast to my end. Because you know they would have done that,” Wei WuXian continued chest now hurting from the tangled up ball of grief and vengeful anger.

“They probably already did,” Wen Qing said, “enough of that, then. What about Jin ZiXuan?”

Wei WuXian paused and thought about that. He didn’t know Jin ZiXuan well and his opinions kept changing. It didn’t help that anyone who thought less than well of Jiang Yanli was instantly disliked.
But Jiang Cheng had the same reaction and he’d allowed the man to marry their beloved sister. Even if shijie liked Jin ZiXuan, Jiang Cheng still wouldn’t allow the marriage if he felt Jin ZiXuan didn’t like her back. He thought about the other man’s arrogance and the way he’d stood steadfast between Mian-mian and the Wen Sect. He thought about the way he used to treat shijie and how he treated her on Phoenix Mountain. He thought about what he remembered Jin ZiXuan saying in QiongQi Path now that his head was clear from the ringing alarm of THREAT! THREAT! THREAT! and the quieter, simmering fury of how dare he? at the sight of Jin ZiXun with his unworthy hands on Jin Ling’s gift.

“I don’t think he really knew about the ambush,” Wei WuXian said slowly, poking at his unreliable memory, “Jin ZiXun said that ambushing me was the whole reason to invite me in the first place. But I think Jin ZiXuan was trying to diffuse the situation.”

“It was three hundred against two,” Wen Qing said flatly, “There’s not many ways you can ‘diffuse the situation’ when one side is trying to keep themselves alive and the other side’s express purpose for being there is killing the first side.”

“I didn’t say he was doing well at it,” Wei WuXian said, “But he tried. Which is… If he really didn’t know about the ambush and his invitation was a legitimately sincere one then I hold no grudge against him. I doubt we’ll ever get along but we can be… cordial. I think.”

“Overprotective sibling,” Wen Qing accused.

“He made shijie cry! In public! You can’t expect me to forget something like that even if he is now making her happy.”

Wen Qing gave a little huff which Wei WuXian thought was like laughter and he felt a little pleased at that. There was silence as Wen Qing clearly thought over everything.

“Can I ask a question?”

“You don’t need to ask that; just ask.”

“It’s an opening line to prepare you for a potentially awkward question! Not actually asking permission!” Wen Qing snapped at him before calming, “Will you ever teach someone Demonic Cultivation? Even Jiang Wanyin advised getting an apprentice.”

“Mostly the same objections as before,” Wei WuXian admitted, “Although, when I was still a young, immature disciple,” he ignored Wen Qing’s snort, “and I was studying at GusuLan under Lan Qiren, I introduced the idea of utilising resentful energy instead of traditional methods.”

“How did he react to that?” Wen Qing asked realising that Wei WuXian has always been this shameless to ask something so, at the time, unthinkable to the most rigid clan’s most rigid member.

“Threw a book at me,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, “However he did bring up two good points in rebutting me. The first was how I’d stop the resentful energy from backlashing onto me.”

“Which you figured out,” Wen Qing observed.

“For the most part, yes. It still has its dangers but I do know my limits. The second one was that the cultivation world would never forgive me if I did figure it out.”

Silence.

“But,” Wen Qing said slowly, “You did figure it out. It’s out there now. You’re proof that this is
possible and now others seek the same power. You have imitators. Even if you die, all that will still be out there. It can’t be reversed or undone.”

“No just imitators,” Wei WuXian said bitterly, “If I ever find that lowlife that thought of living corpses…”

Wen Qing grimaced. It had been a short trip for Wen Qing to examine one to see if it could be reversed and she hadn’t made a definitive answer.

“All the more reason to take on students,” Wen Qing said, “The cultivation world polices itself. Demonic Cultivators should also police themselves. But you’re the only one. And you can’t do everything.”

Wei WuXian stares at her, “What are you really asking, Wen Qing?”

“You can say no. I just want you to consider the idea.”

Wei WuXian gestured at her to continue.

“What if we did become a Sect?”

“You want to restore QishanWen?”

“No,” Wen Qing regulated her breathing so she didn’t appear to be anxious. Thankfully, Wei WuXian didn’t seem to be taking the question too badly. Yet.

“No,” Wen Qing repeated, “QishanWen is gone. We’ll never get rid of the stain from Wen RuoHan and his sons and everyone else. Pretty much everyone here is ashamed to be a Wen now.”

Wen Qing wondered if she should tell Wei WuXian why the shame had become so much deeper now than it ever been before the Burial Mounds became home. No, Wen Qing didn’t have that kind of honesty. Not now, at least.

Swallowing, she continued, “Everyone here has a trade for cultivation purposes. Tailors, seamstresses, paper talismans, sword-makers, ritual ink, medics – we are the backbone of the cultivators who go out and fight. Except for a handful, everyone’s skills are worthless now and before, we were the suppliers of an army that went out and – hurt people.”

“It’s not worthless,” Wei WuXian said frowning, “We’ve gone out and sold several of the things everyone’s made. You’ve helped me sell the Demon Wind Compass. I wouldn’t have even known where to begin to get a good price on that. I know several people are making more to sell as well.”

“Yes,” Wen Qing acknowledged, “But we want to be helpful. To you. And even to the world out there. The regular one where normal innocent people untouched by all this need protection from things they can’t fight against. We are still cultivators after all.”

Wei WuXian listened, understanding.

“We don’t want the QishanWen Sect,” Wen Qing said, “and you – we’ve seen you teach A-Yuan his numbers and letters and you said you taught at Lotus Pier before coming here. You enjoy it. You’re good at it. Teaching Demonic Cultivation probably has its risks but…”

Wen Qing trailed off in frustration. She wasn’t sure how to put everything into an argument. It was a new feeling for her. She didn’t like it.
“If I have disciples I can trust not to abuse my teachings, they can help police those who use resentful energy for more malicious things. And, knowing that there is a Sect that specialises in such things there will be less people who consider themselves geniuses and dabble in something they don’t understand, injuring or destroying themselves,” Wei WuXian said quietly.

“Yes!” Wen Qing said, grateful Wei WuXian was making her argument for her. “Also, won’t the other sects be hesitant about attacking us if we were a proper sect instead of a band of refugees? We don’t even need to be a sect immediately. You wanted to be careful with your students, right? You can take time to decide on disciples. Not even everyone would need to be a Demonic Cultivator. I wouldn’t mind passing on my medical skills and like I said, we all have skills useful for cultivation as well. We’d like to use them for… YilingWei.”

Wei WuXian stared at her, pale.

“YilingWei,” he said before putting his head in his hands, “Wen Qing, I’m the son of a servant. The highest position and responsibility I’d ever wanted was as Jiang Cheng’s right-hand! I never had any other ambition. All this, just, happened. And, now, you’re asking me to be a Sect Leader?”

“You wouldn’t do badly at it,” Wen Qing said, “QingheNie’s ancestor was a butcher and YunmengJiang’s was a rogue cultivator before he gained so many students. Besides, aren’t you also the son of CangSe SanRen? A famous rogue cultivator.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” Wei WuXian said to her, “I’ve seen what Jiang Cheng does as Sect Leader and, yes, I’ve helped with some of it but I don’t think I can do what he does with YunmengJiang.”

“Like I said,” Wen Qing said, “Think about it. You could even ally with Jiang Wanyin. Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen are also sworn brothers. If you feel that you’ll have difficulty than you can always ask Jiang Wanyin for help, Sect Leader to Sect Leader. As equals. Just, think about it.”

Standing, she extinguished all the lanterns except one which she picked up. As she turned to leave she said one last thing:

“Sleep. You still need to heal.”

Chapter End Notes

OK, I have so many headcanons. Like, so many. This particular story is one where I can explore most of them. Some aren’t relevant because it’s an AU but I might still talk about them in my A/N for anyone who’s interested. But I’ll elaborate on the ones that crop up throughout my story. I’ll go through them in order of appearance.

A-Yuan’s Nightmares: to put it bluntly: children can’t come out of things like what A-Yuan did and not have some trauma, even if its minimal. He is a child and will bounce back easily as kids do but he has to go through the process of healing first. It helps to heal while you’re in a safe place; somewhere no one will hurt you. This is why canon!SiZhui was so well-adjusted. Nothing’s safer or more serene than Cloud Recesses. That being said I also have a headcanon that canon!SiZhui gets really clingy when he’s sick thanks to being left all alone in a tree and developing a fever. If anyone wants to write a one-shot about that (Preferably with Mum!Wifi, a Jin Ling
pairing or even Dad!Wangji with little SiZhui) I would love it. So, nightmares. Unsettling commentary. Thanks to Wifi and Wen Ning, A-Yuan has a unique view on death. Even if he can't consciously remember what gives him trauma he subconsciously knows what has brought him mental harm and instinctively avoids those things. This is true for both canon and little A-Yuan in my story. He's too young to store memory properly but mental scars and the emotions brought with it still need to be worked through. Besides, you have to wonder: what exactly happened to his parents? He'll work through it, like canon!SiZhui did. But as this chapter proved, Burial Mounds is not as safe or serene as Cloud Recesses. So, this will come up a bit more than it would in canon. But overall, he's a normal child. Just one prone to nightmares and a bit clingy. WWX's dog phobia: Canon completely justified WWX's phobia. It makes sense - both why he developed it and why he has difficulty remembering it unless he's confronted with one. Again, trauma. That being said, I also understand wanting to expand on it. Livsn wrote a beautiful, heartbreaking story called Puppy about how Wifi had a dog that eventually turned on him. Here, it's not much of an expansion. Considering it was implied in canon that Wifi used to fight dogs semi-frequently for scraps it's ridiculously likely he got something bad from one of the wounds. In that day and age it's a miracle he didn't get rabies. Even if it wasn't from a dog bite it's likely he would have gotten an infection from somewhere being a starving dirty child. A dog bite is just more likely thanks to the large amount of bacteria in the mouth. It wasn't just one incident that made Wifi gain a phobia. His phobia was built up over many incidents. But the one he tells WQ was the worst incident.

The make-up of the Wen Sect Remnants: the non-combatants of the sect. The medics, support and supply section. Because A: there was not much anyone could use publicly to justify killing non-combatants even if they did want to wipe out the whole sect, especially if they surrendered. Cultivators are meant to be 'righteous' after all. They didn't want their reputation to tank. Some, like Nie MingJue, didn't want to be reduced to what the Wen Sect did to Lotus Pier. Others like Lan XiChen genuinely thought they should live. Others just thought it would be easier for them to just slowly be wiped out in 'accidents'. Night-hunt 'mishaps' like what Jin ZiXun did to Wen Ning before sending him and his companions to QiongQi Path or 'falling from the cliff' while being used as slave labour. Oh, so sad, we weren't trying to kill them but, gosh, aren't we all glad they're gone? Eventually, like in canon, there'd just be no Wen's left from the Sect. After all, only a portion went with Wifi, what happened to the rest? B reason: Someone has to make all these things and fulfil all these duties especially in a large clan like Wen. And considering their attitude, it wouldn't surprise me if anyone who didn't measure up in some way was just shoved into this section. Taken for granted and without any thanks. So they survive their own relative's condescension, the war and then they became POW's/slave labour. They have more collective trauma than anyone else. Now they rely on Wifi, someone who was previously their nightmare made flesh. They're completely grateful and devoted to him for his kindness towards them when, by rights, he should have been worse than LanlingJin. Wifi would never ask much of anything from them and they realise this but they want to help him in return. Also, did anyone find anything wrong with my sum-up of everyone's motivations at this point in time? Any criticisms? Parts of confusion?
Hey guys!

Answering a few reviewer’s questions here:

Update schedule: I don’t have a specific one but I think I’ll aim for one every weekend. I work though. It just so happens that it’s a slow period at work right now but that could change. In addition, I do have my own original book to write.

Lan Wangji: unfortunately, no LWJ this chapter but he will be appearing in the next one! Take some Jiang siblings in compensation.

Now, without further ado, enjoy!

To say Jiang Cheng was in a rare state of incandescent fury would not be inaccurate. His more perceptive disciples, some drawing on the lessons Wei WuXian had given on the sly regarding how to approach their tempestuous Sect Leader, knew that there were different levels to Jiang Cheng’s anger. They knew he had a constant low-level feeling of annoyance which can go to frustration, to angry, to pissed and then to fury. Wei WuXian had demonstrated these differences by goading Jiang Cheng until the man had drawn Zidian and tried to use the fearsome whip to catch his irritating, laughing and fleeing second so he could hang him from a pagoda. But, even Wei WuXian had never managed to get Jiang Cheng this angry in their memory.

Jiang Cheng never realized how much he’d miss even Wei WuXian’s most annoying antics. He had known he’d miss his sister when she left. Even if she had convinced him not to hang the barely-breathing-from-laughter man upside-down from the roof. At least, Jiang Cheng had been prepared for her departure. Wei WuXian’s had blindsided him. Even when Jiang Cheng had visited him that accursed place and seen the miserable, skittish, former prisoners trying to make new lives he’d had some hope or an expectation that Wei WuXian would simply return after he got them settled.

Jiang Cheng should have known better. In his defence, he had. The Discussion at Koi Tower after Wei WuXian abducted the lot of them had sent too clear a signal in what Jiang Cheng could and couldn’t do to protect both Wei WuXian and his Sect. If that weren’t enough, hindsight showed both him and his sister the quiet moments when Wei WuXian would think thoughts he shouldn’t and the clenched fists when he heard things he didn’t like.

Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth and tried to pour more spiritual energy into his sword. He was heading to Koi Tower as fast as he could. So he could have some answers.

The problem is, Jiang Cheng thought viciously, that Wei WuXian always diverted attention from things that may damage Jiang Cheng’s reputation onto himself. This was already a known problem as it meant that Wei WuXian sometimes also diverted attention from Jiang Cheng’s accomplishments as well. But now it was even more of a problem as it meant that his stupid, self-sacrificing, idiot of a brother – martial brother, he meant shixiong – had cut all ties to YunmengJiang, including Jiang Cheng and his sister. And, for what? Wens. Old, feeble and weak strangers. Kin to the monsters.
who’d decimated their home, killed Jiang Cheng’s parents and, as a literal final insult, disrespected them in front of their corpses.

One day, Wei WuXian’s kindness would get him killed.

*Oh, please, don’t let this be that day.*

*Wei WuXian can’t die yet, Jiang Cheng reminded himself viciously, I need to yell at him. For a very long time. Then, A-Jie can give him her disappointed look and ask him why?*


Sometimes, Jiang Cheng wanted to yell at Wei WuXian and tell him off for being a hero. For continuously sacrificing himself so others don’t get hurt. So complete *strangers* don’t get hurt.

Except, Jiang Cheng *had* yelled at him for this. More than once even.

*You don’t want others to go through unnecessary and undeserved pain but what about those of us who have to watch as you repeatedly hurt yourself?*

The worst thing was, if those rumours were correct, then that trait wasn’t even the problem this time. Jiang Cheng could not, after all, begrudge the man for taking up an invitation to visit their sister and meet her son.

But the words from that merchant slithered insidiously throughout his brain as they had been poured into his ears.

*Not even the Wen Sect had slaughtered the people they’d invited to celebrate the birth of their children.*

QiongQi Path. Archers. Jin Zi-something. Jin ZiXuan had also been there. The Ghost General. The Yiling Patriarch completely unarmed and with no corpses to call upon but the one he’d brought with him. No sword.

*Why didn’t he bring his sword?*

The next time Jiang Cheng saw Wei WuXian, he was going to punch him. Then he would *weld* that sword to his hand. If Wei WuXian died…

No. Even after Wei WuXian had taken off to live on a desolate peak covered in corpses to live among defeated former enemies, Jiang Cheng still couldn’t get rid of the impression of Wei WuXian, just, always *being* there. So what if he’d spent the first eight or nine years of his life without him? Wei WuXian couldn’t *not* be a part of Jiang Cheng’s life. So, Wei WuXian couldn’t be dead.

*A-Jie said he wasn’t eating.*

A-Jie’s always been worried about Wei WuXian eating, Jiang Cheng reminded himself. Since she’d first seen him carried in by their father as a half-starved, bony, little thing and she’d overheard their physician talk about Wei WuXian throwing up meals because he’d eaten too much for his shrivelled stomach. It didn’t have to mean anything.

But Jiang Cheng couldn’t get the memory of Wei WuXian arguing with Wen Qing about potatoes and radishes and the images of former cultivators who’s never seriously worked the land in their *lives* trying to farm out of his head. Or the thinner, almost gaunt look he’d had when the Jiang siblings had seen him last.
But, even half-starved, Jiang Cheng couldn’t think of anything that could actually kill Wei WuXian. He’d survived so many things already, that one little ambush couldn’t have finished him. The numbers had varied throughout the retellings. Anything from three to thirty to three hundred to three thousand. Knowing rumours propensity to inflate everything, thirty was the most likely number. Usually, Jiang Cheng would’ve gone with the lowest number but trying to kill Wei WuXian with only three men, even if he had been unarméd, was pure stupidity.

They had tried to kill Wei WuXian. Jiang Cheng wrestled with self-restraint so he wouldn’t use Zidian on the first idiot with golden robes he saw. He doesn’t know any facts yet. The one thing the gossipers had agreed on was that the Yiling Patriarch hasn’t been seen since.

Which doesn’t mean anything, Jiang Cheng reminded himself. Seven days trapped in the XuanWu cave. Three months where no-one had known anything. Lan Wangji had even played Inquiry and the dead hadn’t known anything either.

Then Wei WuXian had turned up alive and Jiang Cheng hadn’t even cared that he had changed; that, for a time, Wei WuXian hadn’t even seemed to register Jiang Cheng’s existence, staring straight through him. That even after Wei WuXian had seemed to wake up and slap his back, something had seemed off about him. Wei WuXian was alive. Any changes could be adapted to on both their parts. Wei WuXian had been alive, and Jiang Cheng hadn’t gotten his brother killed through his own reckless stupidity.

Because he disappeared and it was Jiang Cheng’s fault that he had been there waiting; that Jiang Cheng had taken a boon owed to Wei WuXian; that Jiang Cheng had not even cared about the burden he’d been placing on Wei WuXian because Jiang Cheng had run off and left him alone and nearly gotten himself killed and Wei WuXian hated hated hated being alone –

Jiang Cheng wrenched his thoughts from that particular downward spiral. It had been a long time since he had to do that. He was out of practice. Jiang Cheng focussed on trying to put more speed into his sword. He thinks he can see Koi Tower ahead. His sister was there, and the Jin Sect had been the culprits so there’d better be answers.

Thankfully, Jiang Cheng had been trained by his mother his whole life on how to keep his temper, which might be ironic to those who remembered the fierce Violet Spider. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel satisfaction at the reaction of the LanlingJin members to him. Every single one turned pale and none seemed to want to get close to him, some backed away on shaky legs and with hasty bows. He ignored them all and swept into the tower. He knew where his sister’s rooms were, so he didn’t need to interrogate anyone. As he stormed down the hallways, he watched in vicious half-pleasure half-disdain as members of the arrogant sect pressed themselves into too-small alcoves, darted into side-rooms or, in one case, run in the opposite direction. That one might be letting someone know about Jiang Cheng’s presence here, but Jiang Cheng didn’t care.

The sight of an aimlessly pacing Jin ZiXuan in front of A-Jie’s rooms made Jiang Cheng grind his teeth. The man looked pale and drawn, not as much care to his appearance had been made and he looked like he hadn’t slept. But Jiang Cheng didn’t care.

He was outside A-Jie’s rooms. Meaning it was likely that he wasn’t allowed in.

Upon catching sight of his brother-in-law, Jin ZiXuan jerked startled.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” Jin ZiXuan said, saluting, “You received our message quickly.”

“What message?” Jiang Cheng asked coldly, “I came here when I heard rumours that the LanlingJin Sect has disgraced itself and attempted to ambush the Yiling Patriarch after extending an invitation to
him. I came here to find out the facts as I have heard nothing from LanlingJin regarding any of this. What is that in your hand?”

Jiang Cheng had noticed something silver clenched in Jin ZiXuan’s fist, the gold and yellow glint of a tassel poking out between his fingers. Jin ZiXuan looked down in surprise, as if he had forgotten he had been holding it, and audibly swallowed.

“I think it was Wei WuXian’s gift to A-Ling,” he said quietly, holding out the object for Jiang Cheng’s judgement. Jiang Cheng’s breath seemed to catch in his chest as he gazed upon the silver, lotus-engraved bell. The yellow and gold tassel with the pale jade was unfamiliar. But Jiang Cheng picked up the bell and examined it carefully. If this was, indeed, Wei WuXian’s gift then how had he gotten a hold of a YunmengJiang bell for Jin Ling? It could only be made in Lotus Pier.

Jiang Cheng examined it and held it to the light at a certain angle. Sure enough, there were the scratches near the top of the bell that had damaged it years ago during Wei WuXian’s youth. It had gotten caught while evading a monster. Wei WuXian had been very upset about the damages and Jiang Cheng had witnessed him later trying to buff the scratches out. He’d taken hours, an accomplishment for a boy who had such difficulty staying in one place for too long. In the end, he’d somewhat succeeded, the scratches in the finish of the silver were small and hardly noticeable except in the right light.

This was Wei WuXian’s bell. When a disciple left the YunmengJiang Sect they were required to return the bell. Yet, when Jiang Cheng agreed to cut ties with Wei WuXian, he’d never asked for it back. Of course, Wei WuXian would give up his own valuable possession in order to give his nephew a meaningful gift. Particularly since Jiang Cheng has become aware that he probably can’t afford much now. An awareness Jiang Cheng had only gained since gaining control of and attempting to raise funds for his Sect.

A roiling mass of sharp feelings arrested Jiang Cheng before he wrangled it back. Jiang Cheng wasn’t sure how to feel about Wei WuXian willingly giving up the YunmengJiang symbol, even if it was to A-Jie’s son.


“I think it saved my life,” Jin ZiXuan said quietly.

“What are you talking about?” Jiang Cheng snapped at him.

Jin ZiXuan frowned, unsettled, at him, “I haven’t explained what happened to A-Li yet. When she heard that Jin ZiXun had taken a group to attack Wei WuXian and that he was probably dead, she locked herself in here and refused admittance to everyone except you and A-Ling. Not that Wei WuXian is confirmed dead,” Jin ZiXuan said hurriedly at the look on Jiang Cheng’s face. Jiang Cheng didn’t even know what his expression was saying.

“We don’t know,” Jin ZiXuan continued, “He’ll probably be fine if he got to a healer in time. And he has Wen Qing, doesn’t he? But I’d like to tell you what I know of what happened. To you and to A-Li. I tried to stop them. I… I didn’t think they’d shoot.”

“Didn’t you?” Jiang Cheng’s voice was shaking with accusation and anger, sharp and cold, “Wait here, I’ll talk to A-Jie.”

With that, still clutching Wei WuXian’s bell – A-Ling’s bell now – he turned and pounded on the door and called for his sister.
It took a moment before the door opened. Without hesitation Jiang Cheng swept inside and he heard the door close after him. A body flung itself into him and Jiang Cheng could only catch his sister as she seemed to shake in his arms. Her embrace was tight, but Jiang Cheng didn’t complain.

“A-Cheng,” the horrified, raspy tone of his sister emerged, “How could they? How could they?”

Jiang Cheng didn’t answer. His throat had become too tight.

“He’ll turn up again perfectly fine, A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng finally said, when he could unstick his throat, “That idiot isn’t dead until we see a body. He’s survived too much to die now.”

Jiang Yanli made a sound between a laugh and a sob.

“After that husband of yours tells us what the hell happened I’ll go to the Burial Mounds, OK? I’ll let you know how he is,” Jiang Cheng comforted her, his voice gaining the reassuring tone only ever used towards his sister these days.

_Because A-Niang is gone and A-Die never seemed to notice…_

And Wei WuXian had difficulty accepting such blatant care, which was good because Jiang Cheng had difficulty giving it to him. Nothing to do with the recipient and everything to do with Jiang Cheng being near allergic to showing sentiment. A-Jie was different because it was A-Jie.

But Wei WuXian never seemed to have too much trouble navigating Jiang Cheng’s moods and his roundabout and backhanded way of showing care. He was still oblivious though and still sometimes needed much more blunt sentiments bludgeoned into his thick skull.

“I’m coming with you,” Jiang Yanli said firmly, finally pulling away. She has bloodshot eyes which meant she’d been crying recently. Her clothes were sloppily chosen and dressed and her hair hadn’t been put up at all, or even been brushed recently. She looked a mess but she still looked at him with determination.

_No way_, was Jiang Cheng’s immediate thought. Thankfully, he didn’t say so out loud because his elder sister was giving him a rare look reminiscent of their mother.

“Let’s get you presentable and find out what your husband knows before we decide that,” Jiang Cheng said, rather diplomatically, he thought.

His sister clearly didn’t agree, giving him a stubborn look before looking down and realising what she looked like. She flushed.

“I didn’t think the message would get to you so quickly and I just fed A-Ling and put him to bed,” Jiang Yanli said.

Jiang Cheng waved her off and went to her vanity to retrieve her brush and hair ties. Jiang Yanli went to retrieve a more suitable outfit, for going outside and travelling on a sword Jiang Cheng noticed in consternation, and went behind a beautifully painted room divider to change.

“What message? I came when I heard rumours. If there was a message about their idiocy then why didn’t it come at once?”

“They wanted to wait until A-Xian’s death was confirmed. But all the patrols they sent to Yiling came back injured or empty-handed. I asked for you the first day and A-Xuan said he’d go fetch you if no-one else would but his father said no. A-Xuan is confined to the Tower because he tried to interfere and disrespected Jin GuangShan. Or, so says Jin GuangShan according to Jin GuangYao.
No other messenger was sent because they said it was vital to ‘remove the dangerous elements from Yiling Patriarch’s den’ and they needed everyone they could spare. I think they sent for you because they aren’t making progress,” Jiang Yanli’s voice cracked and she sounded angry when quoting the Jin men. Jiang Yanli came out from the screen looking like she was determined not to cry again, struggling with the last ties in her clothes. Jiang Cheng put the brush down and wordlessly went over, batted her hands away and tied the laces himself.

“If you know Jin ZiXuan didn’t help them try to hurt Wei WuXian, why have you kicked him out?” Jiang Cheng said finally, leading his sister to her vanity.

Jiang Yanli’s expression seemed to break in her reflection.

“I know it’s cruel. I know it’s not his fault,” she whispered, “I still love him. I still love being his wife; that I can say he’s my husband. But – his cousin, his father, his family. They tried to… they wanted to…”

Her face crumpled as she broke down crying. Jiang Cheng panicked. He immediately put down the brush he’d been running through her hair and promptly did the one thing he was capable of in such a situation. He wrapped his arms around her and embraced her, head buried in her shoulder. She clutched him back.

“What can I say to him?” she asked, “I know he did nothing wrong, but neither did A-Xian! Yet his family… What can I say?”

“We ask him what happened,” Jiang Cheng said more firmly than he felt, “We ask him what happened. We find out for ourselves whether that idiot is ok. Then we’ll demand to know what the hell Jin GuangShan was thinking. No keeping silent. This is too far. We’ll raise a damn ruckus if need be.”

Jiang Yanli sniffled, “Thank you, A-Cheng. I’m glad you’re here.”

Jiang Cheng cautiously let go, in case his sister needed to hold on for longer. He returned to doing his sister’s hair and was filled with nostalgia. When they were younger, he and Wei WuXian both took turns in ‘doing’ Jiang Yanli’s hair, often rather horribly. They’d practiced braids and many hairstyles on her hair with Jiang Yanli insisting to do theirs in turn. It was how Jiang Cheng developed his usual hairstyle with the braids at the sides. Funnily enough, despite the lack of willpower on Wei WuXian’s part to do his own hair much, he loved doing theirs. He was always chattering in their ears with his hands in their hair.

Jiang Cheng’s throat seemed to become blocked again. This was getting unreasonable.

Even during and after the Sunshot campaign, the three of them got together occasionally to do each other’s hair. It was a comforting thing to them, reminding the three of happier times, and became even more commonplace when the Jiang siblings realised that Wei WuXian seemed to become more himself over the sessions. Not that he hadn’t been himself before. But he became less twitchy, suspicious and quiet and more relaxed and light-hearted. He didn’t return to his more cheerful nature until after the Sunshot campaign was officially over.

Jiang Cheng fondly remembered a time when his mother had walked in on these impromptu grooming sessions. They had been in Jiang Yanli’s room since she had the most hair accessories. His mother had walked in and stared at the sight of Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli sitting on the floor with Wei WuXian’s hands in Jiang Yanli’s hair halfway through a new braid. Jiang Cheng had been done first so he already had a copious amount of messy, uneven braids in his hair, his small hands clutching hair accessories to hand to Wei WuXian to put in their sister’s hair.
The boys had both frozen fearing they might get scolded due to the varying, unreadable expressions flitting across the lady’s face. Meanwhile, Jiang Yanli, absolutely serene and acting like nothing was wrong, asked her mother if she needed something. Yu ZiYuan had simply gazed over the scene and said that it could wait.

“A-Cheng, that style does not suit you. Do not go out of this room without something better,” his mother had scolded. Her lips had quirked in a smile that meant that she thought it was funny. Jiang Cheng had thought she actually meant he looked ridiculous and immediately tried to remove the braids.

“It’s just practice, Madam Yu!” Wei WuXian said.

“Something better,” she said, “and more practice is needed.”

She must have told Jiang Fengmian to go see them because a few minutes later, the man walked in asking why his wife had asked him to go there before taking in the scene properly. By then Jiang Cheng had moved to his sister’s lap to receive a different hairstyle while Wei WuXian stood behind her to complete what he’d already started. Jiang Fengmian looked at the wide-eyed braiding chain of his children. Jiang Fengmian told them never mind and walked out rather hurriedly. Wei WuXian had just started to speak out in confusion when they heard the man laughing in the corridors.

He hadn’t been the only one either as both Jinzhu and Yinzhu had made excuses to visit Jiang Yanli’s room not long after. They’d been more obvious in their mirth but also gave braiding ideas to the Jiang siblings who had progressed to doing a squirming Wei WuXian’s hair.

It was one of Jiang Cheng’s fondest memories despite his embarrassment at the time. After all this was over, he had to find a way to get his siblings – his sister and shixiong – to visit more or visit them more often. The thought of spending more time at Koi Tower or among Wen’s left a sour taste in his mouth. He’d have to find a way to deal with that.

Apparently reading her youngest brother’s mind, Jiang Yanli said quietly, “I’ve missed this.”

Jiang Chen simply nodded, “We should meet up more often. Jin Ling should know Lotus Pier too.”

Jiang Yanli giggled, seeing through Jiang Cheng’s excuse.

“It’d probably be nice for him to get away from all this,” she said before sighing as Jiang Cheng finished her last bun, “Can you call A-Xuan in? I want to check on A-Ling.”

Jiang Cheng nodded before remembering, “You should give him this,” he said handing her the bell.


“Jin ZiXuan says it’s from Wei WuXian. It’s got those scratches as well.”

“It must be the gift for A-Ling’s one month celebration,” Jiang Yanli said, voice wobbly like she was about to cry again. Jiang Cheng panicked but his sister just took a deep breath and stood.


“Right,” Jiang Cheng swept towards the door and opened it to reveal Jin ZiXuan and his mother. They looked strikingly alike with identical sternly worried expressions. Jiang Cheng looked at them and wondered if he should send Madam Jin away. Deciding there was no point he greeted her before turning to his brother-in-law.
“Aunt. Jin ZiXuan, we’d like to hear what happened.”

Jin ZiXuan seemed to slump with relief when he was allowed back into his wife’s chambers. He made an immediate way to the crib and his wife only becoming hesitant just before reaching her. Jiang Cheng decided to ignore their murmurs since his sister didn’t seem to require his help.

“I am sorry about this A-Cheng,” Madam Jin said stiffly. Like her dear, departed friend, and their respective sons, apologies did not come easy. But Madam Jin would have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to notice how fond of their surrogate brother the Jiang siblings were.

“You didn’t know either, Aunt?” Jiang Cheng asked. Madam Jin was not his aunt but considering how close she had been to his mother, Jiang Cheng and his sister could not call her anything less, particularly after Jiang Yanli became her daughter-in-law. They had done the same for Jinzhu and Yinzhu growing up, until it became ‘not proper’.

Jiang Cheng was getting sick of having to be ‘proper’ when it didn’t feel right. Times like this, Jiang Cheng could understand Wei WuXian’s frustrations at the staid, stagnant world they lived in.

“No, I was helping your sister with the celebration preparations,” Madam Jin said, “I should have known that man was up to no good! Even ignoring whom it was done to, the hit it has taken on this Sect is too severe. LanlingJin cannot be considered trustworthy anymore. That man-whore and his silver-tongued brat completely ignored A-Li’s feelings, you and A-Xuan’s honour making that damn plan. And if that weren’t enough, this would make the Yiling Patriarch completely in his rights to retaliate.”

“You think he’s alive then?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I wouldn’t discount him so easily,” Madam Jin said.

“You think he’d retaliate?” Jiang Cheng asked. Suddenly, Jiang Cheng was wondering how Wei WuXian would react to this now. Jiang Cheng honestly didn’t know. This was a lot bigger than anything else they’d ever faced.

“He’d be a fool if he didn’t,” Madam Jin replied grimly, “They’re just going to continue trying unless he puts a stop to it somehow. I’m just not sure how he should go about it.”

Madam Jin gripped his shoulder tightly, “A-Cheng, they’ve been after the power Wei WuXian holds for a while now. The power of the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation and, most especially, that damn Stygian Tiger Seal. I didn’t pay attention to it at first. I thought it was foolish. Even your mother admitted that Wei WuXian was devoted to you, A-Li and YunmengJiang. I never once saw Wei WuXian behave any differently in that regard. I was there during Phoenix Mountain and at the banquet he interrupted. Not once did he ever disrespect you except for saying that even if you were there he’d still be reckless. Anything they’ve told you are so twisted they’re too distorted or are outright lies. I overheard that they were trying to create a rift between you two so they could convince Wei WuXian to join LanlingJin but when he actually left YunmengJiang it was too late.”

For a moment Jiang Cheng froze before almost turning purple in anger. That – that had all been on purpose? Trying to create a rift between him and Wei WuXian? How dare they?

It’s a visceral, overwhelming anger. It’s born of the guilt for the bitter things Jiang Cheng had thought and felt since Wei WuXian had left YunmengJiang and left a broken promise behind. It’s also born from the same place that previous anger has been born when people denied Wei WuXian as part of Jiang Cheng’s family. It’s born of the same outrage and fear that always occurs when someone threatens Jiang Cheng’s family. Wei WuXian is part of Jiang Cheng’s family even if Jiang
Cheng hasn’t acknowledged it in too long. Even if Wei WuXian broke his promise. Even if Wei WuXian had probably forgotten he’d even made it. Even if Wei WuXian wasn’t born into Jiang Cheng’s family; he was undeniably a part of it.

Now, Jiang Cheng wondered if he’s been ignoring that fact for too long. Had he contributed to the rift the Jin’s had been creating? Had he played into their hands? Was Wei WuXian’s isolation in Yiling – so close, yet so far – partially his fault?

Jiang Cheng wrestled with his anger. But the gaping hole where Wei WuXian should be – might never be again – gnawed at him like a gaping, sucking wound. It seemed too much to sit down in nice chairs and talk while Wei WuXian was in Yiling with his condition unknown.

“A-Cheng,” his sister said quietly, hand on his. Jiang Cheng took a deep breath, drawing on his sister’s quiet, gentle strength and the unyielding look on her face. He sat down and looked at the weary Jin ZiXuan.

“Explain.”

Jin ZiXuan did. The more details revealed the more Jiang Cheng became angry and the quieter Jiang Yanli became. Jin ZiXuan had only noticed suspicious things recently and had only figured out what was going on the day it happened. Immediately, and without informing anyone, he’d flown off on his sword to try and stop it. There weren’t thirty men; there’d been three hundred. Three hundred against two. The Ghost General occupying the bulk and the archers while Jin ZiXun attacked the unarmed man alone with his sword. Jin ZiXuan explained Jin ZiXun’s baseless accusations about his hundred-hole curse but Jiang Cheng had interrupted there.

“Who is this person? Why do you think Wei WuXian even knows who he is, let alone wastes time and effort on him?”

Jiang Yanli, to his surprise, answered him: “He’s the one who so rudely barged in on a situation that didn’t involve him and made a big show of insulting A-Xian and trying to attack him with his sword at Phoenix Mountain.”

“Sounds like he’s been asking for it then,” Jiang Cheng said in cold anger.

“He’s also the one Wei WuXian threatened at the banquet when he’d been looking for the Wen Sect Remnants,” Madam Jin said, “I only came in part-way through the commotion, however I do know that Jin ZiXun had tried to blow him off and that idiot man-whore tried to needle Wei WuXian into staying and discussing turning over the Stygian Tiger Seal to him.”

“Why? A-Xian has been trying to destroy it,” Jiang Yanli said.

“What?” both Jin ZiXuan and his mother were surprised.

“After the Sunshot Campaign ended he started looking into destroying it. He nearly blew up the forges when he tried melting it down,” Jiang Cheng said, “He said it was too dangerous to exist; that it had been more powerful than he’d expected and that it didn’t care who used it.”

“But that’s a discussion for another time,” Jiang Yanli said firmly, “This is why Jin ZiXun hates A-Xian and believes that A-Xian cursed him?”

“That’s not enough,” Jiang Cheng said, “Wei WuXian wouldn’t put effort into such an insignificant creature and even if he would, he wouldn’t use such a roundabout menial curse that could be cast by anyone. If Wei WuXian wanted revenge on someone he would make sure everyone knows it was him.”
“He said it wasn’t him,” Jin ZiXuan confirmed, “I asked him to come with me to Koi Tower to clear up the matter but…”

“It wouldn’t have worked, A-Xuan,” Jiang Yanli said, shaking her head sadly, “from everything we’ve heard, they wouldn’t have even cared whether or not A-Xian was innocent.”

Jiang Yanli looked ready to cry again, upset about the injustices piled on her brother.

“He said that,” Jin ZiXuan said quietly, ashamed, “That even if he went to Koi Tower and told the truth, no-one would believe him.”

“Unfortunately, he’s right,” Madam Jin added briskly, “Everyone’s already made up their minds about this. They would have used it as an opportunity to get one over the Yiling Patriarch and confiscate the Stygian Tiger Seal for good measure. What else happened?”

Jin ZiXuan continued, explaining how he’d tried to argue down Jin ZiXun. Jiang Yanli looked horrified and Jiang Cheng was furious when they’d heard how Jin ZiXun had tried to convince Jin ZiXuan to help him kill Wei WuXian, particularly the part where Jin ZiXun had brought up Jiang Yanli. Jin ZiXuan hadn’t been sure how to tell that part but believed his wife deserved to know. In disgust with Jin ZiXun, Jin ZiXuan had turned to Wei WuXian when he’d noticed that the now red-eyed man (and Jin ZiXuan was never admitting how a shiver of fear had run down his spine at the sight of those unsettling, glowing, unnatural eyes) had his gaze locked on something in Jin ZiXun’s hand.

“I snatched it, of course,” Jin ZiXuan sighed, bringing out the smooth wooden box and placing it on the table between them, “Jin ZiXun’s grip was making the box creak and if Wei WuXian was focussed on it I figured it was better in my hands than his. After I grabbed it, I noticed A-Ling’s name in unfamiliar calligraphy and that the lid was damaged but I didn’t get a chance to see what was inside it before Wei WuXian demanded it back.”

Jin ZiXuan continued explaining about how, since Jin ZiXun had been unreasonable he’d turned to trying to convince Wei WuXian to surrender.

“That wouldn’t have worked,” Madam Jin said before either of the Jiang siblings could get a word in, “They were there to kill, not to capture.”

Her tone was disapproving of her disciples actions. Jin ZiXuan deflated, thinking it was directed at him.

“I know now,” he said almost miserably, “I just couldn’t believe they’d go that far. It’s peacetime. Surely coldly planning to kill a man who’d been disarmed and couldn’t fight back properly is too callous? Surely, someone would normally balk at such a thing?”

“No if that idiot brat genuinely thought Wei WuXian was responsible for his curse. Then, killing Wei WuXian would be necessary for survival. That takes away anyone’s inhibitions,” Madam Jin told her son, trying to put some sympathy into her tone.

“Wei WuXian said that as soon as he called the Ghost General off, all those arrows would lock on to him,” Jin ZiXuan said, “It just seemed all so unreasonable! I just wanted everything to calm down and for Wei WuXian to just come to Koi Tower so we could celebrate A-Ling and A-Li could see Wei WuXian. I got angry and lunged at him. I wanted to shake some sense into him! I’d never seen him so coldly angry and his eyes were glowing red which was just unnatural. That’s when the Ghost General landed behind me and tried to attack.”
“What?” Jiang Yanli immediately got to her feet, “but you’re ok, aren’t you, A-Xuan?”

Gratified that his wife still cared about him, he gave a wan smile at her, “I’m fine, A-Li.”

“How did you get out uninjured?” Jiang Cheng asked, “He’s so fast.”

Suddenly remembering that the other man had fought the Ghost General before, combined with Wei WuXian no less, Jin ZiXuan felt his respect rise. The Ghost General had been fast. Too fast for Jin ZiXuan to even realise he’d moved.

“He is fast, I honestly didn’t notice him right next to me until he’d already jerked back. I was focussed on Wei WuXian and didn’t notice anything was wrong until his expression changed to shock and I noticed silver light. Then arrows were shot and the Ghost General tried to defend Wei WuXian. But because of his earlier withdrawal, three arrows made their mark in Wei WuXian’s back. After that, the Ghost General just let out a terrible sound, grabbed his master and fled. Jin ZiXun said later that it looked like the Ghost General had been about to attack me when silver light came from this box and made the Ghost General recoil,” Jin ZiXuan gestured at the wooden box, “That’s why I said that the bell may have saved my life. Wei WuXian must have altered it to repel fierce corpses.”

“That Wei WuXian tried to attack you?” Madam Jin said outraged.

“No!” Jiang Yanli immediately moved to defend her younger brother, “A-Xuan said that A-Xian had been shocked. I think Young Master Wen attacking had surprised him as well.”

“Why are you calling that thing ‘Young Master Wen’?” Jiang Cheng asked in anger, “Wei WuXian should never have brought him back!”

Jiang Yanli frowned gently at her youngest brother, “A-Xian said that Young Master Wen and his sister saved your lives after… what happened at Lotus Pier. I am grateful to anyone that helped bring my younger brothers back to me.”

Jiang Cheng huffed but didn’t dare argue.

“He seemed very mild when we met him even though he was already a fierce corpse,” Jiang Yanli recalled, “We should ask about that as well, when we go.”

Jiang Cheng could feel a headache coming on as the two Jin’s looked back and forth between the siblings. He’d thought they weren’t going to tell the other two about Jiang Cheng heading to the Burial Mounds after this.

“A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng started, “You probably shouldn’t come.”

Jiang Yanli looked at him and Jiang Cheng could already feel his resolve waver. Everyone said that Jiang Yanli took after Jiang Fengmian as much as Jiang Cheng took after their mother. But Jiang Cheng could never, not once, remember his father being so unwaveringly firm and a hair below obstinacy. Jiang Yanli may not have their mother’s fierceness but she did inherit Yu ZiYuan’s attitude towards decisions. In that, this is what I’ve decided so now I’ll go forward and do it regardless of what others say or think.

Jiang Cheng had always admired that trait in both his mother and his older siblings. Now, however, it was very much working against him.

“I’ll pack some money so I can buy food in Yiling,” Jiang Yanli mused aloud, “A-Xian always likes my soup. A-Xuan can you look after A-Ling?”
“A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng said before a stunned Jin ZiXuan could reply, “We shouldn’t let anyone know we’re meeting Wei WuXian. Not until we figure out what we’re doing about all this.”

“And we won’t,” Jiang Yanli smiled beatifically at him. Yes, that was definitely a headache coming on, “No-one will think anything of me remaining locked in my rooms and there’s a place we could sneak out the back on Sandu*.”

“I’d like to go too,” Jin ZiXuan blurted out. Jiang Cheng stopped resisting and finally put fingers to temples in order to massage out the developing headache, “I would like to apologise to him and clear up any misunderstandings.”

“Then would Madam Jin like to take care of A-Ling?” Jiang Yanli asked politely, looking at her mother-in-law.

A-Jie, Jiang Cheng thought incredulously, you’re just letting him come?

“Why don’t you take A-Ling with you?” Madam Jin said, “I’m sure Wei WuXian would like to see his Shizhi*.”

“Nephew,” Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli corrected in unison.

Giving up on all reason, Jiang Cheng dropped his head into his hands.

“Would it be safe?” Jiang Yanli asked in concern, “We are flying on swords, after all.”

“We might not be able to go very fast,” Jin ZiXuan said, “But I could carry A-Ling on Suihua* while brother-in-law brings you on Sandu.”

He’s actually considering this? Jiang Cheng thought.

“If you want to keep this secret, than perhaps a small ruse is required,” Madam Jin mused.

Jiang Cheng gave up. Apparently this was happening.

Sure enough, moments later Jiang Cheng stormed off snapping at a passing Jin that he’d be demanding answers from Jin GuangShan later and flew off on Sandu. Madam Jin requested a meal to be brought to Jiang Yanli’s rooms as the couple were finally reconciling and threatened anybody who’d dare interrupt. A while later, unnoticed, two figures on a single sword hovered slowly by Koi Tower. Another figure in purple and shining silver took one of the riders on the first sword and the remaining golden figure clutched a precious bundle to his chest as the three flew off towards Yunmeng and Yiling.

Chapter End Notes

*1 = Sandu is Jiang Cheng’s sword
*2 = Shizhi means martial nephew. Madam Jin was implying that the only relation was through Sect bonds. The Jiang siblings corrected her with the term for actual family-members (implying blood-relation or official adoption).
*3 = Suihua is Jin ZiXuan’s sword. In canon, Jin Ling wielded this sword. It’s said to be the only keepsake from his parents.

Headcanons:
JC’s messy head: JC and Wifi’s relationship has unfortunately developed all lopsided in various ways. Part of this is culture and hierarchy. Wifi is older and more skilled but he’s also lower in the hierarchy and JC’s subordinate. As mentioned last chapter, this resulted in Wifi doing a balancing act. On JC’s part he’s confronted with the fact that Wifi cannot legally or socially be accepted as his brother. It’s ‘not proper’. Madam Yu was also firm in boundaries that Wifi cannot ever be considered on JC’s level and therefore not his sibling. This had its effect on both of them. JY simply avoided referring to Wifi as her brother in her mother’s earshot but she’s firmer in these things than JC, as mentioned above. JC however loves and considers Wifi his brother (with a large dose of sibling rivalry and younger sibling envy) but is also denying that because he thinks it can’t be real.

I also believe that after getting his new golden core and finding Wifi missing made him supremely guilty. And, again, in denial about it. In this way, he’s like JF in that he doesn’t like to argue with loved ones over such emotional and hurtful things so he avoids it. This eventually builds up and, as seen in canon, is not healthy.

The Bell: If Wifi was so poor how did he get the money to buy silver for a bell? This is my belief that Wifi took his own bell, since he wasn’t and couldn’t be a part of YunmengJiang anymore, and repurposed it as a gift to Jin Ling. It also increased the sentimental value of the gift. In canon, I like to think that the bell Jin Ling has is Wifi’s gift and that’s why Wifi stared at it for so long when he first brought it out in Yi City. It’s too heartbreaking otherwise.

The Blame Game: In canon, LanlingJin were able to bury the whole assassination attempt thing under the reality that the Yiling Patriarch killed his shijie’s husband and their heir. Since no-one would be able to prove otherwise they claimed they hadn’t provoked him the way they did. Jin ZiXun was just asking to be freed from the curse and of course he brought a small escort with him! Jin ZiXuan was there to mediate but the Yiling Laozu just killed him in a cold-blood temper! In canon the LanlingJin made themselves out to be blameless victims. In this story since Jin ZiXuan refuses to go along with that ruse (ergo why he was confined to the tower) and Luo Yaling (from last chapter) has spread the truth around it’s a lot harder to claim victimhood.
Hi, so people were asking about the bell. I haven’t seen the entire animated series yet, I’ve been busy and, as faithful as it is compared to some other examples, it does take Artistic License Liberties. The visual impact of LWJ finding evidence of Wifi’s disappearance is one of them. Since I am primarily going off the novel, the bell headcanon purely came from there. That being said, I do intend to take the red eye thing (also something only from the donghua). Because I like it and I intend to pair it with the oppressive air Wifi does exude when angered in the novel.

But for the bell? I just preferred my headcanon to the one the animaters came up with. That’s all.

When Lan XiChen saw the pale worried face of his younger sworn brother, Jin GuangYao, he became worried. When he saw the stormy face of his elder sworn brother, Nie Mingjue, and said brother’s nervous younger sibling, Nie HuaiSang he was close to being alarmed. Lan XiChen immediately stood from where he’d been enjoying quiet after-meal talk with his uncle and younger brother.

“No, no,” Jin GuangYao said waving him down, “everyone here should hear this.”

“Hear what? Is something wrong?” Lan XiChen asked placing new spots for the three newcomers to sit. Lan Qiren greeted the three with stiff respect, and narrowed eyes in Nie HuaiSang’s case. Lan Wangji greeted them politely and didn’t object to Nie HuaiSang taking the seat closest to him.

“You could say that,” Nie Mingjue said harshly, “I suppose the rumours haven’t reached the Cloud Recesses yet.”

Lan Qiren huffed, “Rumours have no place here, only fact.”

“Well, these rumours are based on fact,” Nie Mingjue growled, “Tell them!”

Taking the order as if it were directed to him instead of Jin GuangYao, Nie HuaiSang blurted out: “LanlingJin tried to assassinate Wei-xiong*!”

“What?” Lan XiChen exclaimed before he could stop himself. In front of him, Lan XiChen could see Lan Wangji focussing intently on Nie HuaiSang. Lan XiChen could tell that this news had shocked and horrified his brother.

“Did they succeed?” Lan Wangji asked. His words were quick and Lan XiChen could tell he was anxious for the answer. Lan XiChen was also worried. He knew that his younger brother was fond of Wei WuXian and the younger boy’s attempts to befriend Lan Wangji had made Lan XiChen have many good feelings towards him. But after hearing about all those fights during the Sunshot Campaign, knowing that Lan Wangji was worried about the effect demonic cultivation was having on the man and his performance at the banquet prior to kidnapping the Wen prisoners of war, Lan
XiChen didn’t know what to think about the Yiling Patriarch anymore.

“We don’t know,” Jin GuangYao said, sighing, “The Ghost General carried him off after he received three arrows to the torso. The hundred-hole curse on Jin ZiXun is still intact, however so probably not.”

“What hundred-hole curse?” Lan XiChen asked at the same time Nie HuaiSang protested: “I don’t think he did that!”

“Sorry, Sect Leader Lan,” Nie HuaiSang said, glancing at him and shrinking under his brother’s disapproving frown, “Sometime ago, Jin ZiXun developed the hundred-hole curse and he thinks that Wei-xiong did it, but Wei-xiong doesn’t do things like that at all!”

“Wei WuXian did threaten him that time at the banquet,” Jin GuangYao reminded him, “Remember?”

“Wei-xiong talks tough but rarely would he go out and hurt someone so maliciously! He verbally traps and mocks people and he almost never throws the first hit in a fight!” Nie HuaiSang continued to insist. His words would sound more convincing if they weren’t said in such a meek tone. Clearly Nie HuaiSang had argued this already and didn’t think that anyone would believe him.

“He tortured Wen Chao, quite cruelly, I heard,” Nie Mingjue said. Contrary to his words and their place in the argument, he sounded quite pleased at the thought.

“He also started a brawl while he was here which lead to his removal from these Cloud Recesses,” Lan Qiren reminded, “Everyone agreed: that troublemaker threw the first punch.”

“Those are different cases!” Nie HuaiSang implored, “Wei-xiong would naturally want to take revenge on the person responsible for Lotus Pier’s destruction. Who would not? As for that fight, I was there also, Wei-xiong only punched Jin ZiXuan after he insulted Jiang Yanli and Jiang-xiong! Wei-xiong and Jiang-xiong adore Jiang Yanli more than anyone and all but worship the ground she walks on. After insulting Jiang-xiong to his face after that, it’s no wonder Wei-xiong lost his temper.”

“I agree with Nie HuaiSang,” Lan Wangji spoke up suddenly, everyone turned to him startled. No-one had expected him to speak up. Nie HuaiSang looked at him as if to a saviour, “Wei Ying only threatened Jin ZiXun to get the location. Afterwards, he most likely forgot about Jin ZiXun.”

“Right, right!” Nie HuaiSang was definitely relieved Lan Wangji had taken his side in this, “Wei-xiong always forgets about insults after the interaction is over! It takes something serious to stick in his memory, like insulting Young Madam Jin*.”

“En,” Lan Wangji agreed.

Lan XiChen was still doubtful, “I remember that banquet. Wei WuXian truly seemed very different to how I remember him when he was studying here. Very much changed.”

At the time it had seemed as if Wei WuXian’s very presence had brought a dark and ominous cloud. Only with his abrupt exit had the oppressive feeling dissipated. Not only that, but even before Wei WuXian’s clear threat by laying a hand on his flute, Lan XiChen could have sworn that Wei WuXian’s seemed to flicker red the way it’s said they do when he commands his undead army.

“I saw him briefly at Yiling after,” Lan Wangji said, “He was much more like the disciple who’d studied here than he’d been since the start of the Sunshot Campaign.”

“When?” Lan Qiren asked, outraged that his favourite student had crossed paths with his least-
“A while after,” Lan Wangji answered. Which didn’t answer anything. Lan XiChen almost wanted to gently scold his brother to use his words more but managed to refrain.

“So, we’ll presume for now that the origin of the curse is unknown,” Nie Mingjue said impatiently. Lan XiChen glanced at his oldest friend helplessly. Nie Mingjue and Jin GuangYao had never met Wei WuXian prior to him becoming the Yiling Patriarch and had no idea how jarring it had been for the rest of them to see such a cheerful, bright and talented disciple so changed. He’d become almost shrouded in shadows even when standing in direct sunlight. His expressions were no longer open cheerfulness but cold arrogance deeply cut in every feature.

In addition, Nie Mingjue could not understand why he’d taken control of the Wen Sect Remnants. During the Sunshot Campaign, the one’s who’d held the most wrath towards the Wen-dogs were Nie Mingjue, Jiang Wanyin and Wei WuXian. As such, joined in this camaraderie of hatred, Nie Mingjue had only good things to think of Wei WuXian, especially since Nie HuaiSang considered him a good friend. But issuing protection to the last of the Wen-dogs had Nie Mingjue baffled.

Jin GuangYao never held much opinion on the man himself. His practice of Demonic Cultivation had the clever man musing quite a lot and so, Jin GuangYao had voiced many varying opinions on that matter. But their user? Only that he was never outright rude to Jin GuangYao, though perhaps very abrupt and keen on verbal play. Jin GuangShan, however, had many opinions since the man wouldn’t submit the Stygian Tiger Seal to him and sprouted them in private frequently. The theft of the Wen Sect Remnants had also left Jin GuangYao unhappy as he could feel the loss of face of the LanlingJin Sect keenly.

“The rumour going around, originating from Yiling,” Nie Mingjue continued, primarily addressing Lan XiChen and gaining the man’s attention immediately as this was clearly the heart of the topic that had made the taller man so upset, “is that the LanlingJin Sect via Jin ZiXuan invited Wei WuXian to celebrate Jin ZiXuan’s son’s first month. But on the way there, in Qiongqi Path, they ambushed and tried to kill him. No-one’s seen him since.”

“Elder brother Jin says that Jin-xiong didn’t know about the murder attempt. Jin ZiXun just took advantage of the invitation,” Nie HuaiSang offered.

Lan XiChen couldn’t help but stare worriedly in Lan Wangji’s direction. Was he alright? The information just given seemed to have thrown him and with Wangji’s head down and staring at his hands, Lan XiChen wasn’t sure what that meant.

“It’s outrageous!” Nie Mingjue raged, slamming his fist down on the table, “Do you realise what they’re saying?” he demanded to Jin GuangYao. Nie Mingjue turned his voice into a clearly mocking tone before the younger man could answer, “Not even the Wen Sect were so horrible as to slaughter those they invited to celebrate the births of their children.” And you know what? They’re right! Not even Wen-dogs were so deceitful nor have they ever broken hospitality! If A-Sang’s right about Wei WuXian’s fondness for Madam Jiang than that’s even worse! They’d played on his affection for his shijie!”

Lan XiChen had to admit, that was all very damning. Playing on bonds like that was very despicable especially combined with an invitation. No doubt Nie Mingjue was also outraged by the fact that the rumours were right: LanlingJin had managed to do something so despicable that even Nie Mingjue’s most loathed adversaries hadn’t done it.

“How long ago was the attack?” Lan Wangji said. He seemed very abrupt to Lan XiChen and he frowned again at his brother before realising that the man was worried for Wei WuXian. Smiling
again at his brother’s kind heart he took a look at his uncle who appeared to want to tug off his beard with how hard he was tugging it. Lan Qiren was clearly deeply in thought.

“Over a week ago,” Nie Huaisang bemoaned.

“We only found out recently,” Nie Mingjue growled again glaring at the unusually silent Jin GuangYao, who shrank back, “through rumours and when this one was finally available to explain just what the hell was going on…”

Nie Mingjue stopped appearing too angry to speak. Jin GuangYao gulped and turned to Lan XiChen whose face was painted in concern. Jin GuangYao attempted to put on a shaky smile.

“I think we all need to be prepared,” Jin GuangYao said, licking his lips, “It’s very likely that if the Yiling Patriarch recovers from his wounds than he will retaliate and I don’t think anyone wants to reduce the Four Great Sects to Three Great Sects.”

“You think he will attempt to wipe out LanlingJin!” Lan XiChen exclaimed.

“He does have the highest kill count out of everybody who played a role in the Sunshot Campaign. Even eldest brother didn’t kill so many Wen’s and he had a three month head start,” Jin GuangYao reminded them. This was true. Nie Mingjue missed out on first place purely because he could not be in multiple places at once unlike Wei WuXian’s undead army.

“We cannot allow Wei WuXian to run amok and threaten the stability of the Four Great Sects,” Lan Qiren intoned.

“Even so, some retaliation is to be expected,” Jin GuangYao finally said, “This is not the kind of thing anyone would take lying down. Especially since Father has been sending raids into the Burial...
Everyone’s eyes widened at that. The audacity of such a thing! It was akin to attacking the head of a clan while he was travelling and then attacking his home while he was in his sickbed.

“Then aren’t you outright asking him to attack you?” Nie Mingjue burst out, “Your sect appears to be doing little else than provoking Wei WuXian! What is the purpose of doing that?”

Jin GuangYao cowered, “I advised Father to wait until we had confirmation of the Yiling Patriarch’s status one way or another but he wanted to strike while the iron was still hot. He believes that eliminating the dangerous elements on the Burial Mounds would be better sooner rather than later. In addition, who knows what Wei WuXian would have done when he came to Koi Tower? We had good reason to believe the Yiling Patriarch was responsible for Jin ZiXun’s curse. What else would he have done to the rest of us when he came to the celebration? It is known that he never liked Jin ZiXuan and had even threatened to kill him if he ever went near Jiang Yanli again during the Sunshot Campaign. Now, Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Yanli are married! Could Wei WuXian with his great affection for his shijie accept that? Could we just let danger near our sect heir?”

“Why did your sect invite him then?” Lan Qiren asked.

“We didn’t,” Jin GuangYao looked miserable, “Jin ZiXuan invited him without our knowledge. By the time we knew, Wei WuXian had already accepted. Jin ZiXuan loves Young Madam Jin and would do anything to make her happy. Young Madam Jin has long wished to see her shidi again so Jin ZiXuan invited him. Young Madam Jin and Wei WuXian are very affectionate to each other. They’ve even gone off walking alone together even though it was very improper. We tried to warn Jin ZiXuan but he wouldn’t listen."

Lan XiChen remembered that as well. The image of the black-clad man arm-in-arm with the more petite purple-clad woman walking off into the dark forest alone was brought to Lan XiChen’s mind.

“Young Madam Jin claimed Wei Ying was her younger brother, at that time,” Lan Wangji said.

“Surely she meant shidi?” Jin GuangYao asked, “I was too far away to hear properly but I believe I heard shidi.”

Lan Wangji shook his head, “Didi* not shidi.”

“Jiang-xiong and Wei-xiong did treat each other like brothers,” Nie HuaiSang jumped in, “They grew up together and the Jiang siblings probably consider Wei-xiong their brother and vice-versa.”

“That is still very improper,” Lan Qiren said, his tone disapproving, “They are not related. If it was Sect Leader Jiang, it would be another matter. Surely Young Madam Jin must have known how it looked.”

Judging by his brother’s minute expressions, Lan XiChen thinks his brother doesn’t agree.

“Didn’t the Yiling Patriarch only come to Lotus Pier at the age of ten? And he was fifteen when you studied with him here. Surely, such strong fraternal feelings between unrelated people require more time to grow?” Jin GuangYao said.

“How can anyone dictate feelings? They develop or they don’t. How quickly or how slowly – everything is different from person to person. We ourselves cannot even control how we feel,” Nie HuaiSang reasoned.

Lan Qiren gave a ‘harrumph’ at that, expression curling in distaste. Meanwhile, Nie Mingjue was
It’s just another thing we don’t know for sure,” he snapped, “It has nothing to do with the situation brewing now!”

“Is the barrier of walking corpses still intact?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Yes,” Jin GuangYao answered, “when we get passed those we encounter the Ghost General who is almost rabid. That creature has not been gentle. Already two of our number are missing limbs from him.”

“Would Wei Ying’s control over them be broken if he… died? Wouldn’t the walking corpse barrier disperse? If the walking corpses are still at their posts, does that not mean Wei Ying is still alive?” Lan Wangji pressed.

Lan XiChen felt his heart break a little for his brother. It was clear that Wangji was not willing to accept Wei WuXian’s possible death easily. He definitely wished for the younger man to still be alive which lead to his line of questioning and his hesitance before the word ‘died’. Which probably no-one had noticed. Lan XiChen looked at the other’s thoughtful and frowning faces and sighed mentally. Indeed, no-one had noticed.

“But surely if Wei-xiong is alive he would confront the intruders personally?” Nie HuaiSang said.

“En,” Lan Wangji said. Lan XiChen sighed internally. His brother had reverted to his previous typical responses.

“Then perhaps he has been too injured by the assassination attempt?” Nie HuaiSang suggested.

“It was not an assassination attempt,” Jin GuangYao insisted, “Jin ZiXun was only meant to ask the Yiling Patriarch to remove the curse.”

“With three hundred men?” Nie Minjue asked sarcastically. He and his brother had received the actual figures when they had journeyed to Koi Tower for answers and met up with Madam Jin. The Madam had taken vicious pleasure in informing the Nie brothers exactly what her son had told her.

Lan Wangji seemed to pale.

“Three hundred!” Lan XiChen exclaimed, “No wonder such a thing is considered an assassination attempt!”

“They all volunteered to help Jin ZiXun,” Jin GuangYao said weakly, “He’s very popular.”

“I don’t know why,” Nie HuaiSang said, seemingly unable to notice Lan Qiren’s disapproving look. Jin ZiXun thought Nie HuaiSang was a giant joke and often laughed at him in the past. Nie HuaiSang, for his part, could not understand how such an average person with average talent gained such arrogance and pride.

“Can he really be that injured still? It’s been over a week and he has the prodigious Wen Qing in his encampment,” Lan Qiren said.

“Even the best medics require medicine. It is possible that Maiden Wen is limited in what she can do for him,” Jin GuangYao said.

“Why would she not have medicine?” Lan XiChen asked in polite bafflement.
“How could she afford to buy any?” Jin GuangYao reasoned.

He paused and looked around before wilting. Everyone was looking at him in confusion or with blank, uncomprehending looks on their faces. Right, Jin GuangYao sometimes forgot. With these people, money was never an issue. Their medics always had medicine and if they needed more it was simply like it magically appeared for them. Why worry about where to get medicine or their next meal? It was simply something that was always available.

Rich people.

“How would the Wen Sect Remnants or Wei WuXian earn any money? With more than fifty people to feed they must be careful with what they have and medicine and the ingredients are expensive. Wen Qing may not be as effective due to lack of resources,” Jin GuangYao reasoned, holding in a sigh.

“I see,” Lan XiChen said, nodding.

“So, it’s likely that Wei WuXian is still seriously injured but probably not dead,” Nie Minjue summed up, trying to get past that awkwardness.

To Lan XiChen, Lan Wangji looked worried. He promised himself he’d comfort his brother when they were alone.

“Maybe he’s letting the Ghost General handle the raids while he’s planning something as well,” Jin GuangYao sighed, “Unfortunately, it’s not like we know what’s going on up there. We just have to prepare for retaliation as well as we can at this point.”

Lan XiChen frowned, worried for his sworn brother.

“Do you need any help?” he asked in concern.

“There should be a call for an emergency discussion conference soon to discuss this crisis,” Jin GuangYao said, smiling wanly, “I was going to contact you and eldest brother to warn you about it soon anyway. Eldest brother simply sped up my schedule.”

Nie Mingjue glared at him.

“In any case, and as nice as it was to see you, brother Lan, and the rest of you, I’m afraid I have a lot to do back at Koi Tower,” Jin GuangYao stood and bowed to them.

Immediately Lan XiChen stood also and offered to escort him out. Lan XiChen chided his younger sworn brother gently about overworking and watched in worry as he flew off on his sword. Sighing he turned around only to be greeted by the sight of his other sworn brother. In the distance, Lan XiChen could see Lan Qiren scolding Nie HuaiSang with Lan Wangji standing a little further away like a statue. Even from this distance Lan XiChen could see how lost in thought Wangji was.

“I don’t like this entire situation,” Nie Mingjue grumbled as he stood next to Lan XiChen, “But even I can see that just leaving the Yiling Patriarch with his Wen-dogs on top of that mountain without anything settled was just waiting for something to snap.”

Lan XiChen nodded slowly.

“Why did you bring your younger brother?” Lan XiChen asked. Nie Mingjue loved his brother dearly but few could see it through his harsh demeanour and brutal expectations. But bringing Nie HuaiSang in on something like this was strange.
“Because I trust his perceptions of Wei WuXian’s character over Meng Yao’s,” Nie Mingjue said bluntly, “More so now that I know your own brother agrees with him.”

That startled Lan XiChen and he looked at Nie Minjue in surprise, “Don’t you have your own perceptions? You have met Young Master Wei before.”

“Doesn’t count,” Nie Mingjue snorted before adding in response to Lan XiChen’s expression, “I know I jumped into the Sunshot Campaign as soon as it started, but Wei WuXian? He lost his entire sect and then was imprisoned in the Yiling Burial Mounds for three months. I don’t know much about demonic cultivation but I can hardly blame him for using whatever he could to survive that. But that kind of thing changes people. A-Sang tells me it changed Sect Leader Jiang. The loss of his parents, sect and having his, apparent pseudo brother, disappear? Sect Leader Jiang changed even if it may not have been as stark as Wei WuXian. Those changes are inevitable in such situations. Plus, everybody forgets that those two were still teenagers when that happened. I’ve met Sect Leader Jiang outside of war but not Wei WuXian. I can’t judge a person based on their actions in a grief-filled war.”

“I never thought of that,” Lan XiChen said, quietly ashamed. Nie Mingjue was always more perceptive than people gave him credit for. Lan XiChen always saw Wei WuXian and Jiang Wanyin as his peers as he saw his brother. Wei WuXian had kept up with Wangji so well in skill, it was like they were equals. Jiang Wanyin, even though he was a year younger than Wei WuXian, had always managed to keep pace with the other man and they had fought together flawlessly. But Lan XiChen had not forgotten Wangji's age; that, despite all of his brother's prodigious skill, he had still only been seventeen during the Sunshot campaign. Jiang Wanyin succeeded as Sect Leader, rebuilt his sect and fought in the Sunshot Campaign all at age sixteen. While Wei WuXian had been the same age as Wangji, the abilities and confidence he had shown, the casual power he had displayed, had made him seem much older than he really was. Looking back, those ages were almost intolerably young to go through such tragedies in such a short period of time.

“That’s also why I think they probably are as attached to each other as A-Sang thinks. Those two and Young Madam Jin,” Nie Mingjue continued.

“Even after their fight? I heard that Sect Leader Jiang stabbed Young Master Wei through the stomach and I saw his broken arm,” Lan XiChen said.

Nie Mingjue scoffed, “If I clapped my idiot brother about the head and tossed him out on his ass tomorrow and told him he couldn’t come back until he’d learned how to use his damned dao properly and he went off to go view musicals and other rot then got himself killed, wouldn’t I still be upset?”

“Brother…” Lan XiChen felt faintly amused at this scenario and yet… “You haven’t… actually thought of doing that, have you?”

“He really would go see frippery and then get himself killed refusing to fight the wrong man, probably over some woman too,” Nie Mingjue grumbled grumpily.

Lan XiChen didn’t know whether to laugh or sigh.

“But having your whole sect be wiped out? Those three were the only ones left. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if they became very attached to each other purely based on that. If anything, it just surprises me more that Wei WuXian left. Unless it was to give Sect Leader Jiang more independence…” Nie Mingjue was clearly considering this last thought.

“Even so, speculating will not get us anywhere,” Lan XiChen said.
“No,” Nie Mingjue agreed, “This is the calm before the storm, so button down the hatches and be prepared for anything. Those idiots kicked a hornet’s nest and who knows where or when they’re going to strike.”

Lan XiChen agreed with a smile he didn’t really feel. He watched as his elder sworn brother yelled at his brother so they could leave. But immediately after that he went to find Wangji. Their uncle had left to prepare lesson plans so Lan XiChen wandered around trying to find where his brother had gone. Eventually, Lan XiChen spotted him in front of their mother’s abandoned cottage, staring at the closed door and playing the guqin.

The tune was sweet but one Lan XiChen never heard before. He waited for Lan Wangji to finish but his brother suddenly stopped the strings, cutting off the song partway through. The motion was unusually harsh and Lan XiChen thinks he can see Wangji’s hands shake.

“Wangji?” Lan XiChen called out gently, “Everything alright?”

Wangji turned around and Lan XiChen immediately knew the answer. No, Lan Wangji was not alright. Lan XiChen has not seen his brother this lost since their mother died. Concerned, Lan XiChen immediately made his way over to stand next to his brother amongst the gentians and place a hand on his shoulder. Wangji leaned into it.

“What’s wrong? Is it about Young Master Wei? I’m sure he’ll be alright,” Lan XiChen said comforting.

Wangji nodded then shook his head in response.

“I…” Lan Wangji has always struggled with self-expression that does not come through music. Lan XiChen waited patiently.

“I… do not know what to do,” Lan Wangji finally said. Lan XiChen was right in thinking his brother looked lost but now he knew that his brother also felt helpless.

“I do not know if I will be welcome there,” Lan Wangji continued. Lan XiChen was confused. ‘There’? Where was ‘there’?

“Even if I were to go, is there anything I could possibly do for him?” Lan Wangji asked.

“’Him’? You mean Young Master Wei?”

“En.”

Lan XiChen was at a loss. He had known Wangji was fonder of Wei WuXian than he would admit but he’d never imagined such depth of feeling towards the free-spirited man. But Lan XiChen put that aside to meditate on later. Right now, his brother needs help.

“If you do not know what to do to help, than you should ask,” Lan XiChen said, “Sometimes, just knowing that someone is willing to be there and help you is what they need above all.”

For a moment, they waited while Lan Wangji turned that over in his head.

“Then, I will go to Yiling. Straight away,” Lan Wangji said, standing.

“What? Now?” Lan XiChen felt off-kilter at the sudden and speedy decision.

“En,” Lan Wangji confirmed, “I will bring money, in case he needs medicine.”
With that he immediately turned and headed for the Jingshi. Lan XiChen was stunned.

“Wouldn’t it be better in the morning? You won’t get there until tomorrow anyway if you leave now,” Lan XiChen protested, “You shouldn’t fly on your sword so far at night.”

“Going.”

Lan XiChen mentally cried at the unearthing of his younger brother’s stubborn nature.

“At least give me an hour or two to hand over responsibilities and I will go with you,” Lan XiChen said, rushing after Wangji.

Lan Wangji looked sideways at him, puzzled, “Why? Brother does not need to come.”

Because you are acting strangely!

“Everything is tense and about to erupt at the moment. It will be much better if we go together,” Lan XiChen added more firmness than he felt to his tone.

Lan Wangji’s forehead furrowed slightly, clearly unhappy with the potential delay.

“Please do not take long, brother,” Lan Wangji said finally.

“I’ll meet you at the Jingshi later,” Lan XiChen promised, happy his brother was being slightly more reasonable, “Don’t leave without me.”

With that he hurried off, forgetting to ask why this was so important to Lan Wangji.

Chapter End Notes

*1 xiong – it’s like calling someone bro. You call your male friends this. Nie HuaiSang calls them this because they studied together in Cloud Recesses. The three were good friends. Jin ZiXuan wasn’t but Nie HuaiSang doesn’t want to disrespect him.

*2 Young Madam Jin is Jiang Yanli. Since there’s already a Madam Jin, Jiang Yanli is referred to as Young Madam Jin.

*3 Didi – younger brother. I don’t actually know if that’s the term JY used as I can’t read Chinese.

Does everyone see JGY’s manipulations here? He’s very subtle and sounds so genuine so it’s interesting to write. He’s encouraging a lot of misinformation and having to compete with LWJ who wants more correct info about Wifi to be acknowledged. NHS wasn’t having any luck by himself until LWJ and his Power of Good Reputation joined in. Unfortunately, for all NHS’s cleverness he’s up against much stronger personalities. Ultimately, NHS and LWJ are on Wifi’s side with LQ and JGY against him and NMJ and LXC on the fence.

Also, as you can see, no matter what the three Jiang siblings feel, the public will never acknowledge Wifi as their sibling. All three are aware of this on varying levels and it's somewhat negatively affected how they approach their relationships to each other seen in Wifi and JC’s POV’s. This is seen in canon as well, Madam Jin thought it was highly improper for JY as an unmarried young woman to go walking alone with Wifi, as an unmarried young man. JY claimed he was her brother but the statement wasn’t
acknowledged by anyone. Also, compare how MJin wanted JZX to escort JY instead in her match-making schemes.

NMJ is shown to be very perceptive in canon, able to see through JGY when everyone else had difficulty. NHS is perhaps even more perceptive and doesn’t have NMJ’s temper holding him back. NHS sees which way the wind is blowing and doesn’t want his friend, someone who’s a genuinely kind person to be the cultivation world’s scapegoat. He couldn’t do anything in canon due to Wifi’s actions but here he can at least add a voice of reason.

I had an unholy vision of NHS as some kind of fusion between N. Italy and France from Hetalia while writing NMJ’s vision of his brother running amok, just with fans instead of roses…

Headcanon:
Not so much here and I’m not sure it counts but I don’t believe even the brother-reading machine knew that LW was in love with Wifi until the Nightless City. As good as he is, even he couldn’t know if LW tried to hide it from his perceptive brother. He knew LW was fonder than he let on but hadn’t realised how deep it had run until after LW had injured 33 elders.
The Great Upheaval

Chapter Notes

Right, for people who have been mentioning Xue Yang, Lan Jingyi and Mo XuanYu. I will be dealing with them buuuuuut… it’ll take a while. Lan Jingyi won’t enter into things until they’re teenagers at this point. Don’t worry though, he and Wei Sizhui will still be BroTP. Mo XuanYu might happen a little earlier. I need to figure out where he fits in the timeline. Xue Yang will be dealt with first… but not before Wifi’s shishu. I think CangSe SanRen’s shidi will be very interested in meeting her son.

As for Wifi’s golden core…. Yeah… he’s never getting one back. Part of the reasons I’m writing this story is to deal with the realities of resentful energy and its effect on demonic cultivators. In canon, everyone, particularly LWJ, have their own theories on its effects on Wifi. But Wifi, the only real expert, barely says anything on the subject. With Wifi’s proclivities on keeping secrets, I have so many ideas. But most tellingly? When Wifi comes back to life? He’s completely fine. Using resentful energy is completely fine. There is never any indication that he’ll go the same way as his original body did. WIFI never considers it a concern. Why? Probably because it never was. I’m of the opinion that WIFI’s death is not due to resentful energy. At least, not by accident.

Also, considering how many times people disbelieve WIFI when he’s telling the truth? Because they think they know better or simply automatically accuse him of doing something wrong? It’s possible he wasn’t completely lying when he says Demonic Cultivation isn’t a problem for him. It’s not damaging. He has inevitable hiccups because, reminder, he’s the first person to ever do something like this. How many scientists worked on trying to figure out a single field or study? Particularly after it was first discovered? How many times did Thomas Edison fail to make a lasting light bulb? Electricity was around for ages before then. WIFI makes some mistakes because mistakes are inevitable. Considering how much he experimented with and what he came up with in the time he had: he really proves that he’s a genius.

So, WIFI isn’t in danger of dying anytime soon. As for the whole aging thing? I’ve got a solution for that. Again, might take a while to get there though. Please be patient! I’ve declared this a slow burn and slow build for a reason.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Allright, alright! Settle down! Settle down!” A loud Uncle Second shouted over the murmurs, “Don’t make get in there and smack you, you know I will!”

There were titters of laughter at this but gradually the crowd started to find seats or places to stand. Wei WuXian had been seated at the start with a furiously hovering Wen Qing seated next to him. All the Wen Remnants were here squished into the largest hut available (which was definitely not large enough for all of them hence the communal hall talks). Even Wen Ning was here, taking a break from defending the border. He was at the entrance and would be using his undead ears to listen for any problems, prepared to run off to defend them if need be. He’d been the one to carry Wei WuXian into the hut, ignoring any protests Wei WuXian made, looking as worried as his necrotised facial muscles would let him.
Wei WuXian had to cut off any apologies the man had attempted to make, both for letting Wei WuXian get injured and for nearly attacking Jin ZiXuan. In that state, Wen Ning had to rely on Wei WuXian for judgement calls and Wei WuXian’s judgement had ended up being far more compromised than he’d realised. In the end, Wei WuXian had informed him to blame Jin ZiXun if they had to blame anyone. None of them would have been in the situation if Jin ZiXun hadn’t decided to instantly blame Wei WuXian for a crime he was innocent of and then refuse to listen to reason.

Wei WuXian had also managed to meet the brave Luo Yaling and her husband. They’d been two of the handful of Wen refugees who were fairly young. In fact, they were not much older than Wei WuXian. Wen Qing had told him about them. The couple had gotten married just before the Sunshot Campaign had started and had been on a honeymoon trip when Lotus Pier had been attacked. The two had received a note from the husband’s older brother to lay low until the entire thing had blown over. They’d stayed out of the entire campaign and then journeyed to Qishan after to meet with the rest of the husband’s family who were left. The brother had not been among them.

Luo Yaling had reminded Wei WuXian of his shijie a little with her gentle looks and quiet will. Her husband was stern-faced, yet his eyes were obviously filled with love when they looked upon his wife.

Sitting on Wei WuXian’s other side was Granny who was gently holding A-Yuan’s hand with her gnarled one. They were the only ones without a bow and quiver.

“Shut it!” Wen Qing finally snapped, standing.

Silence.

Wen Qing huffed and sat back down.

“Right,” Wei WuXian finally broke the silence, “First up, we really need to start building that communal hall so we’re not all crammed together like this. We’ll attach a kitchen and a wine cellar so we can have communal dinners whenever we want.”

“Hear, hear!” Uncle Four cheered. There was laughter.

“Is that really the most important thing to start off with?” Wen Qing snapped.

Wei WuXian looked around at the crowded and cramped area, “Feels like it.”

Wen Qing looked like she wanted to smack him but, admirably, restrained herself. She launched into the summary of what threats were currently facing them that Wen Qing and Wei WuXian spoke about before. Afterwards, there was an uneasy silence. Worried and frightened glances thrown about the room.

“Is there any way to get LanlingJin to back off?” A woman asked quietly.

“I thought removing us from the cultivation world and allowing memory to fade and rumours to die down would be enough, but that kind of thinking might have been a little naïve, in hindsight,” Wei WuXian sighed, rubbing his temples, “It’s also distinctly possible that they used Jin ZiXun’s curse as an excuse. Just like it’s possible that whoever cursed him intended to frame me from the start. I wouldn’t say Jin ZiXun is known for intelligence and he did seem to be brazenly trying to insult people to puff himself up. It’s possible he abused someone too far. That curse is too malicious and targeting the source of his pride: his vanity.”

“Well, his pride certainly can’t be his tiny…”
“Hey!” the woman next to him cut him off, scandalised, “There’s toddler here!”

The man coughed, looking at a confused A-Yuan sheepishly.

“You’ve met him?” Wei WuXian asked curiously.

“Only when he sent us to Qiongqi Path,” he said, “He really did swagger too much.”

“None of us,” another man cleared his throat before lowering his voice in embarrassment, “None of us were the ones who cursed him, but we can’t deny feeling a bit of schadenfreude over his predicament.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the more vocal members of the crowd.

“Office Leader said they’re attacking because of the threat of QishanWen right? What if there are no Wen’s here?”

“What do you mean? You’re all Wens, married into the clan or not,” Wei Wuxian said looking very confused.

There were a few looks thrown about the place before someone answered, “We’ll change our names. None of us will be called Wen.”

“We’ve been thinking about it for a while,” another man said while Wei WuXian was getting over his shock.

“Wen Ruohan has made our legacy into ashes. Our ancestors must be ashamed.”

Calls of agreement were made.

“We do have honourable ancestors but I can only hope they can forgive us for changing our name to honour other ancestors,” Someone said firmly.

Wei WuXian’s eyebrows had flown up to join his hairline. It was clear to him that they had been thinking on this for a while. Now he was suspicious of Luo Yaling insisting on keeping her name.

As if reading his mind Luo Yaling’s husband spoke up.

“Or those we married,” his voice seemed unnecessarily stern, “I have already decided to take my wife’s name. From this day forward I will be known as Luo Chen.”

There were cheers and calls of congratulations. Without getting an answer to their initial question they eagerly started announcing new names for themselves. One by one they stood up and announced that they were taking their mother’s maiden surname or their late honoured sister- or daughter-in-law. One man stood and declared that he was taking the surname of his best friend who had been killed during the Sunshot Campaign.

Wei WuXian observed all this in affectionate bemusement. He turned to Wen Qing who looked exasperated with her relative’s enthusiasm.

“At this point I don’t think it matters whether it helps with the situation or not, they seem to be going ahead with this anyway,” Wei WuXian said to her. Wen Qing sighed.

Still, Wei WuXian was surprised at how energetic they were regarding this topic. By changing their names they’ve essentially changed their history and uprooted themselves. As the son of a servant and a rogue cultivator like CangSe SanRen, Wei WuXian didn’t have much family history. But he knew
by heart what little he’d been able to recover, even if it was just rumours about his mother’s teacher and her other disciples. He also knew that his shijie and Jiang Cheng could recite almost every generation of Jiang’s all the up to the first Sect Leader. Even in Gusu, Lan Qiren had easily recited his ancestry’s greatest accomplishments. Given that the stories had been quite interesting despite Lan Qiren’s droning, Wei WuXian remembered those parts of the lessons best. Particularly when he amused himself by trying to figure out Lan Wangji’s reactions to these ancestors of his.

It appears these people’s determination to make new lives for themselves extended to all parts of their existence. And yet Wei WuXian noticed that, even like this, they still chose to honour those they loved. Family members and spouses and dear friends. They were still, in their own way, hanging onto the concept of ‘family’.

“So, what do I call you now, Wen Qing?” Wei WuXian asked.

“I don’t know,” Wen Qing said. Her shoulders slumped, “our mother was also a Wen, on the other side of the family tree; very distantly related to Father. Granny doesn’t remember her maiden name anymore and we don’t know our cousin’s wife’s maiden name either. So, A-Yuan’s is up in the air too. Although…”

“Although?” Wei WuXian prodded.

“Young Master Wei,” a creaky voice said with an aged hand touching his elbow. Wei WuXian turned to look at Granny.

“Yes, Granny?” Wei WuXian said before remembering how this woman used to always be so afraid of him her old, creaky legs would shake, “Can I call you Granny?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling. A-Yuan looked at both of them curiously, trying to understand what’s going on, “We’ve noticed how fond you are of our A-Yuan. And, unfortunately, you were right. I’m too old to keep up with such a young child, even one as well-behaved as A-Yuan. He needs a parent. Someone who will look after him properly. You’ve done such a good job so far. We were wondering if you were willing to adopt him.”

“Adopt him?” Wei WuXian said, feeling faint.

“It means,” Wen Qing said around the shocked Wei WuXian, “that Wei WuXian would become your parent. That you would become Wei WuXian’s son. You’d introduce yourself as Wei Yuan. Would you like that?”

“Yes!” A-Yuan looked happy. It was like a sucker-punch to the gut and almost made Wei WuXian want to cry.

“Yes!” A-Yuan echoed, nose scrunched in confusion at the new word.

“It means,” Wen Qing said around the shocked Wei WuXian, “that Wei WuXian would become your parent. That you would become Wei WuXian’s son. You’d introduce yourself as Wei Yuan. Would you like that?”

“Are you sure?” Wei WuXian asked, “I’m not sure I’d be a good parent. I’ve already lost A-Yuan already in that market and gotten him into dangerous situations. I mean, I’m public enemy number one right now. Everyone says my maturity level matches that of a child’s and…”

“Wei WuXian,” Wen Qing interrupted, “I’ve seen worse parents than you. You care. You try. There are people called ‘parents’ out there who don’t even do that much. That you’re even considering these things, even though I know you want this, speaks for how much you care. You’ve already been parenting him, this would just make it official.”

“You don’t want me?” A-Yuan said, trying to muffle the tears already trailing down his face.
“I do. I do!” Wei WuXian blurted out, picking up A-Yuan and placing him on his lap for cuddling. Thankfully, the child hugged him back.

How could Wei WuXian begin to explain? Actually becoming the official parent of A-Yuan was simply too good to be true! How could he so easily accept something so grand?

Helplessly he looked at Granny and then Wen Qing. Granny had an encouraging look on her wizened face. Wen Qing had an expression of wistfulness instead. Finally, he looked back down at the sticky child on his lap.

“A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian said gently, only continuing when the child met his eyes, “Would you really like to become my son? You can’t ever take it back.”

“Yes!” A-Yuan said, “I want to be Xian-gege’s son.”

“OK,” Wei WuXian swallowed, wondering if he was letting A-Yuan make a big mistake but too selfish now that it had been dangled in front of him for so long, “Wei Yuan, then. My son.”

Suddenly cheers erupted in front of him and Wei WuXian startled, realising everyone had been surreptitiously watching them for a while. A-Yuan buried his face in Wei WuXian’s chest and squeezed him as tight as he could. Wei WuXian reciprocated the hug automatically.

Wen Qing laughed softly and leaned over to her nephew, “You’ll have to stop calling him gege now that he’s your parent, A-Yuan.”

“Understand,” A-Yuan mumbled.

An idea bloomed inside Wei WuXian’s head. It was a slow, careful unfurling of each petal. He glanced at the doorway where Wen Ning was standing. He got the feeling the fierce corpse was smiling. Something to think about.

“Even if we did inform them about there being no Wen’s on this mountain that’s not enough. Not to get them to leave us alone,” Wei WuXian said.

“Don’t they get the concept of ‘if you leave us alone; we’ll leave you alone’? What’s the point of trying to poke at us?”

“We haven’t done anything and neither has Young Master Wei before all this happened and they still attacked us!”

“Sometimes the only way you can get someone to leave you alone is to force them to.”

“What? Scare them off? How?”

“Or prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you won’t be taking any of their shit lying down!”

“We can’t do that! None of us have that kind of power!”

“I do.”

Everyone quieted down at that point, turning towards Wei WuXian, the owner of the last voice.

He simply sat there holding A-Yuan in his lap. To everyone who could see him clearly, he looked tired in a bone-deep weary way. It reminded everyone that he had been on his death-bed only a week ago and had only woken up yesterday.
Despite this, not a single person doubted his words.

His gaze was weary but it was also firm. In the silence, everybody was reminded of the man’s weighty presence. Everybody had always been aware of the ominous and slightly sinister air around Wei WuXian. But they had gotten used to it. In fact, on the Burial Mounds where everything was infused with resentful energy, they had simply adapted to it like it was background noise. Unknown to all of them except, perhaps, for Wen Qing and Wei WuXian, by eating food grown on the Burial Mounds, they had adapted astonishingly quickly to living in a place with such density of resentful energy. Thereby allowing them to adapt to Wei WuXian’s unsettling aura in a way few had been able to do since he’d developed it.

Even without that, this was still the man who’d been the source of their nightmares before becoming their protector. They knew, far better than his former allies, who’d been drunk and high from ‘their’ victories and thus easily able to block out the realities of Wei WuXian’s actions during the Sunshot Campaign, exactly how dangerous he was and how much damage he was capable of all on his own.

Wei WuXian’s cheerful, easy nature had soothed them over time. His close friendship for the highly respected and adored Wen Qing also helped. The proud woman was never once afraid of him and had frequently treated him not much differently than her own brother. Which meant referring to him frequently as an idiot and occasionally hitting or throwing something at him.

After two years of such a thing, they realised that this was how the feared Yiling Patriarch truly was. When angered, yes, he was as vengeful and rightly feared as a wraith. But normally? Cheerful, friendly, laid-back, easy-going, someone who loved to laugh and make others laugh. He was the kind of person who let most things slide off his back, taking offence at very little and not for very long.

Unlike the rest of the cultivation world who saw a man simply mastering a new ability that was too heretical for normal people to contemplate and grew arrogant with it, they saw someone who’d lived through things that would have killed a normal man, who’d managed to tame an energy that had never before seen a master who still lived.

To them, Wei WuXian’s lethal, dangerous nature would never have emerged nor been refined if it had not been for the actions of Wen Chao and his father. In the end, the Wen Clan had truly reaped what they had sown. Not just for Wei WuXian either. Nie Mingjue’s battlefield fervour, for example, had been a direct result of Wen RuoHan’s actions.

Wei WuXian had been contemplating a different matter entirely. After losing his temper at Langya and his shijie recovering slightly from the incident, Jiang Yanli had taken him aside and gently scolded him. He should not, she had explained, tell someone he would kill them unless he wanted people to think that he really would kill them, particularly in their current wartime situation and with the way people viewed him. He’d tried to explain that it was just tough talk and not to be taken too seriously but Jiang Yanli had just shaken her head.

"Maybe that’s true for boys and teenage boys at that. I know you’re still a teenager, and so is A-Cheng, but we don’t have that luxury of being children anymore. Everything we say is taken seriously. We’re in the adult’s world now, A-Xian, what we do and say can’t be brushed off anymore as children’s games."

Wei WuXian had been panicked then as his shijie’s already reddened eyes welled up with tears again, lamenting that her younger brothers had grown up far too fast. Wei WuXian quickly promised her that he would take more care with his words and he had.

Except when they’re directed at Jiang Cheng. But that wasn’t tough talk; that was two siblings play-
threatening with each other. Besides, Jiang Cheng needed someone to argue with like that to unwind. All of his disciples took him too seriously. But it had hammered in what Jiang Yanli had said. After all, even though Wei WuXian had always known Jiang Cheng would be sect leader – and a damn good one at that – he’d always expected Jiang Cheng to be older. It was strange watching men so much older defer to a sixteen year old, even if it was Jiang Cheng.

Plus, in the past two years, he and Wen Qing had spoken of many things, including how Wen RuohAn kept his overly-large clan under control. If Wen RuohAn said he would punish so-and-so in this way if they disobeyed him… then that would be exactly what would happen. Wen RuohAn ensured it to use as a warning to everybody else. It was the extreme version of this logic that lead to Lotus Pier’s demise.

As loath as Wei WuXian was to use any of Wen RuohAn’s tactics, this one just might make everyone back off if he made himself seem reasonable enough. Wei WuXian was no Wen RuohAn. Wen RuohAn enjoyed causing pain and had thought Nie Mingjue’s father’s death as amusing. No one could rightfully claim that Wei WuXian killed indiscriminately or tortured others for amusement.

“The question is: how to do it?” Wei WuXian continued.

“We’d need a spectacle,” Wen Qing said in the stunned, thoughtful silence, “The best way to ensure any message gets heard properly is to have the largest and most relevant audience hear it.”

“Like a Discussion Conference?” Someone called from the back.

“Yes,” Wei WuXian mused, “exactly like that.”

“Would you need that army of corpses?” a man asked, tossing his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the uninhabited part of the mountain. This was where most of the half-buried or completely unburied bodies were on the Burial Mounds. It was a veritable sea of bones and rotting flesh. Luckily, the wind swept the other way avoiding their settlement and the town below.

“No,” Wei WuXian smiled, “I’m only going there to politely request they back off. Or else. Politely means no armies, I’m afraid. Wen Ning should come however, and Wen Qing, if she would like.”

Wen Qing nodded firmly. She would come.

“Well, if you need a spectacle than you need better clothes,” a petite woman said firmly. She eyed him like she was trying to get his measurements through sight alone, “Clothes make the man, they say. If someone could get me some good material, I can sew in protections. I can make something for all three of you. Co-ordinating outfits to make you look magnificent and intimidating. Something to match the most lauded and ethereal of cultivators but with that demonic cultivator air. Mostly black with some jewel-bright red, I think. To match Chenqing.”

“I can try and find some material if you tell me what you need,” Luo Yaling said, leaning forward. The tiny woman nodded thoughtfully and they started conferring. Wei WuXian made a mental note to talk to that seamstress about her sewn in protections. Half the reason he stopped wearing YunmengJiang purple was because the protections interacted oddly with his demonic cultivation.

“We need horses,” Wen Qing sighed, “Turning up on foot would be too humble. There’s only one cultivation sword here. A carriage is too pretentious. Horses would be best.”

The Burial Mounds had managed to trade in to receive some chickens and a couple of working donkeys but that was it.

“No, we have the finances for that as well as the cloth?” someone asked.
“No,” Wen Qing sighed. Horses were expensive.

“I might have an idea,” Wei WuXian said, “But I don’t know if it’s workable. But we’ll try to raise money anyway. If worst comes to worst, we’ll have to hire horses for the day. Maybe. Just focus on the clothes for now.”

“If Wen Qing’s going, I managed to save some nice hair ornaments,” a woman said.

“If we’re going to tell them there’s no Wens here then we’ll need a document detailing the names and ages of the people here. That way we can prove all of you aren’t going to revitalise the QishanWen Sect,” Wei WuXian said.

“I’m a calligrapher,” a thin man offered, “I’ve done official documents before. Some quality paper and good ink and brush and I can make something nice they won’t overlook that you can give to them.”

“Me too,” the man next to him said, “We can make a copy for each of the Four Great Sects, maybe. More proof the better, right?”

“Oh,” someone cleared their throat, “About the sect thing…”

Noise died down as everybody tried to surreptitiously watch Wei WuXian from the corner of their eyes. To Wei WuXian’s amusement, they were just as effective as A-Yuan trying to hide the paint stains.

“Considering what we were just talking about, I’m surprised by your eagerness,” Wei WuXian said.

“QishanWen is an entirely different thing,” a very large man known for his predominant limp said. Wei WuXian couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“Becoming a Sect Leader and establishing a Sect is no small matter and that’s without all the other challenges we have. The cultivation world doesn’t seem willing to allow us to become a Sect. We are lacking in potential students. Those people with their signs and whatever else that run around the bottom of my mountain? I will never teach them Demonic Cultivation. Demonic Cultivation itself…” Wei WuXian tugged at his hair in frustration, “If I were willing to teach it, it would only be to students whose values and attitudes I can trust. Of which currently number zero. Maybe A-Yuan in the future. Long, long in the future.”

“That’s fine,” Uncle Four said, “Why does it need to be established now? We deal with the current threats and when we have breathing room, you can go out and search for potential disciples. Screen them yourself. It can be established when you’re ready. At least you’re thinking about it. We understand it’s not a simple matter or decision.”

There were murmurs of agreement around the hut. Wei WuXian smiled at them, warm feelings dawning in his chest.

“About potential students,” Wen Qing said thoughtfully, “I’ve been thinking about it since talking to you yesterday. Why don’t you find children like you?”

“Children like me?” Wei WuXian asked, “Are you calling me a child?”

“Before former Sect Leader Jiang found you,” Wen Qing elaborated, “How many children out there, without means, opportunity or even birth status, are capable of being cultivators but never get the chance? How much potential is the current system of clan-based sects and societal structure wasting?”
Wei WuXian considered that. If Jiang Fengmian never found him… If he was lucky he’d be an adult beggar perhaps one playing the flute in return for a few coins. Not every rogue cultivator’s children were so lucky to be looked out for by someone with a more secure position. Then there were Jin GuangShan’s copious amounts of bastard children he never acknowledged. Wei WuXian wasn’t so ignorant as to think the Jin Sect Leader was the only cultivator who abandoned his bastards either. Since social hierarchy ensured illegitimate children were so low it’s unlikely for them to ever rise very high. Most female bastards often ended up in brothels. Jin GuangYao’s situation was one in a billion chance. Even then, he’d always face people who’d throw his courtesan mother in his face.

If someone had the ability, the values and the will – why can’t Wei WuXian provide the means?

“I think you might be more heretical than me,” Wei WuXian told Wen Qing, “It’s a good idea. I’d be searching for gold in the dirt at night but going for quality over quantity wouldn’t be a bad thing. Even so, the final decision will have to wait until this mess is finished up with. Anything else to add? Everyone know what we’re going to do?”

“If anyone needs materials from town please give me a list,” Luo Yaling said firmly, clapping her hands.

“We’ll make more Spirit Attraction Flags and Demon Wind Compasses to sell,” a man said.

“Same with the medicine,” someone called from the back, “The herbs are coming in nicely since we started growing them in pots.”

“I’ll need to measure Young Master Wei, Office Leader and A-Ning. Then I’ll draw up some design ideas,” the petite woman – Chang? – said.

“Everybody turn in your name and age to me so I can start making those documents. I’ll make official adoption papers for A-Yuan too,” the reedy man said.

“I’ll start mixing up ink then,” another man laughed.

“I started making calligraphy brushes some time ago if you want to look at them,” an older woman offered.

“I need to check your bandages,” Wen Qing said.

“I think I can make up some good quality paper even without all the resources,” someone considered.

“And I’ll make sure no one starves,” the big, limping man said, laughing.

“And I’ll check my distilleries!” Uncle Four said rubbing his hands together with a grin.

“Is that really important?” Wen Qing asked in exasperation.

“Of course!” Uncle Four laughed, “If you three pull this off, we’ll need to celebrate!”

“Alcohol’s always important, Wen Qing!” Wei WuXian agreed.

“Shut up!”

With that everyone got up to leave, chuckling and talking animatedly to each other.

Eventually, the only ones left were Granny, A-Yuan, Wen Qing, Wen Ning and Wei WuXian.
Wei WuXian leaned back a little. He was contemplating the blooming idea he had before. It wasn’t the sort of idea he needed to think about. It was the kind of idea he needed to feel. A part of him wanted to bring it up now but a larger part of him hesitated. It wouldn’t be fair to Jiang Yanli or Jiang Cheng. It would only be an offer. They wouldn’t have to accept.

He thought of Wen Ning and his quiet and meek, yet determinedly kind nature. He thought of Wen Qing who was the kind of healer who would tie you to your sickbed if it meant you’d rest and heal. He thought of Granny and the way she’d done everything she could to protect A-Yuan even if it meant blocking potential blows with her own frail body.

He thought of how A-Yuan looked so happy when he said he wanted to be Wei WuXian’s son.

A big decision.

Wei WuXian would have to think about it.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think he wants to do? *winks*

Headcanons:

Not much of a headcanon but come on, it was totally Jin ZiXun’s fault as much as it was JGY’s and SS’s.

There is a good explanation for why Wen Ning attacked JZX that time, but the full, deeper explanation won’t happen for a couple of chapters. In the meantime, I’ve given tiny hints in the first chap and here.

Granny: I fully believe that she’s actually A-Yuan’s great-grandmother (but now everyone just calls her Granny as the eldest). WQ calls her Granny when she first sees her and mentions later that A-Yuan’s parents are her cousins.

Tough talk: I really wanted to deal with this habit of Wifi’s especially since whatever Wifi threatens next won’t be tough talk anymore. It’ll be warnings. As far as I can see, Wifi’s ‘tough talk’ has gotten him into trouble. It’s a bad habit especially with the power and reputation he has now. He needs to be aware that people will take him seriously if he says “I’ll wipe out your whole clan” in comparison to Xue Yang who hadn’t been taken seriously at all… and yet actually went and did it once he got the means.

Wifi’s sinister aura: this should be elaborated on later. But come on, all that resentful energy? Every time there’s a place or object full of resentful energy mentioned in canon, it has an oppressive presence. Well, so does Wifi. This is detrimental to him as it effects how people perceive him and his actions, but now he plans to use it to his advantage. He doesn’t have it when he’s incarnated into MXY… which I have headcanons about. I’ll elaborate… later.
You know, initially, I wanted to do the reunion all in one big chapter so I can move on to the next bit because I'm really looking forward to it. Then I actually outlined what I wanted to happen while this overly large group is there. Then I wrote this chapter and realised, nope, I'm not even going to be able to get past the greeting.

So enjoy part 1 of 3 reunion chapters (possibly stretching out to four).

“Gentle, Qing-jie. Be gentle with me – Ahh!”

“Hold still,” Wen Qing snapped at Wei WuXian. At least Wei WuXian was getting better if he had the energy to make jokes and tease. He kept pretending to be an innocent maiden wanting to protect his non-existent dignity and virtue while Wen Qing was checking his wounds.

The wounds themselves were small in area but very deep. They had not been behaving normally at all. Wei WuXian had also reacted to them oddly. This was not the first time. When Wei WuXian had been injured before – during the fight with Jiang Cheng and when Wen Ning awoke – Wen Qing had noticed that his injuries had been unusual. Despite his lack of spiritual energy, he did not heal as slow as those without a golden core.

It was inconsistent. He got an infection, which he would not have gotten with properly circulating spiritual energy. He healed about as fast as a traditional cultivator left with no proper treatment apart from herbal remedies. There was no infection left now even though by this time there should still be lingering symptoms. Even Wei WuXian’s wounds were inconsistent. The deepest part of the most worrying wound, the one that nearly nicked his lung, was healing rapidly. In comparison, the injuries closer to the surface had barely healed at all!

It appeared that even without trying, Wei WuXian managed to make Wen Qing want to strangle him out of aggravation. Wounds should not work like this!

Not only that, Wen Qing had ensured Wei WuXian would only be unconscious for two days. She didn’t have the medicine to put him under for longer. By all rights he should have woken up within a day after she stopped drugging him. Yet he hadn’t. He’d burned through a fever ridiculously quickly and had woken up about 24 hours after his fever had broken.

Not that Wen Qing didn’t have an idea of what was causing this. From the very first wound, Wen Qing had noticed the resentful energy within Wei WuXian’s body behaving strangely. Any healer would have removed the resentful energy and push their own spiritual energy in to heal him. Wen Qing was not any healer. She had no need to boast that she was the best healer – because she was the best healer. Attempting to remove or hinder the resentful energy in Wei WuXian’s body in any way would have only made things worse for him.

But she was left more helpless than she’d been since she was an apprentice healer. All she could do was provide medicine and monitor the resentful energy. From what Wen Qing could gather, the resentful energy had helped him heal – to an extent. It had clearly prioritised on the infection and
more serious wounds and left barely any for the parts of the injuries closer to the surface. The resentful energy had been what had kept Wei WuXian knocked out, so it could heal as rapidly as possible without wasting energy on letting him wake.

Even after waking, Wei WuXian slept longer than he usually did and was tired faster. But now even that was lessening. The wounds still looked bad, like they’d barely scabbed over and they would open if Wei WuXian did something stupid like attempt to draw a bow. But deeper inside he was almost completely healed.

The pain had been concerning (after Wen Qing had gotten Wei WuXian to admit it) but after some investigation Wen Qing believed that it was due to the rapid and unusual healing. He was feeling sore due to the how deep the healing was and possibly due to how aggressive the resentful energy had been eliminating the infection. It would fade fairly quickly.

Wen Qing and Wei WuXian had theorised that resentful energy could be used for healing, at least oneself. However, their careful experiments had not made much progress. As Wei WuXian had confided to Wen Qing, resentful energy did not seem to flow or work the way spiritual energy did. It was like being back in the beginning, trying to figure out how to heal but this time without teachers, books or examples to work from.

The resentful energy had seemed to work by instinct, which, yes, made sense. But just because it could burn through an infection did not mean it would not be more helpful if he was able to prevent one happening in the first place!

“Shut up,” Wen Qing ordered him, “Just because you’re sore doesn’t mean you’re not mostly fine. But if you open these wounds, so help me, I will immobilise you on that bed. Not a word!”

Wei WuXian closed his mouth and tried to look innocent. It didn’t work.

After some contemplation, Wen Qing had made medicine out of the herb plants they’d initially tried to grow in Burial Mound soil. The resentful energy absorbed by these plants meant they couldn’t be used as medicine for the average person so they couldn’t be sold. The medicinal herbs had to be grown in pots with soil from outside the mountain to be viable. But Wen Qing theorised that the resentful energy would probably help Wei WuXian more than harm him and so had made the medicine just for him. Thankfully, this experiment seemed to work.

Normally, Wen Qing would resent becoming one person’s personal medic. But not only did Wei WuXian require someone of her expertise to aid him in his body’s minute alterations but the mystery and challenge was enough to hold her attention. It helped that Wei WuXian was nothing like anyone else who had ever tried to convince Wen Qing to exclusively serve them. Wei WuXian actually encouraged her to go out and use her skills on others. He’d been the one to bring the case of living corpses to her attention. Wen Qing never had to worry about being monopolised. She’d never thought he’d do so. Becoming his personal medic had been a natural progression and had essentially been her choice.

That didn’t make Wei WuXian any less of an annoying patient though.

“You can get up when the bandages are on properly. Not yet!” Grumbling, Wen Qing carefully checked that the bandages were tight enough before she started trying to tie them. Before she was finished, however, A-Yuan’s shouting distracted them.

“A-Niang!”

“Has that boy started calling me mother?” Wei WuXian asked. He wasn’t sure whether to be
indignant or amused.

“It suits you,” Wen Qing told him patting his cheek condescendingly. Wei WuXian went to answer back when they caught sight of the toddler running and crying up the mountain trail to the cave’s entrance. Immediately, they became alarmed.

“A-Niang! A bad man is here!”

“What?”

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A little while ago at the base of the Burial Mounds...

It was hard to say who was more surprised: the white-clad Lans or the gold and purple Jin-Jiang foursome.

Jiang Cheng and Jin ZiXuan were arguing about how to get past the barrier of swaying corpses. They’d all been so prepared for finding Wei WuXian that they had completely forgotten that they had as much chance of getting past the barrier as Jin GuangShan’s malicious raids. Jiang Yanli was trying to calculate mentally exactly what she needed to make her praised soup for 50+ people while absentmindedly waving a toy for her baby not unlike one would for a cat.

This was what the Twin Jades of Lan walked into.

“What,” Jiang Cheng growled out, breaking from his argument with his, ugh, brother-in-law, “are you two doing here?”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang Yanli said before anyone could respond. Jiang Cheng visibly restrained himself at his sister’s unspoken request. It was not unlike what the man they had come to see had done at Phoenix Mountain. Everyone felt their respect rise at this woman who could tame two of the most temperamental and dangerous men of their generation just by using their name.

Truly, a formidable woman, they all thought.

“But we are curious to your presence here, Zewu-jun, Hunguang-jun,” Jiang Yanli said, smiling. If her arms had not been full, she would have saluted the two men.

“We have recently found out about the attack on Wei-gongzi*,” Lan XiChen said, “We were concerned about him. Particularly Wangji.”

Lan Wangji gave his brother an imperceptible look. As far as he was concerned, Lan XiChen did not have to point that out.

Jiang Wanyin and Jin ZiXuan gave doubtful looks. They had front-row seats to many of Lan Wangji and Wei WuXian’s arguments, brawls and Lan Wangji’s punishments in Cloud Recesses. Jiang Yanli, who had mostly heard of Lan Wangji through Wei WuXian, had a different opinion and smiled even brighter at the second jade.

“A-Xian will be happy to hear that,” she said.

Lan XiChen made a note to himself to give Nie Mingjue a bit more credit when it came to predicting people. As soon as he saw Jiang Cheng he realised that his sworn brother had been completely
correct regarding the relationship between the Yiling Patriarch and the Jiang siblings.

Jin ZiXuan crossed his arms and gave a suspicious look to Lan XiChen. He knew that Jin GuangYao had a not insignificant role in the attempted assassination and he did not want any of this getting back to that smiling man. They might be half-siblings but, to Jin ZiXuan, Jin GuangYao was still mostly a stranger. One entirely devoted to their father at that. As Jin ZiXuan grew older he became uncomfortably more aware of his father’s many shortcomings. This last, he’ll be polite and say fiasco, was the most egregious example. Did no one see how close to disaster this was for LanlingJin? Not necessarily due to the Yiling Patriarch, but due to the loss of trust and a developing bad reputation from their actions. Jin ZiXuan still didn’t believe the Sect was out of danger yet.

But Jin ZiXuan’s wife and son – and their extended family – came first.

“You can’t say anything about this to anyone,” Jin ZiXuan said firmly, “Not even your relatives or sworn brothers. Especially GuangYao.”

“Why not A-Yao?” Lan XiChen said at a loss. He looked taken aback.

“Because, if you think for one second he won’t tell Father, you really are foolish. And in case you haven’t noticed? All this was done with Father’s blessing,” Jin ZiXuan glared at them, “So, if you don’t intend to keep your mouth shut, you can get lost.”

Jiang Cheng looked at him in surprise and grudging respect. Unlike Wei WuXian, Jiang Cheng had actually been around while the Jin was courting his sister so he didn’t dislike the man as much as he had when they were younger. But most of this goodwill was still only brought on by how happy Jin ZiXuan made Jiang Yanli.

“We will not,” Lan Wangji said giving another look to his brother. Lan XiChen agreed. He was still unsure about why suspicion was cast upon his younger sworn brother but he would never break his word nor upset Wangji by being prevented from seeing Wei WuXian.

“Why can you not go upon your swords?” Lan Wangji asked.

“If we go too low, the corpses jump at us. If we go higher than there is a barrier of resentful energy,” Jiang Cheng said impatiently, “We cannot get in without Wei WuXian’s help.”

Lan Wangji frowned minutely. Last time he had flown straight into the Burial Mound’s settlement. But he had been carrying Wei WuXian who had been in a hurry. Was it possible that Wei WuXian had allowed him through? Could he replicate it?

“Last time I was able to fly through. But I was carrying Wei Ying as well.”

“When were you here?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“A while ago,” Lan Wangji answered which did not answer anything.

Lan XiChen, noticing Jiang Cheng’s anger, hurriedly asked if there was any way to contact someone inside.

“We could yell, I suppose,” Jiang Cheng said. No one was sure whether or not he was being sarcastic. Jiang Yanli merely smiled.

“Excuse me?” a soft voice called out.

They turned around. The woman who called out was wearing peasant’s clothing and carrying a great
deal of shopping. She had delicate features and smiled sweetly, if nervously, at them.

Luo Yaling had been watching for a while. She’d hidden herself behind a convenient tree and listened. If it had just been the two in purple she would not have hidden herself but the golden one had made her wary. She’d been about to reveal herself anyway when the two Lans had appeared. She’d recognised that one of them must have been the man who’d visited and helped them the day Wen Ning had woken. After hearing the Jin man speak she had become convinced and had simply needed to steel herself.

“My name is Luo Yaling,” she said bowing, “I live on the Burial Mounds under the protection of Yiling Laozu*. I can get you inside, if you like.”

“I thought everyone who lived here was a Wen,” Jiang Cheng said suspiciously.

“I married Wen Chen,” Luo Yaling replied, “These days, however, he has taken my name. So, it is Luo Chen now. He has no wish to be associated with people such as Wen RuoHan and his sons.”

Luo Yaling peaked at the purple Sect Leader. This was a perfect test to see if changing their names would have any effect on people. Everyone knew how Jiang Wanyin hated the Wen clan for what they did to his family and Sect. Jiang Wanyin looked almost constipated as he tried to work through how he felt about that. Rather quickly, he decided he didn’t care because they didn’t know how that idiot was doing yet.


“He’s doing fine, as far as I know,” Luo Yaling said reassuringly, “Wen Qing has been hovering almost non-stop. Apparently there was some issue with his healing but I think it’s resolved now. He’s been complaining about wanting to move around now.”

“At issue?” Lan XiChen asked. He had enjoyed learning to heal and would have pursued it further had it not been for his duties as Sect Leader.

“I don’t know anything about it, I’m afraid,” Luo Yaling said. She pointed further down the corpse line away from the road leading to the town of Yiling from the Burial Mounds, “If you could follow me, Wen Ning lets me in over this way.”

She set off and, with some furtive looks at each other, the colourful group followed. Each had their own thoughts and worries whirling in their heads. Finally, Jin ZiXuan could take his curiosity and apprehension no more.

“Forgive me, but I wish to ask something rude,” he said.

“What is it?” Luo Yaling asked.

“You said your husband does not wish to be associated with Wen RuoHan or his sons. May this one ask what role he had during the Sunshot Campaign then?”

“None,” Luo Yaling said, “We did not participate.”

A collections of exclamations followed.

“But I thought that the only people living here were the prisoners of war who had followed Wei WuXian from Qiongqi path,” said Lan XiChen. Luo Yaling turned, frowning slightly.

“We are.”
“Then, if you did not participate in the Sunshot Campaign, how did you become a prisoner of war?” Jiang Cheng asked frowning. Something was fishy here.

“We had only just been married and were travelling when the Sunshot Campaign began. We had received a message from my older brother-in-law to stay away until everything had been resolved. We had not been near any part of the Campaign or anywhere the Wen Clan might be. We pretended to have lost messages from my husband’s superiors who wished to order him back. After everything was over and we found out that the surviving members had been banished to a small part of Qishan, we travelled to meet them. My husband hoped to see his older brother there but no one knew what had happened to him. My husband and I were among the cultivators who were night-hunting with Wen Ning when Jin ZiXun tried to bully us into becoming bait with Wei-laozu’s Spirit-Attracting Flag’s. We refused and Jin ZiXun had captured us and sent us to Qiongqi path.”

Luo Yaling looked at them and, with a sinking feeling, realised that they had no idea about what happened to the thousand-or-so people who’d been ‘left free to live in Qishan’ after the Sunshot Campaign. They all looked shocked. Even Lan Wangji’s eyes had become wider. The two Lan’s could vaguely remember Wei WuXian saying something like this at the interrupted banquet but it had quickly become overshadowed by everything else and so they had not given it much thought.

“After everything was over, groups from us living in Qishan kept disappearing. We had no idea what was happening. Sometimes we’d find a body but mostly they just disappeared. We thought that maybe they’d left to make themselves a new life but it didn’t make sense that they didn’t tell anyone. When we arrived as prisoners and slave labour to Qiongqi path we realised that everyone had been taken to places like that. Even mother’s with their babes and the elderly. Jin-gongzi, aren’t you the heir to LanlingJin? Did you really not know how your sect treated us?”

“No,” Jin ZiXuan said quietly. He felt ashamed that such behaviour had taken place under his nose and he had never noticed… or cared to notice, “I did not.”

“There were roughly a thousand of us living in Qishan after the Campaign. There are none there now. We sent messengers after settling here, hoping to see certain relatives, particularly the children, but the messengers came back and said no-one was there. There are only about fifty people living on the Burial Mounds. Where do you think the other 950 people are?”

None of them knew. None of them had cared. Lan Wangji had done a bit of investigation after Wei WuXian’s actions but he had been stonewalled by LanlingJin and busy with his own duties. The number of people who had gone missing was staggering to them. Particularly the realisation that a lot of them probably had been children. Naturally in the Sunshot Campaign, killing children was not something to be done so, whenever possible, children had been sent to live with the remains of the QishanWen Sect. If they were missing…

The implications were not good at all.

Luo Yaling led them to a place along the corpse line that did not noticeably look different than anywhere else and called out. In less than a minute the Ghost General came and made his way through the corpse barrier. He stopped and stared at the guests before bowing clumsily and greeting them all by name.

This was the first time Lan XiChen had seen the infamous Ghost General. He was surprised. Apart from the minor matter of being a corpse, he was exactly like a person. The way he moved was stiff but it was the same formal motions anyone would greet with. He spoke and looked at them with clarity though he held an air akin to a dog expecting to be kicked.

“Is this your son, Young Madam Jin?” Wen Ning asked.
“Yes,” Jiang Yanli said smiling, “This is Jin Ling.”

She approached Wen Ning but he backpedalled quickly. A soft light began to glow among the baby’s wrappings.

“He has Wei-gongzi’s gift. I’m glad. Wei-gongzi will be overjoyed,” Wen Ning said, “If you had taken out the bell, you would have gotten through the barrier easily.”

“Oh,” Jiang Yanli said in surprise, “I did not think of that.”

“I should have thought of that,” Jin ZiXuan said almost at the same time.

“Would it work for the whole group Wen Ning?” Luo Yaling asked.

Wen Ning shook his head, “Perhaps only Young Madam Jin, her son and one other person. The others will have to be taken in one by one.”

“Perhaps we should co-ordinate, Wen-gongzi,” Jiang Yanli said, “I will take someone over with the bell and leave A-Ling over there and come back for the others?”

“The bell only has a limited charge of energy. It will need to be recharged by Wei-gongzi eventually. But I think that it will be alright,” Wen Ning said shyly. He was grateful for his lack of stutter as a corpse. Jiang Yanli’s kindness reminded Wen Ning of Wei WuXian when he isn’t being teasing.

Wen Ning curled his arm protectively around Luo Yaling who held her shopping as tightly as she could. Wen Ning let out a faint roar when he approached the corpses and they scattered before him. Jiang Yanli extracted her son’s bell and gave it to Jin ZiXuan and they went through together. The small family looked ethereal surrounded by silver light.

Jin ZiXuan convinced his wife to stay with Jin Ling while he went back for her brother and Wen Ning came back for the Lan Wangji. Lan XiChen was convinced to walk through with Jiang Wanyin and Jin ZiXuan.

“I heard you were attacking every cultivator that came past,” Lan XiChen said.

“Yes,” Wen Ning said trailing behind Luo Yaling who led the way up the mountain to the flatter parts where their relatives had built their houses, “I could not let anyone pass who would hurt someone. Especially, when Wei-gongzi was unable to deal with them himself. It was not hard. As soon as the ones who got past the barrier see me, they attack.”

“I see,” Lan XiChen said thoughtfully.

“How are Wei WuXian’s injuries?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

“He had three arrows to the back that were jostled when I carried him back here at a run. One was deep enough that nearly nicked his lung. The arrows were successfully removed and sister kept him unconscious for a while so he wouldn’t set back his recovery but he’s mostly fine now,” Wen Ning’s summary was succinct and only delivered facts. It was indicative of his past as a nurse and assistant to his sister, “Sister has been monitoring him in case something goes wrong which includes not letting him do much.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Jiang Yanli sighed in relief.

Lan XiChen had a slight smile on his face which was not unusual. When everyone developed theories about Wei WuXian’s absence, none had thought that he might be forced on bed rest by
doctor’s orders. He could see Lan Wangji had calmed down now too. Something struck him then.

“I was not aware that Wei-gongzi had been struck to the back,” Lan XiChen said. Hadn’t Jin GuangYao said the front?

“It was to the back. He’d been standing side on to the archers but put his back to them when Wen Ning almost struck me. They took advantage of Wen Ning being out of position and Wei WuXian not noticing him. They shot him then,” Jin ZiXuan said.

They neared the start of the small fields that had been worked on. Everyone looked at the land work in amazement. Jiang Cheng had visited prior to any major work and Lan Wangji had been too distracted and it had been too dark for him to really see.

“Jin-gongzi,” Wen Ning started before being cut off.

A small child, only a toddler had been running toward them calling for ‘Aunt Luo’ and ‘Uncle’. Upon sighting them though the child stopped running. His small face turned pale and he immediately whimpered. The child looked terrified!

Before anyone could react, the child turned tail and ran screaming for his mother.

“Oh no,” Luo Yaling moaned clutching her face, “I didn’t think…”

“What happened?” Lan XiChen said alarmed.

“We didn’t think he would remember,” Wen Ning said, “He was so small.”

“Remember what?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “Isn’t that the small child who clung to people’s legs?”

“Yes,” Luo Yaling sighed, “He still has the occasional nightmare of his time at Qiongqi Path, particularly recently since Wei-laozu has been injured. He never remembers the details though so none of us thought to ask Jin-gongzi to change or cover his sect clothes. We adults understand that Jin-gongzi can’t be that bad if he’s been let inside but a child doesn’t have that rationality.”

“He was afraid of me?” Jin ZiXuan asked in shock pressing a hand to the embroidered peony on his clothes.

“What was a child that young doing at a labour prison?” Jiang Yanli asked in horror.

Before anyone could answer, a black figure appeared on the path and they were struck silent by the ominous pressure brought with it. Wei WuXian’s clothes had not been put on properly. Only one sleeve was filled with the other drifting behind. This exposed his shoulder and the worn, loose bandages wrapped around his torso. It gave nothing comical or undignified to the man however. All of them were struck by the furious snarl on his face, glowing red eyes and purposeful stride.

When Wei WuXian got a good look at them though, he stopped walking.

“JIN ZIXUAN! IT’S JUST YOU?” he roared. He threw up his hands and looked to the sky before whirling around and stalking back the way he came.

The entire group were left silent.

“I… think that means you can continue,” Luo Yaling said hesitantly, “Though perhaps we should find you a cloak, just in case.”

Jin ZiXuan sighed, “I have one. We used it to sneak up here. We just didn’t think I’d need it after
arriving.”

“Please forgive A-Yuan, Jin-gongzi,” Luo Yaling said, “He was only about a year old when we were under LanlingJin’s control.”

Something in him twisted at that and he looked at his son in his wife’s arms, “Its fine,” he muttered. Jiang Yanli gave his hand a squeeze and looked at him with worry. He squeezed back and put the cloak on, covering his golden clothes.

People began coming out to see the visitors. The Jin heir and Lan Sect Leader could not help but look around at the refugees. Neither had been quite sure what they had been expecting but it hadn’t been this.

A small woman, younger than most of the seniors surrounding them, closer to Luo Yaling and Jiang Yanli’s ages came up to them. Luo Yaling handed off one of her parcels. The woman made a pleased sound and walked away muttering numbers and talking about cross-stitches under her breath. Luo Yaling kept handing out parcels to people, including one that had what looked like feathers poking out of it. The one she gave it to, was a boy who looked about fifteen who already seemed to have had a broken nose that had healed crooked. He looked at them warily and ran off once he had the feathers.

Apart from the toddler, he was the youngest one they’d seen.

“There’s no children here,” Jiang Yanli observed, “Apart from that toddler and that teen.”

“No,” Wen Ning said, quietly, “We don’t know what happened to the others. That teenager was not a Wen. He hid a teenage girl called Wen Shijing but they found out and so they took them both to Qiongqi Path. Those two are quite close now. They wish to marry one day.”

‘They’ naturally meant LanlingJin but Wen Ning felt it was better not to say so. It was unneeded anyway. Everyone understood who he meant.

Luo Yaling’s husband came and she went with him saying goodbye. He was a taller stern-faced man who looked like he’d aged quickly despite having a golden core, albeit a weak one.

Wen Ning continued to lead them up to the Demon-slaughtering cave, quickly sharing the joke Wei WuXian made about it.

“I think he thought it was ridiculous how everyone seemed to assume he’d do sinister things just because he’s a demonic cultivator,” Wen Ning said.


Wen Ning attempted to smile at her.

Wei WuXian came into their eyesight. His clothes had been fixed and he was holding the child letting him clutch at the man’s neck. He was murmuring to the toddler and waved at them when he saw them. The anger that they had seen before was gone leaving those unfamiliar with Wei WuXian’s temper with whiplash.

“Look A-Yuan!” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, “Remember Brother Rich? He bought you all those toys that time and spoiled you rotten!”

He turned the child around so he could see Lan Wangji.

“Hello,” the child sniffed, blinking up at Lan Wangji with a child’s large eyes. The child – A-Yuan – turned back to Wei WuXian and said almost sulkily: “And I’m not.”

“Not what?” Wei WuXian asked, lips quirked in amusement.

“Rotten!”

“Yes, you are,” Wei WuXian said, clearly teasing, “Lan Zhan bought you so many toys it’s made you go bad. We’ll have to bury you to get you to become good again.”

At this A-Yuan’s eyes widened, “No burying!” he yelled. Wei WuXian laughed.

“Then you have to apologise to Jin ZiXuan for screaming at the sight of him. I know his face is unsightly but that’s no reason to cause a ruckus.”

“Hey,” Jin ZiXuan objected. He subsided somewhat when he heard Jiang Yanli giggle. But then he grew annoyed again when he heard the rare sound of Jiang Cheng’s laugh.

“But he’s…” A-Yuan trailed off, unable to put his feelings into words with his limited vocabulary.

“Related to some bad people,” Wei WuXian said gently. His face held a soft expression rarely seen. It was completely genuine care and regard for the child. It struck his audience hard as most of them had never seen him like that. Lan Wangji stared in fascination and barely hidden yearning at the sight he’d only seen when the three of them had dinner before.

“That’s not his fault. Remember when I told you about my shijie? She’s the best woman in the world and she loves him so he can’t be a bad person. And he tried to help me before so I wouldn’t get hurt.”

“He failed,” A-Yuan mumbled.

“That’s not his fault either. Just because you try something doesn’t mean you’ll succeed. But trying is better than doing nothing. OK?”

The toddler nodded. He turned his head towards Jin ZiXuan and mumbled, “I’m sorry. I thought you were one of the bad men.”

“That’s ok,” Jin ZiXuan said, feeling his heart break a little, “My father is one of the bad men but I won’t let him come here. I’ll try and prevent all the bad men in gold from coming here. That way you can meet some good men in gold instead.”

A-Yuan blinked up at him and nodded. Despite A-Yuan’s agreement it was clear the toddler didn’t believe him. Wei WuXian smiled at Jin ZiXuan however, nodding to him in thanks.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, A-Xian?” Jiang Yanli said, smiling at the child her brother was clearly so fond of.

Wei WuXian laughed, “I’ve missed you shijie. This is my son Wei Yuan, formerly Wen Yuan. I adopted him only recently. A-Yuan, this is my shijie, Jiang Yanli and her husband is Jin ZiXuan and this is their son, Jin Ling.”

“Your son, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said lighting up in happiness for her brother. Jiang Cheng stared at the boy, his mind and feelings in turmoil.
“A-Niang, he’s really small!” A-Yuan exclaimed.

Never mind, Jiang Cheng thought. He burst out laughing. Beside him, Jin ZiXuan choked on his laughter and Jiang Yanli buried her face into her son’s wrappings to muffle her own. Lan XiChen clapped a hand over his mouth to hide his mirthful smile. Lan Wangji, on the other hand, seemed moments away from getting caught in a daydream. Though to everyone, he was simply staring at the child without changing his expression.

“You were that small once too, A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian said, ignoring their mirth, “And are you really going to call me A-Niang?”

“Aunt said that I can’t call you gege anymore,” A-Yuan said, “and you do all the things you and Granny say a mother does.”

“Weren’t you the one who said calling me Mum would be weird?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Just is.”

“A toddler’s logic,” Wei WuXian sighed, “You’ll probably be embarrassed about this when you’re older. And what’s the married couple laughing about? You’ll have to deal with this kind of logic in a year or two.”

“Somehow, I don’t think I have to worry about my son referring to me as anything other than his father,” Jin ZiXuan retorted.

“Hello, A-Yuan,” Jiang Yanli said, smiling at her new nephew, “If you’re calling A-Xian, Mum, than you can call me Yima* and my husband Yifu*. This is my younger brother, Jiang Cheng. You can call him Jiujiu*.”

“You’re just going with it?” Jin ZiXuan asked.

“I’m fairly sure we’re educating him wrong,” Lan XiChen said faintly.

“Does this mean we can teach A-Ling to call Wei WuXian, yima?” Jiang Cheng asked in sadistic delight.

“Absolutely not,” Jin ZiXuan said, “If it’s not shishu* than it’ll be dajiu*.”

“You are having too much fun with this,” Wei WuXian complained to Jiang Cheng before turning to Lan Wangji, “Lan Zhan, they’re bullying me. You’ll make them stop, right?”


“And finally, this is Brother Rich’s older brother, Lan XiChen. You have to call him Sect Leader Lan,” Wei WuXian said. A-Yuan waved.

“Can I ask what you’re doing here, Sect Leader Lan?” Wei WuXian asked.

Lan XiChen smiled. He noticed that Wei WuXian didn’t ask Lan Wangji this question. He also noticed throughout the previous interaction that everybody seemed to accept Wei WuXian’s connections to the Jiang siblings as if he were blood-related.
“We recently heard about what happened at Qiongqi Path,” Lan XiChen said. The mood turned more sombre, “Wangji was worried since no one had heard whether or not you survived or how injured you were. I am glad you seem to be alright. Perhaps, if it would not trouble you, can I ask what happened and what you intend to do now?”

“Are you alright?” Jin ZiXuan asked, “It went by so quickly but those arrows seemed to be deep and Wen Ning said one nearly got to your lung.”

“She’s mostly healed now but what A-Ning told you is correct.”

“Why has it taken so long to heal?” Lan Wangji asked. Wen Qing made a face, “His body is atypical now thanks to demonic cultivation. That means I have to go slower and more cautiously when healing him. It also took a while to make up the specific medicine for him as well which also delayed the completion of his treatment. I do not have the most potent herbs. He’s relatively fine now. Though he still needs to rest.”

“I will, I will,” Wei WuXian shifted A-Yuan so he could wave a hand dismissively at her. Unspoken went his gratefulness to her for the explanation.

Their audience collectively frowned, wondering what effects demonic cultivation had on Wei WuXian’s body that hindered normal healing.

Lan Wangji, in particular, had to hold himself back from asking Wei WuXian to give up demonic cultivation once again. It was difficult. The knowledge that demonic cultivation had clearly affected the man in negative ways was alarming. But Lan Wangji knew that Wei WuXian would only brush it off and become angry when it was pushed. So, with great difficulty, Lan Wangji did not say anything.

This was new territory for Lan Wangji. Normally he struggled with saying things. Now he was struggling with withholding words.

Most people, when faced with unexpected new things did not like them. In this case, Lan Wangji was no different. This was not the first time he had experienced something new thanks to Wei WuXian. But he was unwilling for Wei WuXian to leave his sight just yet. So, he retrained himself for now.

“Do you have to be somewhere anytime soon?” Wei WuXian asked.

There was a chorus of negatives. Everyone had taken some time off because they had had no idea how long they would stay.

“Then why don’t you stay for dinner?” Wei WuXian said brightly, “Lan Zhan! Last time you left but this time you have to stay for the meal since I forgot to pay last time.”

“Wei WuXian,” Wen Qing tried to hiss at him. They couldn’t feed all these people who were
probably used to much better fare than what the Wen Remnants had available.

“That’s a wonderful idea, A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli was equally as bright as her elder younger brother. “I’ve already been calculating what amounts I’ll need to make my soup for everyone here and I’ve brought some money to buy any extra ingredients.”

“Really?” Wei WuXian was delighted.

“Your soup was really, really good! Uncle brought us some,” A-Yuan chimed in.

“You’ll need to talk to Granny,” Wei WuXian said, “While we wait, I can answer your questions Sect Leader Lan.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Lan XiChen said earnestly, “I only hope we aren’t putting you out too much. But Wangji did bring some money after it was pointed out to us that you no longer have the same access to medicine as before. Perhaps we could contribute by helping to pay for ingredients?”

“Oh, it will be no trouble at all Sect Leader Lan!” Jiang Yanli said.

The people with less sunny personalities just stood around while decisions were made for them. Wen Qing twitched before hitting Wei WuXian’s head with a karate-chop.

“Ow!”

“Would you let me fix your bandages now? They’re not leaving anytime soon, so sit down!”

“Qing-jie… be gentle with me…”

Chapter End Notes

1* Gongzi = young master. Used for all young men.
2* Laozu = Patriarch.
3* Yima = Mum’s older sister
4* Yifu = Mum’s sister’s husband
5* Jiujiu = Mum’s brother (older or younger). This is what JL calls JC.
6* Shishu – Sect uncle
7* Dajiu = Mum’s brother who is the eldest boy.

Demonic Cultivation:
Yay! I’ve worked in my first mystery! To quote Wifi: Spiritual energy is energy; resentful energy is energy as well. Yeah, but that doesn’t mean it’ll work the same way. Yes, resentful energy can be used to heal Wifi but that doesn’t mean WQ and Wifi know how.

Also, for WQ’s healing compared to what LWJ always tries to do. LWJ always just transfers spiritual energy. This boosts the patient’s (I.E. Wifi) spiritual energy to circulate and repair the damage themselves. WQ on the other hand is an actual healer. She can use her own spiritual energy on even non-cultivators and still grant them miraculous healing.

She can’t use this on Wifi though. Resentful energy and spiritual energy don’t interact
well, especially inside someone’s body. She can’t remove the resentful energy either because it’s too engrained into his body and soul. This would actually horrify and sicken a normal healing cultivator. WQ just goes with it.

Headercanons:

Wei Yuan’s fear: trauma builds up to phobia. A-Yuan’s young enough that he’ll get over it compared to Wifi’s cynophobia. He doesn’t actively remember Qiongqi Path. But like someone instinctively knows fire hurts if you touch it, he instinctively knows people who look like that are bad and hurt people. The clothes act as a trigger.

Wen Sect’s disappearance: As mentioned before the Wen Survivors all disappeared. What happened to them is never answered in the story so this is my interpretation. No one had noticed because no one had cared. LanlingJin had been given responsibility for the remains of QishanWen and the prisoners of war due to proximity and the fact that QishanWen had not attacked them the way they had the other major sects so it was thought they would be the most impartial. This also meant that the survivors had no one to turn to for help. WQ was one person able to slip through LanlingJin’s guard to find Wifi, who she believed would be the only person willing to help, at least for WN’s sake.

A-Niang: This is in no way meant to allude to a gay relationship or the stereotypical roles of one. It’s simply amusing. As A-Yuan doesn’t have an example of a nuclear family within the Burial Mounds he’s going with the explanations he’s been given of what a ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are like. Since they knew he didn’t have RL examples people told him lots of different things and feelings associated with them but didn’t think to tell him the obvious that mothers are female parents and fathers are male parents.
“I’ll sit, I’ll sit!” Wei WuXian yelped, “You don’t have to abuse me so.”

“You should listen to your doctor, A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said.

“Yes, listen to your doctor,” Wen Qing agrees, tugging on Wei WuXian’s collar.

“Hang on,” Wei WuXian said exasperated. He couldn’t sit down while holding his son. His son. Even though it had been nearly a full day since his adoption, Wei WuXian still felt a surge of surrealism at something he had certainly never expected to have. Goodness, next thing you’d know and Wei WuXian might get married and add a daughter to his son.

However, when Wei WuXian looked at A-Yuan, he realised that the boy was clearly still too uncomfortable to let go. Thinking quickly, Wei WuXian turned to Lan Wangji.

“Lan Zhan! Here,” before the other man could respond, Wei WuXian pushed A-Yuan into his chest. Just as Wei WuXian predicted, Lan Wangji instinctively raised his arms to hold the toddler. Wei WuXian imagined he could see hints of bewilderment on the man’s impassive face at the sudden turn of events.

“No, no Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian scolded lightly, grinning at the sight, “Move your arms like this. It’s much more comfortable for both of you like that, right A-Yuan?”

The toddler nodded obediently, turning to put his arms around Lan Wangji. Wei WuXian had initially thought it would be funny seeing Lan Zhan holding a toddler, something Wei WuXian doubted he’d ever done before. Instead they looked absolutely adorable.

“Hello,” A-Yuan said to Lan Wangji.

“Mm,” said Lan Wangji. Lan XiChen beside him wanted to coo at the sight of the toddler and his precious younger brother staring at and speaking so blandly to each other. Seeing that neither were going to continue talking Lan XiChen decided to ask him a question.

“When were you adopted, A-Yuan?”

“The day after A-Niang woke up,” A-Yuan said.

“When did Wei Ying wake?” Lan Wangji asked, seizing the chance to ask this question.

“A while ago,” A-Yuan answered. To a toddler two days before was indeed ‘a while ago’.

“…” Lan Wangji felt this did not answer the question at all.

Meanwhile, Wen Ning offered to lead Jiang Yanli to Granny who kept the books where they recorded everything. Granny would know how much food they had so Jiang Yanli could figure out how much needed to be bought. Jin ZiXuan decided to accompany his wife. Before they left however, Jiang Yanli gave her son to her brother to hold.

Wei WuXian had to resist laughing. Between Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng, it was Jiang Cheng who looked far more uncomfortable holding a child. Despite this, when Jin Ling attempted to smack his
uncle’s face with his hand, Jiang Cheng just grabbed and held it. Wei WuXian resisted the urge to exclaim over this. Two adorable images in one go!

“Poor Sect Leader Lan is the only one without a ‘bundle of joy’ to hold,” Wen Qing murmured in his ear while undoing his upper shirt to get to his bandages.

“He’s so bereft,” Wei WuXian whispered back, trying to resist laughing.

“Wei-gongzi?” Lan XiChen asked in confusion.

“Yes, Sect Leader Lan?” Wei WuXian said with an innocence no one believed.

“You were going to tell us about what happened?” Lan XiChen prodded.

“Right – ow!”

“Don’t mind me,” Wen Qing said, tugging on his bandages.

Wei WuXian grumbled but started to explain, “We only noticed something was wrong when we realised how few people were walking in Qiongqi Path…”

Downhill, Wen Ning showed the couple the way to his grandmother’s house. When he was certain he was out of his master’s earshot he stopped and turned to Jin ZiXuan.

“Jin-gongzi, I wish to apologise for my actions in Qiongqi Path,” Wen Ning said. He bowed to the surprised man, “I nearly killed you by accident. If my attack had connected…”

Jin ZiXuan grew uncomfortable. While he was aware that he was no more unkillable than the next man, the idea that he might have died at that time was still a foreign concept to him. The idea of leaving his wife so soon after marrying her, of leaving his son so soon after his birth or of dying before he could succeed his father as Sect Leader was unthinkable to him. To have come so close to dying without even realising until after was a feeling Jin ZiXuan did not like but would not forget in a hurry.

“Wen-gongzi, why did you attack my husband? You said it was an accident. Did you mistake him for Jin ZiXun?” Jiang Yanli asked. Her voice was gentle and unaccusing but that only made Wen Ning feel more ashamed.

“It was not that I mistook him for someone else; it was that I did not recognise him at all,” Wen Ning said, “There were so many that I let go of most of my consciousness so that I could react faster. When I am like that I recognise no one, not even sister. I have nothing but instinct. But I am tied to Wei-gongzi as my master. He is the only one I recognise and his words are the only ones I hear. Everyone else are nothing but bodies to me. All other voices are nothing but white noise. My only intent and orders were to protect my master. I did not hear your words and did not know who you were and had no conscious to recollect that my master, and myself, would never want you killed. All I knew was that someone with aggression in their body-language – a threat – was too close to my master for him to adequately dodge. So, I attempted to remove the threat. And so, I nearly killed the one person there that was not a threat to Wei-gongzi.”

Wen Ning bowed again, “I am truly sorry.”

The Jin couple were stunned. They naturally had no idea what it was like for Wen Ning as a conscious fierce corpse. Jin ZiXuan thought back to that time and, yes, he had been so angry at that time, but he hadn’t wanted to seriously hurt Wei WuXian. But if Wen Ning couldn’t tell the difference, especially since he was also occupied keeping away the legitimate threats than naturally,
he would react badly.

To be honest, Jin ZiXuan was surprised that he’d so readily received an apology. He’d expected to point out his own danger in order to get even an acknowledgement from Wei WuXian. He hadn’t expected to get such a sincere apology and regret from a dead man no one had really considered a person.

“There was no harm done to me,” Jin ZiXuan said, sighing, “And now I know not to go near Wei WuXian when you are like that.”

Wen Ning hesitated, wondering if he should correct Jin ZiXuan. Considering what happened before he decided he should.

“Wei-gongzi is not so defenceless even without corpses or a weapon. In such a tense situation and angered… it would not be a good idea to get close to Wei-gongzi anyway. He doesn’t lose his mind the way I do, but when pushed, demonic cultivation has given him his own defences and attacks. He just prefers not to use them. They can be cruel to the recipient and Wei-gongzi is not the kind of person who would want to cause unnecessary pain. Plus, they’ll probably just make everyone fear him even more.”

“Then why did he develop them?”

“He did not know the effects until after he tried them on a living person. They are very effective on walking corpses and Wei-gongzi developed them when he was trapped here,” Wen Ning gestured around him.

“I see,” Jin ZiXuan murmured, trying to wrap his head around that.

Jiang Yanli had a concern, “Wen-gongzi, what did you mean when you claimed A-Xian was your master? A-Xian prefers friends over servants. I cannot ever imagine him being comfortable with such a distinction.”

“Wei-gongzi has always been a good friend to me and sister,” Wen Ning wanted to smile at her, “Madam Jiang is right, he isn’t comfortable with it. It’s not like I call him such. But it is the best description of the bond between us.”

“Bond?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Wen Ning said, “But it’s something I chose, I think, when I first became conscious after my death. It as not just because Wei-gongzi had been the one to raise me or bring my consciousness back. I think it was because I trusted him with directing me when I’m not capable of making decisions myself. Though, Wei-gongzi being a demonic cultivator helped. I’d like sister to have the same power but we’re not sure how she could get it without being a demonic cultivator.”

“I see,” Jiang Yanli said. Jin ZiXuan hoped she did because he was completely lost.

“Granny?” Wen Ning called out at the door to one of the huts, “Granny’s very old and she has trouble seeing and hearing,” he explained to his guests. He knocked louder.

“Please wait here,” Wen Ning said politely. He went in to search for her. After a moment they could hear him speaking.

“This place isn’t what I was expecting,” Jin ZiXuan murmured to his wife.

“What were you expecting?” Jiang Yanli asked.
“Not this,” Jin ZiXuan said. He looked out at the people – Wen’s – going hither and fro all clearly with a purpose.

“Hello there,” a wizened voice said.

This was clearly the oldest women either of them had ever seen! She with withered small and hunched with creaky doddering legs. She peered at them with clouded eyes and wrinkled face.

“Hello, I would like to make some of my soup for everyone for the evening meal. It’s A-Xian’s favourite. I always make it for him when he’s not well. I was told to ask you about the available ingredients?” Jiang Yanli spoke to her loudly and clearly remembering what Wen Ning said about her not hearing too well. She also spoke with great respect. Truly, the woman’s age alone was enough to gain respect.

The wizened woman smiled and invited Jiang Yanli in. Jin ZiXuan refused politely and said he would wait there. As the two women began talking Jin ZiXuan took the opportunity to examine the place a bit more.

The buildings ranged from decent to shoddy and none of them were very big. They had probably been made in a hurry than fixed or added to in time. Everyone was going about with a purpose. Jin ZiXuan was not so blind as to not notice the new bows and quivers everybody had or that he was given covert, suspicious looks. Despite the suspicion, nobody stopped to speak to him or behave rudely.

Under the guise of examining the odd blackened wood everything seemed to be made of, Jin ZiXuan examined them. They all looked thin and hardened and yet there seemed to be a determined sort of optimism in their air. In the distance, Jin ZiXuan could see a reedy man sitting at a poorly crafted table that appeared to have been dragged outside and writing on it with a people lined up in front of him. It looked very unusual. Jin ZiXuan resisted the urge to go over and ask what he was doing. Not only would the people not appreciate it, but he was waiting for his wife.

Said wife had also come across something unusual.

“Why is it this colour?” Jiang Yanli asked somewhat alarmed.

In her hands was a carrot. Most carrots were a bright orange under the dirt. Not this one. The colour was dark and the top leafage was a green so dark it looked almost black. It was not the only one either. Wen Ning and Granny pulled out several things they had managed to grow and all of them were blackened.

If Jiang Yanli saw this in a market or at home, she would think the food was rotten and not fit to be eaten. But the carrot in her hands was firm and clearly fresh. Apart from the abnormal colour it seemed to be alright.

“It’s the Burial Mounds,” Granny said, “They are perfectly good to eat and we can’t afford to be picky.”


“The Burial Mounds was a forbidden place full of extremely dense resentful energy. It’s been this way for a long time. As long as the Great Sects if not longer. Before Wei-gongzi, no one could get into the place. No, that’s not true. You could get in, but no one has ever come out before Wei-gongzi. The resentful energy has been here for so long and it’s so powerful here that it’s saturated everything, even the soil. Everything that grows here has resentful energy,” Wen Ning said.
“Is it truly safe to eat? If it has resentful energy in it…” Jiang Yanli asked in worry. Her mind was spinning with half-remembered lessons on the effects of resentful energy touching people.

“A-Qing has monitored it,” Granny reassured, “If anything, it’s helped us live here. When we first came the air was so oppressive it felt like something heavy was always on your chest, even with Wei-Laozu taming it for us. Now it’s a comforting pressure. Almost gentle even.”

“Wei-gongzi and sister could tell you more,” Wen Ning said, “But it really is just trace amounts and it really does help everyone to live here. It even helps with me and Wei-gongzi.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask Wen Qing then,” Jiang Yanli said, looking at the other vegetables that have been pulled out, “Do you think it will be alright for us to eat?”

“I don’t see why not,” Granny said.

“Well, then I’ll probably use about…” Jiang Yanli went into organising food and potential labour. It would be a truly massive meal to make for fifty plus people and guests.

During this time, Wei WuXian was finishing up his story. Wen Qing had finished his bandages and had retrieved her nephew and took off to look over everyone else’s productivity.

The Lan brothers were giving each other undecipherable looks. Lan XiChen was frowning unsettled and Lan Wangji simply looked mildly disapproving. Wei WuXian was entertained by the fact that Lan Wangji wasn’t being disapproving towards him for once.

Jiang Cheng was scowling, which wasn’t unusual. But paired with the fact that his nephew was clearly trying to play with his hand (and occasionally trying to grasp his hair) made his usual expression a little more comical than usual.

“I still don’t understand why you attacked Jin ZiXuan though,” Jiang Cheng finally says. Wei WuXian’s story held a lot of similarities to Jin ZiXuan’s from the moment he entered. But Wei WuXian noticeably glossed over some of Jin ZiXun’s remarks.

Wei WuXian sighed. It wasn’t a topic he particularly wanted to talk about. He still felt shame for reacting the way he did. He’d gone over it in his head when he wasn’t planning for the eventual confrontation with those responsible for hassling them. Wei WuXian, like most people, was a bit adverse to admitting mistakes and flaws.

“It was not something I had intended,” Wei WuXian said.

“So, it’s Wen Ning’s fault,” Jiang Cheng said.

“No!” Wei WuXian protested, eyes wide. He hadn’t imagined that anyone would blame Wen Ning, “It was an accident! Wen Ning didn’t have control of himself; I did. Which is to blame: the knife or the one wielding it?”

“What happened?” Lan Wangji asked.

“I…” trapped now, Wei WuXian had to answer. Feelings aside, it was not an easy explanation, “I was trapped, in a corner. I had nothing non-lethal that I could use to defend myself except for Wen Ning. That Jin person wouldn’t leave me alone! Then Jin Ling’s present slipped out of my sleeves and he grabbed it… and laughed.”

Wei WuXian shifted uncomfortably. It really was shameful to have been so bothered by a worthless someone’s words.
“He thought I was foolish to think there was any purpose or reason to invite me except to try and kill me,” affecting his voice, Wei WuXian imitated, “‘You didn’t really think you could attend A-Ling’s full-month celebration, did you?’”

Wei WuXian’s imitation was practically spot on with his mocking, superior tone of voice full of disdain, he sounded just like Jin ZiXun had in those moments. The slight emphasis on the second ‘you’ driving home exactly what Jin ZiXun thought of Wei WuXian.

Immediately Jiang Cheng was furious on his brother’s behalf. The implication that Wei WuXian was unworthy of meeting his own nephew was something Jiang Cheng knew had hurt Wei WuXian the most. He made a mental note to tell A-Jie and her husband about this so they could also be adequately pissed at this too.

The Lan siblings were disgusted. Lan Wangji was already quietly angry at the immediate and groundless accusations made and now the insults made him seethe. Lan XiChen was horrified. The sheer implications of the ambush, its preparations and now the arrogant disdain made him very sympathetic to Wei WuXian.

“That person…” Ln XiChen faltered. He was not the kind of person to say bad things about them, even if it was true. But Lan XiChen cast his memory back to Jin ZiXun’s performance at the very same banquet Wei WuXian had interrupted. He recalled the discourteous pressuring, the prideful posturing, and the obfuscation when Wei WuXian had been trying to interrogate him and his actions towards Jin GuangYao. It truly painted a person with many flaws and very little to recommend him favourably, “Even if this person hates you and believes you to be the origin of his curse, doesn’t he realise that he’s breaching Jin-gongzi’s honour by insinuating such a thing?”

Wei WuXian laughed hollowly, “I doubt he cares. His life is naturally worth the most. Who cares about others?”

“That!” Jiang Cheng’s voice had been strangled in his fury. Even now, he could only get that one word out, unable to think of anything horrible enough to describe Jin ZiXun.

“Yeah,” Wei WuXian nodded in agreement to Jiang Cheng’s unvoiced insults, “That was when Jin ZiXuan turned up. I wish he had gotten there just a few moments earlier. Not only would Jin ZiXun would never have gotten a hand on Jin Ling’s gift but then I wouldn’t have started doubting Jin ZiXuan.”

“Doubting him?” Lan XiChen said in surprise.

“Jin ZiXuan and I have never gotten along. Everyone knows that. But, just because I might not like him doesn’t mean I ever want him dead. Even disregarding the fact that he’s dear to shijie and married her. In hindsight, it was foolish to think so, but I was rather stressed. It made sense since the ambush was very well planned out. They’d even made sure to remove all the bodies they’d buried in Qiongqi Path. Now I see that they just took advantage but it was a different matter at the time.”

Wei WuXian sighed, “So, I was backed into a corner with no way out and a valley full of people who wanted to kill me for something I didn’t even do. Not to mention I had to keep part of my attention on Wen Ning. He had let go of most of his consciousness so he could react faster but I didn’t want him to kill anyone if he could help it. Wen Ning trusts me to keep him under control when he becomes like that. In this instance, however, I failed him.

“Jin ZiXun said more infuriating things which I’m sure Jin ZiXuan could tell you,” here Jiang Cheng nodded but the two Lans frowned slightly, “Thankfully, Jin ZiXuan noticed A-Ling’s present and took it from Jin ZiXun but he didn’t give it back when I asked. Well, demanded. Instead he
demanded that Wen Ning be called off and that I surrender to him so everything could be sorted out at Koi Tower. Naturally, I was not going to do so. Jin ZiXuan’s cousin proved that I am guilty no matter what the facts are. In the end I asked if what Jin ZiXun said was true. This aggravated Jin ZiXuan. Whether he was going to punch me or something else, I don’t know. I had already closed the distance some when I asked for Jin Ling’s present back. It was too close.”

Wei WuXian paused here, pressing his fingers into the acupuncture points at his temples. It was clear that he was discomfited by his actions.

“It was like when you’re in training and suddenly you’re not thinking about dodging the strike because you’ve already moved. Or when you start falling and you go into those controlled falls we get taught. It’s just automatic. Jin ZiXuan was too close. I was without a weapon. Everyone wanted to kill me for some contrived reason. I was angry, stressed, trapped and I just… reacted. I pulled over the one weapon I had to protect me: Wen Ning. Thankfully the bell reacted and he was repelled. But during that moment is when the arrows managed to get through since I had no defence.

“I really had no intention to hurt Jin ZiXuan. I have no excuse for that attack. If it hadn’t been for the bell…” Wei WuXian bowed his head, implications clear.

His audience were all quiet at that, thinking over the story. Lan XiChen was disappointed and he wondered if Jin GuangYao knew how aggressive Jin ZiXun would be in ‘asking’ for his curse to be removed. He was also thinking on what Wei WuXian had said about simply ‘reacting’.

This was a topic that all three were thinking on. There were some thoughts about whether Wei WuXian’s demonic energy had influenced his actions but they had no evidence. In addition, all three could remember the aftermath of the Sunshot Campaign. It had taken some time for all of them to deal with high-stress situations again. Lan Qiren had guided his nephews through such reactions but now Lan XiChen, reminded of the two boy’s youth and lack of guide, wondered if anyone had helped them. Most likely, what Wei WuXian said is correct: in a high-stress situation, his battle reflexes simply went into overdrive.

“Battle reflexes can be hard things to control,” Lan XiChen said, “Elder brother still has trouble with them. Everyone always has to take precautions. Making sure you’re not sneaking up on him, for example.”

“I thought I was taking care to control my instincts. I know about my reactions to things but then a serious slip like this happens,” Wei WuXian said.

Something about the way he phrased that rang alarm bells in Jiang Cheng’s mind. But for the life of him he couldn’t tell what.

“Can you think of who really cursed Jin ZiXun?” Lan XiChen asked.

“Zewu-jun, after the banquet I forgot all about Jin ZiXun. I had much more important things to work on,” Wei WuXian gestured to the clutch of huts below them, “And no one here would dare risk our safety by provoking those who want us killed. I and all the people here just want to be left alone to live in peace. We have practically been in seclusion. The only ones who go outside are myself, Wen Ning, Wen Qing and now, Luo Yaling. For local night-hunts, shopping and to offer services as a healer. That’s it. I don’t exactly get any gossip. You would know far better than I, who Jin ZiXun has offended. Considering his personality, it must be many. Any one of them could have done it.”

Lan XiChen conceded the point.

“What will you do now?” Lan Wangji finally spoke up. He’d been standing to the side, completely
silent, just listening to Wei WuXian talk. Wei WuXian gave him a smile. To his credit, it only showed how tired he was by a little bit.

“We just want to be left alone,” Wei WuXian repeated, “All I can think of is telling everyone that, forcefully if need be. Do you think you can help us convince everyone to do that?”

“I will advocate for leaving you and the others here alone,” Lan XiChen assured him, “Since coming here, you haven’t made any aggressive move at all until this one time when you were provoked. I think I can argue them into taking that into consideration.”

“We’re not going to punish Jin GuangShan for this?” Jiang Cheng demanded, “He clearly had a stake in this, according to Jin ZiXuan, and Jin GuangYao helped plan it!”

“The thing is, if I retaliate too harshly against him, everyone would just go on about the brutal ‘Lord of Evil, Yiling Patriarch’ is too dangerous and must be put down with his pawns. No offense Wen Ning,” Wei WuXian added.

Turning, the group saw the Jin couple and their undead guide coming up the hill to see them.

“It’s fine,” the man said, shaking his loose hair.

“A-Xian, I think I’ll need to go shopping to get some more ingredients,” Jiang Yanli said, “I don’t want your people to be too put out for one meal. Granny said I could ask you for some spare paper to write a list on?”

“That’s fine,” Wei WuXian said, “It’s in the cave.”

Wei WuXian stood and went into the cave. Lan Wangji immediately followed, still unwilling to let Wei WuXian out of his sight for too long. Seeing that Wei WuXian didn’t object, the others followed.

The cave was lit by the sunlight coming through the opening. But there was also a red glow coming from inside the cave. It made rippled red light appear on the rocky interior. Upon walking closer, they all noticed a small, yet deep pool that was emitting the red light. Red string hung with talismans formed a barrier around it. There were random objects all over the floor that they had to be careful not to stand on. Wei WuXian was rummaging through a pile of disorganised paper, mumbling to himself.

“Nice to see you still keep the same state of cleanliness to your rooms,” Jiang Cheng said, foot nudging a bottle filled with some kind of liquid.

Wei WuXian looked over and scowled, “That belongs to Qing-jie. She kept using experimental medicines on me and hasn’t cleaned up yet. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been in a state of ill health recently.”

“Like that would change much,” Jiang Cheng retorted. Wei WuXian didn’t have an answer to that, purely because Jiang Cheng was correct. Instead he snorted and stood to give the paper and writing utensils to their sister.

“Is this a dead bird?” Jin ZiXuan said in disgust. His foot had nearly stepped on it, nearby Wei WuXian’s pitiful excuse for a bed. He immediately moved away, unwilling to catch any of its germs.

“Don’t damage it!” Wei WuXian hurried forward, picked it up and held it close. It was, indeed, a dead bird. Its main body was now cupped in Wei WuXian’s hands with its wings hanging limply. Carefully, Wei WuXian placed it on what passed for a table.
“Why do you have a dead bird?” Jin ZiXuan asked. He was somewhat disturbed by the casual way Wei WuXian treated the possibly diseased and rotting corpse.

“It’s part of an experiment,” Wei WuXian explained, “Is there something else you need?”

They shook their heads. Wei WuXian was about to get them to leave, because he did have some face and he knew his living situation wasn’t the best, when he remembered his other idea.

“Then can I talk to shijie and Jiang Cheng alone? I want to ask them something.”

“Of course,” Jiang Yanli said. Jiang Cheng gave Jin Ling to his father. Wei WuXian couldn’t help but stare at his nephew. Then they all filed out. Lan Wangji lingered for as long as he could staring at Wei WuXian until he could justify it no longer.

Chapter End Notes

So, we finally have why Jin ZiXuan almost died! Both WN and Wifi’s stories are correct, just from different perspectives and naturally both think it’s more their fault than the other’s. It was something similar to PTSD, just battle instincts going into overdrive.

No headcanons today. Like the middle of a trilogy this is mostly interval and setup.

But you get Lan Zhan holding his future son!
Reunion the Last

Chapter Notes

The last reunion chapter! Now I can get back to juggling less characters and situations. More importantly, the next chapter is the one with one of scenes I wanted to write since I thought up this story.

I also have a missing scene that I have decided to cut. I wrote it out anyway because I needed to know exactly how it went as characters would keep referring to it which turned out to be a good idea. I might have an outline for this thing but its sparse enough so I can have room to bring up and create things on the fly while actively writing.

So, I decided if you want to read it, I'll make a YilingWei Outtakes story and include bits that don’t fit into this narrative.

Warning for this chapter: potential heartbreak. Includes short details on slavery, murder and details on how A-Yuan became an orphan.

You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m going to check something out,” Jin ZiXuan said, shifting his blessedly quiet son in his arms. All the excitement seemed to have left A-Ling sleepy.

“If you don’t mind, we’ll come with you,” Lan XiChen said.

Jin ZiXuan nodded, and they set off down to the motley collection of huts. Jin ZiXuan decided that he was going to find out what was going on with the line-up he’d seen before.

“I was surprised to see you here. Wei WuXian’s reputation is very bad right now. It’s probably why everyone thought they could get away with trying to murder him in such a way,” Jin ZiXuan said, glancing at them. Jin ZiXuan has resolved to himself to pay more attention to what was going on within his Sect. Before, he was preoccupied with wooing his chosen wife (which required more effort due to his prior actions towards her), his wedding, his wife’s pregnancy and then his newborn.

It was, he felt, only natural for any new husband and new father to be more preoccupied with his burgeoning family over gossip and politics.

Well, he amended, thinking of his own father, most men anyway.

But it meant that he hadn’t noticed when his father took too many risks in expanding his power. Shouldn’t someone like Jin GuangYao have advised him of the dangers of his actions? Or had Jin GuangShan simply not listened?

“That truly was a terrible action. Do you know why they did it?” Lan XiChen asked.

“Wei WuXian is a wild card in the current climate of the cultivation world. Plus, his demonic
cultivation scares people. Despite imitators, no one has reached his level in the things he does. As far as LanlingJin is concerned, he’s already proven himself hostile to us,” Jin ZiXuan kneaded his head, “Which is part of the reason I invited him. I believed that people would realise he’s not a danger if he attended a social event and didn’t cause any trouble. That way, we could build a more positive relationship, if only for A-Li’s sake. Engendering LanlingJin to him and, hopefully peace and goodwill to follow. Wei WuXian is the type that won’t do anything harmful unless provoked. So, what do my relatives do? They provoke him.

“Have you ever realised you’re related to suicidal morons?”

“I am thankful to not have felt that feeling myself,” Lan XiChen said. He felt much sympathy for Jin ZiXuan. It was clear he had been trying to do something positive for his family and Sect. But it had been sabotaged by his own relatives. In comparison, GusuLan was mostly in harmony about various decisions.

“And now I find out about the Wen Sect Remnants! I’ll admit that I preferred not to think of them. Out of sight; out of mind, right? But surely someone would’ve taken a look at what was happening and thought ‘no, this is wrong’?” Jin ZiXuan was nearly ranting now. In his arms Jin Ling started getting fussy.

“Wei WuXian did,” Lan Wangji said.

“That’s even worse! No one in my Sect thought anything was wrong even though its their responsibility. Instead an outsider found out and put a stop to it in a brutal way. Qishan isn’t even near Yunmeng! How did he find out about it? And even Wei WuXian only became suspicious when something happened to his friend! How many other complaints did we shut down? Not everyone has the power of the Yiling Laozu. That teenager tried to hide someone only to be treated the same as the rest! What is wrong with everyone? When did LanlingJin become synonymous with high-handed cruelty?”

Jin Ling couldn’t take the negativity any longer and burst into ear-piercing wails. Jin ZiXuan noticeably deflated and tried to comfort him. He wished Jiang Yanli had taken Jin Ling instead. She was better at getting him to calm down.

“If Jin-gongzi would like help with any investigations, GusuLan would offer assistance,” Lan XiChen said once Jin Ling’s cries subsided, “I’m sure A-Yao would also be a great help.”

“Jin GuangYao? Sect Leader Lan, you jest. Surely, you’ve realised that it was Jin GuangYao who planned that ambush. No: assassination attempt,” Jin ZiXuan said bitterly. He continued to rock Jin Ling.

“A-Yao did?” Lan XiChen was shocked, “He never said...”

“And lose your good esteem? The opinions he values above all others are my father’s and yours. Everyone else is superfluous,” Jin ZiXuan snorted, “My cousin is many things but he’s not clever enough to prepare a kill box and remove all the corpses from it. My father is fond of Jin ZiXun and so would have made Jin GuangYao help him with his issue. If it got rid of a thorn in his side like Wei WuXian? Well, if he hadn’t cursed Jin ZiXun, then it would still be no problem. Afterwards, we’d just search the old fashion way for the real culprit.”

“Then with Wei Ying gone, who could protect these people?” Lan Wangji asked, looking around at the black wood buildings and small gardens.

“No one,” Lan XiChen said quietly. He was internally struggling with Jin GuangYao’s role in this
“And so, the genocide would be complete,” Jin ZiXuan said. He could feel bile in his throat. When had his Sect degenerated to such things? How could he possibly fix them? He was only the heir – how could he gain power enough to go against his father?

“Genocide…” Lan XiChen said faintly. The group was silent as they continued walking except for the fussing Jin Ling.

“Alright, alright! Step right up. Tell me your new name and age and no changing your personal or courtesy names! We have enough to memorise as it is! No, I don’t care if it means your name sounds inelegant now. You should have thought of that when you decided your new surname!” A large, jovial man called out. He was passing out what looked to be meat buns of some kind to the people lined up in front of a wobbly table with a calligrapher on the other side.

“Hello there!” the man called out to them when he saw they were coming his way, “Want a bun? No meat I’m afraid, but chock full of vegetables!”

“Thank you, it smells delicious,” Lan XiChen said. He tried to take out money but, laughing, the man waved him off.

“I’m Chang Jianhong,” he introduced himself, “You might have seen my wife around before she got into her sewing. Tell me, what do you think of everyone here changing their names?”

“Is that what’s happening?” Jin ZiXuan wondered. He was glad to be brought out of his increasingly depressing thoughts. He’d still have to go through them later, but he’d prefer it would happen when Jin Ling wasn’t around.

“Yes,” Chang Jianhong said, nodding, “Consider it a new life for us, unrelated to the taint of Wen RuoHan and his ilk. We’re hoping the rest of the world will consider it that way too. Once we’ve finished, there’ll be no more Wen’s of QishanWen. Just as everybody wanted.”

To hear this, so soon after realising the potential genocide that may happen, was not a good feeling for any of them, at all. It was like boulders had dropped into their guts and weights on their shoulders. To Lan Wangji, it was a not unfamiliar feeling. He frowned looking around at everything and everyone more carefully.

“Does the Burial Mounds’ resentful energy strengthen negative emotions?” Lan Wangji asked abruptly.

Last time Lan Wangji was here, he also found an increase in his negative emotions which had led to his abrupt departure. It had not seemed to affect anyone else, so he had assumed it was just him. But with the others like his brother, he now realises that its affecting everyone who doesn’t live here.

Chang Jianhong blinked in surprise before peering at them intensely, “Eat up,” he said seriously. He did not answer until they had all taken a bite.

“Yes, it does. It took us a while to adapt but that was partially because we were already pretty negative when we came here,” Chang Jianhong said, “Sorry, we didn’t notice before. The food that’s grown here helps.”

“It’s black!” Lan XiChen exclaimed. True, inside the vegie bun were blackened vegetables.

“A-Li mentioned this,” Jin ZiXuan said.
Lan Wangji was still chewing when his brother found the blackened insides. Frozen mid-chew, he looked around at everyone before finally finishing his bite.

“It’s the resentful energy. Makes everything black here. We’ve got black wood, black soil, black bamboo – which is where Wei-Laozu made Chengkap – black leaves... Even the river is a lot more murky than usual. Don’t worry, eating it shouldn’t have any effect on your cultivation. It just makes your body better adapted to places like this and to Wei-Laozu and A-Ning. We’ve been here for so long, everyone’s grown used to the atmosphere here and none of us thought about how it might feel for you,” Chang Jianhong said apologetically.

“A-Li and Jiang Wanyin don’t seem to have any problems,” Jin ZiXuan said, “And what about my son?”

“Well, they’ll be used to Wei-Laozu, won’t they? It’s like a less controlled version of his aura spread out over a large area,” Chang Jianhong said, “You get used to it eventually. It’s a bit like weight lifting. It might strain the muscles at first but eventually, you won’t even notice the weight. As for your son, does he seem more fussy than usual? Throwing tantrums?”

“No,” Jin ZiXuan said.

Really? The Twin Jades of Lan wondered remembering the screeching from a few moments before.

“Hmm,” Chang Jianhong leaned over oddly to examine the babe who clearly did not like the strange face and promptly tried to hit it with his hand. Thankfully, Chang Jianhong simply gave a full belly laugh, “Aah, I want a child myself one day. If he’s fine than something must be blocking the resentful energy. Maybe...”

“Oh!” Jin ZiXuan exclaimed cutting off Chang Jianhong, “My apologies. I just remembered Wei WuXian’s gift is capable of repelling resentful energy. It must be protecting him.”

“Well, there you have it,” Chang Jianhong laughed.

“Well, why not?” a women’s voice cut in. Everyone turned to the line. At the front was a young woman with a gentle, homely appearance, probably not even twenty years old yet. Beside her was the crooked nosed teenager from before.

“Wen Shijing, even if you aren’t too young to be married...” The reedy man was cut off.

“Which I’m not. I’m nineteen.”

“Xia Bolin is only fifteen!” The man sounded a bit stressed.

“So? We say we want to change our names. I want to take Bolin’s and marry him. I don’t want anything to do with Mother or Father. I never approved of the kinds of things they did or the way they treated people. So, I don’t want to be called ‘Wen’ and I don’t want my mother’s name either! I want Bolin’s.”

“Wen...” he cut himself off at her stubborn look, “Shijing-er, we don’t have anything for a wedding ceremony. We’re stretched thin doing all this, as it is.”

“Can’t we just do the things that make it legal and do an actual ceremony later? I was happy to wait but then Wei-Laozu got attacked and those people are still after us! If we change our names now then I want to take Bolin’s,” the young woman insisted.

“‘Those people’, Jin ZiXuan repeated lowly, wanting to hide his face. He’d never been so
uncomfortable in a place before. Well, except for the past week when he’d been locked outside his wife’s rooms. But this was an entirely different situation!

“This is-! An entirely unprecedented notion…” the reedy man blustered, “We couldn’t possibly…”

“Please?” The girl’s eyes grew wide and shiny. She looked devastated. The boy next to her, apparently Xia Bolin, put his arm around her for comfort. He gave a disapproving look to the man who realised that everyone in the vicinity was also giving him the exact same look!

“I’ll look into it,” he said in defeat.

“Thank you, Uncle!”

“LanlingJin… really are the bad guys here, huh?” Jin ZiXuan mumbled to himself.

“You’re Jin-gongzi, right? We all heard A-Yuan crying. I’m glad you weren’t an enemy. I can’t exactly run anymore,” Chang Jianhong said good-naturedly.

“I didn’t think a child that young could be so scared of me,” JinZiXuan said.

“Didn’t someone say he didn’t even remember that far back?” Lan XiChen wondered.

“True. But that level of trauma doesn’t go away,” Chang Jianhong mused. He glanced at Jin ZiXuan, “Are you sure you want to hear?”

“Please tell me,” Jin ZiXuan said after a moment’s thought.

“A-Yuan was taken to Qiongqi Path with his parents and Granny, his great-grandmother. He’d been weaned by then which ended up causing problems because we were only given starvation rations and only one for Granny and A-Yuan combined. In other words, they were starving. A-Yuan’s mother became desperate. One day, without telling anyone, she tried to steal extra food. She was caught, of course. She wasn’t a strong cultivator and she’d given up a lot of her food to her son. They decided that they were going to make an example of her, so no one would think to steal from them again. They gathered everyone up, so everyone would watch, and they started beating her. Naturally, her husband couldn’t bear it and ran out to plead mercy. They just added him to the beating. That lot buried them in some unmarked grave in Qiongqi Path. Goodness knows what’s happened to the bodies now that they cleared away all the corpses they’d made and buried there.”

Chang Jianhong took a deep breath. The faces of his audience looked horrified. Jin ZiXuan looked as pale as a hanged ghost.

“They made everyone watch, including A-Yuan. Granny had A-Yuan and she tried her best to keep his face turned away. But the people making sure we were watching made sure she couldn’t entirely succeed. Granny kept him with her all the time after that. Granny had to watch her grandson and granddaughter-in-law die in such a way. She wasn’t going to give anyone the excuse to take A-Yuan as well.”

Jin ZiXuan kept a hold onto Jin Ling. The worst part, he felt, was that he could see Jiang Yanli and himself doing the exact same thing.

*With Wen Qing and Wei Yuan*
Wen Qing had been making sure all her medical journals were locked away in a chest and keeping an eye on Wei Yuan playing when they heard it.

Due to personal decision and necessity, Wen Qing’s hut was the one closest to the Demon-Slaughtering Cave. At the beginning, not only had she been unwilling to be too far from her brother’s remains, but she’d been the only one who didn’t shy away from their new benefactor.

Even before they heard anything, something seemed to prickle the fine hairs on her body. Wei Yuan looked up from his toys and towards the Demon-Slaughtering Cave. Concerning. Wen Qing frowned. After so much time familiarising herself with Wei WuXian’s store of resentful energy, she’d become more receptive to the feel of the Burial Mounds. Thankfully it wasn’t in an adverse way. It was subtle, no-one else would feel it. But the last time she’d felt something like this was at the time of the ambush.

But Wei WuXian was completely safe so why…?

Standing quickly, Wen Qing made her way to the cave. Wei Yuan followed at a small run to keep up with her long strides. The first time Wen Qing had seen Jiang Wanyin, the teenager had been trying futilely to strangle Wei WuXian. He’d been apparently suffering some kind of mental break at the time, but it wasn’t something that endeared him to Wen Qing, especially these days. Wei WuXian’s complete disregard of the action did not help.

After she came out of the hut, she heard Wei WuXian shouting inside the cave. She could not tell what he was saying but that he raised his voice was telling. She waved off a few concerned kinsmen.

“Hey! Is everything alright in there? We can hear you yelling all the way to Uncle Fourth’s place,” Wen Qing called out at the entrance.

“Mum?” Wei Yuan echoed, clutching Wen Qing’s leg.

“Everything’s fine!” Jiang Yanli called back.

A moment later and Jiang Yanli walked out. There was something wrong with her expression, but Wen Qing couldn’t put her finger on what.

“Wen Qing, I was wondering if you and your brother would accompany me shopping in Yiling,” Jiang Yanli said. Wen Qing was surprised.

“I have no objection. A-Ning would need to come anyway. His strength is useful for carting things up the mountain,” Wen Qing said.

“I’m glad,” Jiang Yanli said honestly, “Shall we go now? I don’t know when the markets will close.”

“I’ll take A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian said coming out of the cave with Jiang Cheng, “I know Granny’s busy helping with everything.”

“We’ve decided to set up an outdoor area to cook and eat,” Wen Qing told him. Wen Qing looked at him in veiled concern. Wei WuXian smiled at her and cheerfully waved her on. Frowning, Wen Qing acquiesced.

“We can pick up my brother on the way out,” Wen Qing said. Jiang Yanli smiled and started asking about Yiling as they walked away. Wei Yuan changed to clutching at Wei WuXian’s leg.

Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian did not look at each other. The air between them was awkward. Wei
Yuan looked at them in confusion before mentally shrugging it off. He tried to grab Chenqing by its hanging tassel. Long used to A-Yuan’s habit of reaching for his flute, Wei WuXian easily stopped him.

“Is everything alright?” Lan Xichen called out. His brother and Jin ZiXuan were with him, “We heard there was yelling.”

“Everything’s fine,” Wei WuXian called back, “Come on, let’s go set up for A-Jie.”

Jiang Cheng grunted but followed.

In the markets of Yiling

It was fortunate that the regular residents of Yiling were used to Wen Ning. He was scruffy in appearance compared to his living sister and the cloak-covered Jiang Yanli but everyone seemed to ignore the occasional black vein and his loose hair. Though, there were some people who stopped and stared as the corpse loaded Jiang Yanli’s shopping onto a cart. The easy strength was surreal.

Wen Qing couldn’t help but marvel at it. Here was a fierce corpse. Here was her brother. But no one screamed or treated him like he wasn’t a person. Not only that, but once people started recognising him, and therefore Wen Qing, the locals started politely inquiring after Wei WuXian. She’d started to give them the same answers.

Yes, he was fine. He was injured but now mostly recovered. He’d probably show his face around soon. The food we’re buying is for a celebration. It was a recent decision which was why Luo Yaling didn’t buy everything this morning.

Unless Wen Qing was imagining it, she was getting suspiciously frequent good deals on things.

Jiang Yanli was interesting. She was gentle and kind in everything but not without firmness or steel. Her sweetness, even in her haggling, made her surprisingly effective as she did not let anyone take advantage of her.

Wen Qing was impressed. She certainly couldn’t pull off the same thing. She had the haughty aristocratic features typical of Wen Mao’s descendants which did not lend itself to sweetness or even her brother’s meekness.

“I would like to be honest with you, Wen Qing,” Jiang Yanli said suddenly, after their shopping had concluded and they were on their way back.

Wen Qing was surprised. Immediately she was wary. Was she not honest before?

“I see no reason why you can not be honest with me,” Wen Qing said.

Jiang Yanli nodded. She turned to Wen Qing and said: “I’m actually rather jealous of you.”

That made Wen Qing halt, “What? Why?”

“You were able to help A-Xian.”

“I’m the reason he’s here in the first place,” Wen Qing said bluntly, unwilling to believe she’d been in any way beneficial to Wei WuXian compared to what she’d taken, “I was the one who took
him away from his home, from Lotus Pier. I was the one who made him leave you and your brother.”

“A-Xian is my little brother,” Jiang Yanli said, “As much as A-Cheng. But throughout my life, I’ve never been able to help either of them when they truly need it. All I could ever do was be there and make sure they were eating. Before the Sunshot Campaign, Wen Qing and her brother helped both my brothers.”

“It was A-Ning’s idea,” Wen Qing protested, “He wanted to repay Wei WuXian’s kindness…”

Jiang Yanli held up her hand and Wen Qing did not continue.

“Now, A-Xian is here. As you said, he is away from home and all those he was familiar with. You healed him repeatedly and have become a very dear friend to him. He values you highly. Your brother as well,” Jiang Yanli said, glancing back at the steadily moving Wen Ning.

Silence. Wen Qing could not protest what Jiang Yanli was saying.

When Jiang Yanli saw that Wen Qing wasn’t going to respond she continued: “A-Xian said he hasn’t mentioned it to you and your brother yet. But he asked A-Cheng and I, our opinions.”

Wen Qing frowned. What was Jiang Yanli talking about?

“He wants to adopt you and your brother as his siblings. Give you his name to use.”

Wen Qing’s jaw dropped, and she gaped unattractively at Jiang Yanli.

“What?” Wen Qing said. There was a slight crash behind them. The women looked to see that Wen Ning had dropped the handle of the cart and was looking at them wide-eyed. Then he scrambled to pick up the handle again before it could roll back downhill.

“It’s why I’m even more jealous,” Jiang Yanli said softly, “When you have his name, no one will be able to deny that you are officially his older sister. Not like the way they do with me.”

Jiang Yanli had to look away for a moment. But she straightened and continued: “And I am, admittedly, a little bit unhappy that A-Xian is looking at someone else as his older sister. Silly, isn’t it? He said no one can take my place. He wants his family to grow; expand. I should be happy that the number of people who could be considered family is growing. Instead, I’m unhappy that I’m no longer the only one – the only older sister – A-Xian looks to.”

“Family is the most important thing. Always,” Wen Qing said awkwardly after moments of silence.

“He adores you,” Wen Ning reassured as he came up beside them.

“I know,” Jiang Yanli said smiling, “It really is a silly irrational thing. I like the two of you and its not like I can be there all the time for my little brothers anymore. I have my husband and son to take care of now.”

Jiang Yanli suddenly gave them an assessing look, “Do you want to become Wei Qing and Wei Ning, A-Xian’s siblings?”

Wen Qing could only freeze up at that. Her mind rapidly going through memories of Wei WuXian. Reluctantly, she admitted to herself that she saw him as one of her family and she was closer to him.
than even the rest of the ones living in the Burial Mounds except for A-Ning himself…

Wen Ning had a different issue.

“I’m dead,” Wen Ning pointed out baffled, “I’ve noticed the way people talk about me now. They don’t even use my courtesy name anymore. It’s either Wen Ning or the Ghost General. Taking a new name after I’ve already died is a bit…”

“There will always be foolish people,” Jiang Yanli said, “But, dead or not, you’re still a person. Unlike all those other dead, you still have free will. You can still decide whether or not to take a new name.”

That silenced Wen Ning. Jiang Yanli began walking again and the Wen siblings followed in silence. Wen Ning could not help but wonder if it was true. It was, after all, one of those things that felt too good to be true. But he resolved to himself, he would only accept if his sister did.

Centre of the Burial Mounds

Everything was coming along surprisingly nicely. Lan XiChen had somehow taken over directing former Wen’s on how to place various tables and chairs brought out from the huts. Jiang Yanli was in her element. She flitted between the bubbling pot over the campfire and the chopping stations, she directed, advised, chopped and stirred. It was almost dizzying. Chang Jianhong had tried to get down on his knees, even with his bad leg, to plead for her guidance only for his tiny wife to nip that in the bud.

Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Cheng had both been roped into chopping vegetables. Jiang Cheng was having the time of his life mocking and making fun of Jin ZiXuan’s sheer clueless incompetence. Jin ZiXuan had spent his whole life with servants. Other people made food. Even on the Sunshot Campaign, the quality might have been significantly poorer (with one notable exception) but Jin ZiXuan didn’t really have to cook.

Jiang Cheng on the other hand was quite competent in the kitchen even if he didn’t share his sister’s passion. Yunmeng Jiang was known for its practicality. They had servants but they were there because people like the Sect Leader simply didn’t have time for all the little things like cleaning their room. Yu ZiYuan had enforced this further by preferring to impose punishments that were unwanted but had a purpose. Performing a servant’s workload was one of the milder punishments and Jiang Cheng still implemented it. She was also adamant that her children weren’t going to be incapable of looking after themselves if need be. So, all three children in her care knew how to cook, clean, serve tea and sew.

After Lotus Pier’s destruction, the three had, more than once, blessed Yu ZiYuan’s foresight and hard-ass punishments.

That being said, neither Jiang sibling protested when the former Wen’s adamantly refused to let Wei WuXian near the cooking stations. Jin ZiXuan and the Lan’s looked confused (as much as Lan Wangji could) but it hadn’t been cleared up for them. Instead the Jiang’s had simply nodded in understanding, and slight exasperation in Jiang Cheng’s case. Clearly, the Wen’s had been subjected to Wei WuXian’s idea of cooking, a fact that was only confirmed when they saw the tight watch everyone had on the spices.
It wasn’t that Wei WuXian’s cooking was bad. But, as Jiang Cheng once said, you needed a serious lack of taste-buds to tolerate the levels of spice.

Instead, Wei WuXian had been relegated to babysitting duty. Wei Yuan was ‘helping out’ by running underfoot and parroting whatever orders Lan Xichen gave. But someone still needed to watch Jin Ling.

Wei WuXian had swallowed imperceptibly when he’d been given the baby. Jin Ling was noticeably smaller and seemed frailer than Wei Yuan had been even when he’d been starved, and Wei WuXian first picked him up at Qiongqi Path. Holding his nephew was something that Wei WuXian had almost accepted wasn’t going to happen anytime soon after the disaster at Qiongqi Path. Well, second disaster.

Instead he’d accepted the fussy baby and walked off so everyone would stop giving him suspicious looks. His cooking wasn’t that bad!

Lan Wangji had somehow managed to get out of cooking. He would not have been opposed to learning the recipe for Wei Ying’s favourite dish, but this was an opportunity he’d been waiting for. He watched placidly as his brother made himself useful and Jin ZiXuan looked like he was restraining himself from putting his knife into the mocking figure of his brother-in-law.

As the evening had grown darker, the two teenagers had gone to light up many red lanterns in the trees around the small village and down a few trails. Lan Wangji avoided them as he walked towards a more shadowed area following where he saw Wei WuXian heading, rocking and chatting to his fussy nephew.

The darker shadows made Lan Wangji slow down to pick his way along the ill-worn path. He hadn’t gotten very far when he heard the familiar sounds of a flute. It wasn’t the tense, sinister tune Wei WuXian used on his corpse army. It was, in fact, a very familiar tune.

He remembered…?

Heart pounding, Lan Wangji unconsciously sped up to find the source of the sound. His feet finally stopped when he saw Wei WuXian. Jin Ling was set carefully in his lap, no longer making a sound. Wei WuXian leaned back slightly, only illuminated by the sunset. His eyes were closed so he had not noticed Lan Wangji yet. Lan Wangji made no move to correct this, instead staring at his face.

This person could have died. Someone – many someone’s – had tried to remove this person from the world. It had felt like his heart had stopped when Nie HuaiSang had blurted it out. It had blurred Lan Wangji’s reality as he tried to make sense of what he’d heard.

Seeing Wei WuXian again, even angry, had been a relief. He had been concerned about the bandages, but Wen Qing’s words soothed him. Hearing about Wei Yuan’s adoption should not have been surprising in hindsight. Wei WuXian had clearly been very fond of the child even with his typical teasing.

But, once again, in this place, Lan Wangji wondered why he was here. There was no place here for him. He was of no use here. Lan Wangji belonged on a different peak surrounded by cloud mist, books and undisturbed serenity.

Wei WuXian did not.

Lan Wangji never thought he was much like his father. Not that he was any more like his mother. But until he saw Wei WuXian shrouded in oppressive shadows; expression twisted in anger and
lined with unnatural cruelty, did he understand the longing to lock his beloved away from the world that continuously hurt them.

But Lan Wangji refused to be exactly like his father. He would not trap or trick or force his beloved. Besides, Lan Wangji had to sadly concede that being trapped in such a place as Cloud Recesses would only make Wei WuXian unhappy. Confining one such as Wei WuXian would only be cruel.

But something settled in him listening to the sweet tones of his song on Wei WuXian’s flute. Wei WuXian had been delirious and barely conscious when Lan Wangji had played it. Considering Wei WuXian’s notoriously bad memory, Lan Wangji would not have been surprised if he’d forgotten it. In fact, he’d half-hoped half-dreaded that he had. It was only because Wei WuXian had been so out of it that he’d been brave enough to play it.

However, approaching the final chords of the song, a note was suddenly played wrong. Lan Wangji could not be entirely surprised. It was astonishing that Wei WuXian had replicated it as much as he had. He still internally cringed at it though.

Wei WuXian must have also realised something was wrong because he suddenly stopped playing. “Ah, that’s not it… How did it go…?” He muttered to himself before shushing the baby who didn’t seem to like that he’d stopped playing. He then noticed Lan Wangji.

“Oh! Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian smiled at him and waved him over. Heart beating fast again, Lan Wangji complied, “I don’t have anywhere for you to sit that won’t dirty your clothes…”

He was cut off by Lan Wangji decisively sitting next to him. He could deal with a few stains.

Wei WuXian blinked at him in surprise before bursting out into laughter. Jin Ling gurgled.

“Ah! So that’s where it was from!” Wei WuXian suddenly exclaimed, “That melody I was just playing, it was you who played it first, right? In XuanWu Cave.”

“En.”

Wei WuXian laughed again, “I wondered! It came to me when I was trying to think of something soothing to play for A-Ling, but I was struggling to remember where I’d heard it from. I can’t seem to remember all of it though. I’m sorry, that mustn’t’ve been good when I made a mistake just then.”

The GusuLan Sect was famed for its music and Lan Wangji was known even among them for his exquisite guqin playing. Wei WuXian did not like that he’d messed up a song he’d inadvertently learned from Lan Wangji in front of him.

“You were falling unconscious,” Lan Wangji said, shaking his head, “You could not be expected to remember it clearly.”

Wei WuXian laughed again, his heart warmed by this forgiveness.

“It really is a nice song. I’ve never heard it before. Is it a GusuLan song?”

Wei WuXian had asked this before but this time, Lan Wangji had to give a clear answer and he so, he slowly shook his head.

“I composed it,” Lan Wangji admitted, voice quieter than usual but still clearly heard.

Wei WuXian’s eyes widened in delight, “Lan Zhan did? No wonder its so nice. Ah, now Lan Zhan
must teach me the rest. I cannot go around only knowing how to play half of it. That would be an injustice.”

“Mm,” Lan Wangji said. He was pleased that Wei WuXian liked it so much. But he did hope that the other man would not ask its name. Lan Wangji had named it guiltily and felt some shame at how blatant he’d made his feelings by its name, but he also had been unwilling to change it. So, he had simply held it close to his heart.

He reached behind him to take his guqin but, at that moment, one of the teenagers ran up.

“Wei-Laozu! Dinner’s ready!”

“Coming!” Wei WuXian waved back and stood carefully, “You’ll have to teach me later. It’ll be a promise.”

Lan Wangji nodded, and they joined the rest of the group. Jin ZiXuan took Jin Ling and Lan Wangji went to sit with his brother. Jiang Yanli was serving everybody soup from her pot with the help of Chang Jianhong.

When Wei WuXian sat down with his soup, keeping a careful eye on A-Yuan with his own bowl, Jiang Cheng sat next to him.

They sat and ate in silence for a while.

“They’re not horrible,” Jiang Cheng finally muttered grudgingly.

Wei WuXian had to stuff his mouth full so he didn’t respond with something like: ‘would I care about them, if they were?’ Instead, he hummed in acknowledgement.

Jiang Cheng continued to scowl at his food without eating.

“I’ll accept it,” he mumbled. Wei WuXian snapped his head around to stare at him but before he could swallow and talk, Jiang Cheng continued: “But you have to acknowledge me too! Or the deal’s off and you’re never allowed in Lotus Pier again!”

Jiang Cheng had been about to continue with his threats, but Wei WuXian cut him off. He placed his arm around him and pulled him into a side-hug. Wei WuXian’s forehead tapped Jiang Cheng’s temple. Surprised by the physical affection, Jiang Cheng froze.

Wei WuXian liked to be physically affectionate with people he really liked but as he grew older it became another thing that became more frowned upon. Not only that, but Jiang Cheng was the opposite. He did not appreciate all the affectionate touching. The only time he had ever initiated a hug was when Wei WuXian had been found after his three-month disappearance. Wei WuXian knew that and promised to limit it to ‘special occasions’.


Jiang Cheng managed to release a grunt and stuffed a spoonful into his mouth to occupy and distract himself. Wei WuXian chuckled and removed his arm to eat. The sides of their bodies still lined up however, but Jiang Cheng didn’t move away.

It was…. Tolerable.

He was still discomfited over having to share his brother. But, once again he’d come close to losing Wei WuXian and, this time, had been unable to help. In addition, if it meant that he’d be able to
acknowledge Wei WuXian as his brother outside of his head – and vice-versa – then he’d still be coming out ahead compared to where he was before.

“And you have to visit more,” he added. Wei WuXian laughed.

“Or you could visit here. I’ll have to see about making some kind of token that allows people in,” Wei WuXian mused, trailing off into thought for a moment. Jiang Cheng grunted. He stared out at the chatting, lively people and made a face.

Everyone was sitting around the biggest fire and the rest of the area was lit by red lanterns and the clear stars above. Everybody was talking, laughing or enjoying his sister’s food. Jiang Yanli and her husband and son were illuminated in the distance, happily smiling. Wen Ning had taken over serving the food as someone who didn’t need to eat. Wen Qing was sitting next to her grandmother and appeared to be keeping an eye on the elder. All in all, it was a good atmosphere despite the location’s detractions.

It was… nice.

“I want to go to the Yunmeng Lantern Festival,” Wei WuXian said suddenly, “A-Yuan should get to see it, too. A-Jie should come as well and bring Ling-er.”

Jiang Cheng liked that idea, “She should leave Jin ZiXuan at home.”

Wei WuXian laughed but before he could respond the talked about person appeared. Jin ZiXuan looked suspiciously at his in-laws. Jiang Cheng muffled his smirk by taking another mouthful.

“I’d like to visit more often, A-Xian. A-Cheng as well,” Jiang Yanli said.

“We were just talking about that,” Wei WuXian laughed, “How about meeting up at Yunmeng’s Lantern Festival? I’m also going to try and make some tokens that will let you in.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Jiang Yanli said, warmly, “That way I can talk to A-Xian’s other siblings as well.”

Wei WuXian froze before getting up and hugging her carefully. Jiang Yanli had a bowl in each hand and so could not return the hug, though she tried.

“Thank you A-Jie,” Wei WuXian said into her hair.

They sat and ate for a while. When Wei WuXian was finished, he took Jin Ling from Jin ZiXuan so he could eat. A-Yuan had finished by this time and had come over in curiosity at the baby. Wei WuXian taught A-Yuan how to play peek-a-boo and A-Yuan delighted himself in getting Jin Ling to react to his expressions.

“Jin ZiXuan,” Wei WuXian said suddenly.

“Hmm?” Jin ZiXuan hummed around his wife’s delicious cooking.

“Considering everything that happened, will there be an emergency Discussion Conference or something similar called?”

Jin ZiXuan nodded. Once he finally swallowed, he asked why.

“I want to attend.”

“They won’t invite you,” Jiang Cheng pointed out.
Wei WuXian nodded, “I know. They don’t need to. I’ll crash the party. I just need to know when it is.”

“I can let you know,” Jiang Cheng said.

“Thanks.”

It really was, Wei WuXian reflected, a good night.

It really was, Lan Wangji reflected, too early to leave.

To be fair, they’d stayed well into the night. There was no room at the Burial Mounds to put them up for the night but Yunmeng was not far off. The Jin-Jiang family already intended to stay at Lotus Pier and Jiang Wanyin did not seem to mind offering the Twin Jades a room there as well.

Lan Wangji felt as if he were frozen. While he felt glad that he had come, he could not help but think he hadn’t contributed anything at all. The helpless feeling persisted. Wei Ying always seemed too far even though he was just a few strides away. Wei Ying went through the world along a different current than Lan Wangji. Only the mercy of the heavens allowed their currents to meet, not infrequent, but far too brief each blessed time.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying said, right in front of him. He had finished speaking to all the others and Lan Wangji wondered why he was last. Instead he looked at Wei Ying’s smiling face and tried to memorise it.

It was his sincere one, no trickery or impish thoughts, just genuine kindness.

“Wei Ying,” he returned. Wei Ying’s smile seemed to widen.

“Thanks for coming,” Wei Ying said. His voice had dropped, as if he wanted only for Lan Wangji to hear. As if, to grant them the illusion of privacy. Another wishful thought in Lan Wangji’s head, most likely.

At the words, Lan Wangji felt his heart drop a little.

Ah, it really was time to leave.

“I have to admit; I was surprised you did. But, I’m also very glad.”

Lan Wangji flicked his gaze over the other’s face, but he was being honest. His heart gave a pleased flutter.

*Speak!* Lan Wangji scolded himself. *Don’t stand there and say nothing! Use Brother’s advice!*

“I’m glad you’re alright,” Lan Wangji said. He then wanted to punish his tongue. That wasn’t what he wanted to say even if it was true.

For a moment, Wei Ying looked surprised then he gave a warm, pleased look to Lan Wangji that made his heart speed up.

“You’re fonder of me than you like to admit, huh?” Wei Ying said, tone and smile clearly teasing… but still delighted.

*Thump-thump,* went Lan Wangji’s heart
More than you know, went Lan Wangji’s thoughts.

“If you ever would like some help, I will always be available,” went Lan Wangji’s mouth.

Lan Wangji wondered if there was something out there that allowed his thoughts and feelings to be given directly to the other man without having to bypass his disobedient mouth.

Not that he objected to the words but, they weren’t enough.

“Thank you,” Wei Ying said, back to his sincere smile.

Definitely time to go.

“But I hope that Lan Zhan won’t forget his promise to me,” Wei Ying added, “I’ll be busy for a while and I intend to make guest tokens, so someone doesn’t always have to escort others in and out of the Burial Mounds. But when I do, Lan Zhan has to visit me and teach me his song.”

Our song, Lan Wangji corrected in his head.

Yet… This was new. An assurance they’ll meet again.

Something twitched at the corners of Lan Wangji’s lips. He ducked his head and said, in agreement, “En.”

Chapter End Notes

Lan Zhan might be unreadably stoic on the outside. Inside, he’s a flustered hot mess of a man, mooning over his beloved but too shy to actually do anything about it. And we love him for it. I swear he took over the last part of this chapter so he could moon over his beloved in his own, repressed way.

Headcanons:
The shouting match: This was seriously necessary. Those two need to stop ignoring negative feelings and start communicating. Sometimes the best way to do that is to yell at each other. NOT pretend everything is fine.

JYL: Yeah, she’s a bit jealous. She’d still the closest thing to an angel but even JYL will get upset about anyone trying to take her role with her boys. She’ll get over it, but it won’t be an instantaneous friendship. Those two will work for it, if only for Wifi’s sake. Thankfully, they have more in common including being compassionate, protective older sisters who’d do anything for their younger brother’s and neither of them really have friendships with other girls. Or anyone outside of family.
Discussion Conference: Start!

Chapter Notes

Regarding Mo XuanYu. Here’s thirteen right now and hasn’t been brought to LanlingJin yet. He was brought in after JZX’s death to point out to JGY that he’s not special. Considering in canon they had to deal with a lot of things after JZX’s death like Buyetian and planning the Siege on the Burial Mounds, I think he’s thirteen. He will be brought in and this time around he can meet JZX as well as JGY. But it will be after all this.

So, this was only meant to be one chapter but just after the start of the chapter Jiang Cheng kicked over my outline and said screw you, this is my time. That idiot can be badass next chapter. I’m gonna verbally eviscerate fucking Jin GuangShan!

And so, this happened.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just below the clouds flew a black bird. It hovered gracefully along the thermals, peering below. A golden tower rose from the green earth. It was magnificent, both large and tall with gilded roof and carvings. Spread from the tower were white flowers only interrupted by well-maintained paths like snakes and streams with ponds filled with colourful koi.

The crow examined the place critically. There were humans, like ants crawling along the paths. Many went into the building. But many, in glinting eye-catching gold which drew the crow’s eyes, were along the periphery of the garden.

But the crow was not here to take the gold, even if she did want like the shiny…

Refocussing on her goal she landed on one of the lower tier’s jutted decorations. The few birds there immediately flew away. No more approached. The crow stared at the humans below. She did not seem to blink.

Her gaze focussed first on a man in purple than on two near-identical white and black humans. If this was the crow from before she would have cawed to herself, but she was not and cawing required a lot of effort which would be a waste anyway. She had to be quiet.

She watched until no more humans went inside the shiny building. Then she took off. She flew around the tower before finding the window that had been indicated to her.

It was closed.

No matter. This crow had always been clever. Now she knew a great deal more things.

With careful manoeuvring, she got the window open and quietly flew to an inner beam.

Good, they had not noticed her. She nested down on her perch in the shadowed crook of a cross beam and waited. Her eyes were fixed on the shiny one perched above all the others.
If someone could have seen her, they would have remarked uneasily to themselves that the crow’s eyes appeared to have glowing red embers within them. They would shake their heads to themselves and tell themselves that they were foolish and seeing things.

They would not have been.

Within the Golden Hall; Koi Tower; Lanling

Jin ZiXuan was tense. It had been a tense two days leading to the Discussion Conference. His father had finally admitted that this was needed. Or rather, finally panicked enough to secure aid. Jin ZiXuan, his mother and Jiang Yanli prepared as much as they could. They did not know what Wei WuXian was planning and having to put blind trust in the man was grating.

But after the Burial Mounds and all the damage done by his Sect, Jin ZiXuan pushed it aside and tried to work. The invitations sent out had been staggered. This was not unusual. It took time to have a calligrapher write out appropriate messages to other Sect Leaders. Having to try and craft an explanation that did not make them look like suicidal morons would not have helped. But, usually the first ones sent out were for the Sects that were further away.

Not this time. This time the ones sent to the most loyal of the Sect’s allied to LanlingJin were sent out first. Jin ZiXuan suspected that the only reason the other three Great Sects were included in the first batch was due to their power and Jin GuangShan being unwilling to alienate such useful allies.

It had also been an annoying manoeuvre to organise the ones on guard duty. LanlingJin seemed to be divided into those who supported Madam Jin, Jin GuangShan, Jin GuangYao or Jin ZiXuan himself. It didn’t help that many held torn loyalties between Jin GuangYao and Jin ZiXuan. But Jin ZiXuan, with help, at least made sure the ones loyal to his father stayed near his father to leave room for more important points of entry to be covered by others.

Worst of all, there had been fights with his wife recently. Jiang Yanli wanted to see what would happen during the Conference. Madam Jin was required to be present due to her influence counteracting her husband’s. Jin ZiXan and Jiang Wanyin had to attend as Sect heir and Sect Leader respectfully. That, unfortunately left Jiang Yanli to take care of Jin Ling. Thankfully, she had acquiesced and simply lurked around the entrance to try and catch a glimpse of her brother.

Pointing out that it had been Jiang Yanli who had refused the wet-nurse’s and nannies that were typical in LanlingJin could have been, in hindsight, phrased better.

Now everything was set up and Jin ZiXuan was anxious. His father sat on a slightly raised dais at the head of the Golden Hall. Two large placings were set on each side. Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Wanyin on one side and Lan XiChen and Nie Mingjue on the other. In a show of Jin GuangYao’s self-preservation instincts, the more volatile Jiang Wanyin and Nie Mingjue were further away. The smiling man himself was standing behind their father, ready to serve. Madam Jin was also seated slightly back and to the side of her husband but still on the dais at least. Her expression was annoyed. Sitting close behind the Lan and Nie Sect Leaders were their respective younger brothers.

Jin ZiXuan resisted the urge to interrogate Jiang Wanyin again. The man had quickly told his sister that, yes he’d told Wei WuXian and, no he had no idea what the demonic cultivator was planning.

Jin ZiXuan gritted his teeth and pushed down the anxious anticipation curling in his gut. This
Discussion Conference was crucial. His father could not get away with this but Jin ZiXuan did not want LanlingJin as a whole to be tarred with the same brush. It would be a delicate balancing act. Not only that but this would also be the meeting that decided the fate of the Yiling Patriarch.

Once everyone was settled, Jin GuangShan gave a motion and several strong disciples closed the doors to the hall. The doors were magnificent, solid wood and gorgeously carved. But they were also tremendously heavy so it required a few disciples on each side to close them. They were rather impractical and normally they were left open except for Discussion Conferences. It was a statement that no one was allowed in or out of the meeting until Jin GuangShan gave the order. Once the doors closed with a muted bang that echoed in the hall, Jin GuangShan stood and everyone quieted.

“Hello everyone and thank you for coming on such short notice,” Jin GuangShan began, “I am terribly sorry to trouble you but…”

He was cut off then by the sardonic voice of Nie Mingjue finishing his sentence for him.

“But you’ve caused a bit of trouble,” Nie Mingjue sneered.

There was shifting and quiet whispers for a moment. Rumours had spread far, both the version from Lanling and the Yiling one. People were torn on what to believe. LanlingJin under Jin GuangShan had done much to aid the cultivation world after the Sunshot Campaign and the Yiling Patriarch was wild and certainly had abilities to be feared. But the Yiling Patriarch hadn’t done anything since taking the Wen Remnants and it was known that he’d been invited by LanlingJin.

(Above, a crow looked on in curiosity.)

Jin GuangShan sighed, putting on an air of forbearance, “Truly, we thought to have the matter cleared up before it affected the rest of the cultivation world…”

Once again, Jin GuangShan was cut off.

“Did you think that anyone – that I – would not say something about the murder of Wei WuXian?” Jiang Wanyin asked. His tone seemed uncharacteristically mild but his sarcastic smile seemed reminiscent of some predatory creature with too many teeth trying to pretend it’s harmless in order to fool its prey.

Everyone was silent. Jiang Wanyin was young but already known as someone you didn’t want to make an enemy of, even without the Yiling Patriarch at his side. He was sharp-tongued, temperamental, a Sect Leader and skilled and powerful enough to be in the top five of the best cultivators of his generation. Not only that but having the Yiling Patriarch as his subordinate, however briefly, then fighting him and his Ghost General without hesitation was much admired for the sheer gutsy fearlessness.

Or, to put it crassly: he must have solid gold balls the size of boulders.

“I was unaware that Sect Leader Jiang cared so much about one who is no longer a part of his Sect,” Jin GuangShan said. His tone was reminiscent of an adult exasperated with the antics of unruly youths.

“Sect Leader Jin makes the mistake of thinking that Wei WuXian’s value to me only exists when he is a member of my Sect. Perhaps he does not realise that people are perfectly capable of caring about others even when they are not obligated to,” Jiang Wanyin observed, his tone regaining a hint of his usual mocking lilt.

Jin ZiXuan had to work to keep his face impassively unhappy.
Did he just…?

There was a muffled snicker from behind Nie Mingjue who, himself, seemed amused by this.

Jin GuangShan caught the implication and a small flush of anger worked its way across his face. He did not like it when he was undermined, insulted or disrespected.

“Considering your last interaction with him ended in quite the public fight, I was not aware Sect Leader Jiang forgave him for his disrespect,” Jin GuangShan said.

“Considering that Sect Leader Jin seems to think that, just because our last disagreement was made public, then he must know what it was about, I am surprised he still thinks that I would be uncaring about his own disrespect. You orchestrated a plan to trap and murder my brother for a crime he did not commit without even giving him the courtesy of defending himself. Not just physically either. You did not even give him the chance to defend against your baseless accusations and false assumptions. That shows far more disrespect than anything Wei WuXian has ever done. Not only to me and my brother, but also to my sister, who is your daughter-in-law, and to your son, who had invited Wei WuXian in genuine goodwill. An invitation you took malicious advantage of. You even showed disrespect to your newborn grandson, as you conspired to murder his uncle while using the bonds of affection for him as bait,” Jiang Wanyin said.

Jin GuangShan was the oldest and most experienced Sect Leader and his skill with words was not small. He could convince Wen RuoHan that he was loyal when he was not, cajole the populace into thinking he was a good and noble cultivator despite his shortcomings and talk his way into many women’s beds.

But Jiang Wanyin grew up with Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian was clever and quick-witted, liked to argue and play devil’s advocate to everything and nothing and did not seem to require pauses to breathe when talking. It made him very difficult to argue with much to the consternation of his teachers, including Lan Qiren. Jiang Cheng however, had considered arguing with Wei WuXian something of a hobby growing up and was one of the few who could outargue him. Not only that, but both had grown up under the tutelage of the Violet Spider and her sharp tongue was revered as a lethal weapon in its own right to match Zidian.

If Jin GuangShan thought he could take advantage of Jiang Wanyin’s youth, inexperience and lack of will to play political games for petty power he was very much mistaken.

Jiang Fengmian also had little will to expand YunmengJiang’s power, preferring to simply hold on to the power they already had and warily watched the outside politics for threats. He had taught his son how to keep an eye on things while not needing to get involved. It was, unfortunately, the only thing of political value he had taught as the landscape had changed so thoroughly after QishanWen’s dissolution.

“Then Jin-Gongzi’s invitation was genuine?” Lan XiChen asked politely. He already knew this but it needed to be asked.

“Of course,” Jin ZiXuan spoke before his father could put his own spin on things, “He is my wife’s younger brother and, although he could not make it to her wedding, it would be cruel to prevent him from meeting his nephew. After all, no one would dare suggest keeping Sect Leader Jiang away from his nephew. Why should Yiling Laozu be different? In addition,” he continued raising his voice over his father’s attempted interruption, “I am aware of the history between the Yiling Patriarch and LanlingJin and have no wish to make him an enemy when he has previously been such a staunch ally. Therefore, I had hoped that such common factors in my son – his nephew – and my wife – his beloved elder sister – would repair and generate good relations between us. While I might not get
along with that brother-in-law, I have no wish to be at odds with him. Since he agreed to my invitation, he must have felt the same.”

There were murmurs at this. Everyone was impressed by Jin ZiXuan. It was fairly known that Wei WuXian and Jin ZiXuan did not get along so they felt it was very impressive for Jin ZiXuan to overcome that to make peace with the feared Yiling Patriarch.

“Forgive me, but I must admit some confusion,” a minor Sect Leader said. His name was Yao.

“I also find confusion in some of my son’s words,” Jin GuangShan spoke, restraining his anger at Jin ZiXuan’s defiance. Jin ZiXuan clenched his fists under the table, “To which part, does Sect Leader Yao find confusing?”

“Both Sect Leader Jiang and Young Master Jin have claimed the Yiling Patriarch to be the brother of Sect Leader Jiang and Young Madam Jin and yet, as far as I am aware, Wei WuXian is not the son of honoured late Sect Leader Jiang Fengmian…?” Sect Leader Yao said, trailing off pointedly.

Jiang Wanyin’s face darkened. This again.

(In the crow’s eyes above, the red embers seem to burn brighter.)

“Wei WuXian is the son of Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren,” Jiang Wanyin said, eyes boring into an increasingly uncomfortable Yao’s, “However, as he was raised with myself and my sister, regardless of his differing parentage and name, that makes him no less a member of my family. He is my brother, no matter what those outside the situation may think.”

Nie Mingjue gave a pointed triumphant look to Lan XiChen who returned it with a rueful one. Jiang Wanyin turned back to Jin GuangShan.

“Or any disagreements we might have,” Jiang Wanyin finished pointedly.

“A broken arm and a sword through the stomach seems excessive for a disagreement,” Jin GuangShan said, “Surely we can be mistaken in thinking your bond was broken?”

“I was under the impression that Sect Leader Jin had many siblings, many of whom are brothers,” Jiang Wanyin observed, “Are you telling me you never get rough with each other when you get angry with them?”

*Even if he says that, isn’t that still too violent?* Everyone thought.

Nie Mingjue turned to grin sadistically at Nie HuaiSang who gulped and tried to surreptitiously edge away.

“But, perhaps Wei WuXian and I simply have much worse tempers than anyone in the Jin Clan,” Jiang Wanyin seemed to concede.

A depressed shadow seemed to come over the audience. *Don’t say that!* They internally wailed. The thought of the Yiling Patriarch having a temper as bad as Sect Leader Jiang’s was not one they wanted to contemplate.

“Sect Leader Yao, shouldn’t you have already known this?” Jin ZiXuan asked, “On Phoenix Mountain, my wife referred to Wei WuXian repeatedly as the little brother she had raised and did not like others insulting him. In fact, I don’t think anyone gave her the apology she had asked for.”

Sect Leader Yao flushed and tried to remember. He had dismissed it easily then as a woman’s soft
As fascinating as this family debate is,” Nie Mingjue drawled, “It all boils down to treachery on the side of LanlingJin, aside from Jin-gongzi, towards the Yiling Patriarch.”

“How else were we meant to save the life of my nephew?” Jin GuangShan cried.

“Perhaps finding the genuine culprit would be an idea,” Jiang Wanyin threw out sarcastically.

“No one has been more hostile to Jin ZiXun in the past than Wei WuXian,” Jin GuangShan insisted, starting to show his annoyance at how this isn’t going his way, “And he is certainly powerful and skilled enough to have done it.”

“Two years is an extensively long time for Wei WuXian to take revenge and in such a banal way,” Jiang Wanyin commented, “I’m impressed at the improvement of his patience and his memory. Usually he would easily forget people, even the annoying ones in favour of whatever new entertainments he comes up with to amuse himself.”

In the corner, Jin ZiXun flushed in embarrassed anger. Indeed, the first thing that had come out of Wei WuXian’s mouth when he saw him at Qiongqi Path was ‘who are you?’

“Which, from the last time I was in Yiling, appears to be working on objects like the Demon Wind Compass,” Jiang Wanyin continued, enjoying the progressively reddened face of the Jin Sect Leader, “Though I also heard him mention potatoes.”

The last time he was in Yiling, according to everyone else’s knowledge, was during their ‘disagreement’.

“Potatoes?” Someone said in the crowd blankly.

“Apparently the Wen Sect Remnants were working on farming and building. But this was two years ago,” Jiang Wanyin said.

Many had blank faces at this. For such people as cultivators to do something so worldly and materialistic as farming seemed to be a rather foreign concept. In his corner, Jin GuangYao resisted the urge to face palm.

“The last time I can recall Wei WuXian waiting so long for his revenge was only for three months and that was only because he’d been rather detained during that time. And from what I recall, this made the method of revenge rather more creative than normal due to the delay,” Jiang Wanyin continued when no one seemed to have a response. Compared to the stress of the last Emergency Discussion Conference that had Wei WuXIan as the topic, Jiang Cheng was surprised to find he was almost enjoying himself.

“Oh? And who did he take revenge on?” Jin GuangShan asked, hoping he could turn this around.

Jiang Wanyin grinned, taking away Jin GuangShan’s hope. It was a feral, vicious, toothy kind of grin that looked like it only needed fangs to be complete.

“Wen Chao,” he said, pleased at the thought.

There was silence. The only ones who knew what happened to Wen Chao were Lan Wangji, Jiang Wanyin and Wei WuXian. The rest only knew from rumours that Wen Chao had been chased down by a black ghost playing a flute, now known to be Wei WuXian, and that Jiang Wanyin had given the final killing blow. The head had never been produced the way Wen Xu’s had as, according to
Jiang Wanyin and Wei WuXian, it wouldn’t have been recognisable anyway.

This left the rest up to the audience’s macabre imagination. In this rare case however, reality was actually worse than the public’s wildest imagination.

Jin GuangShan had no answer to that. But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try. He’d come too far to just give up.

“Even so, perhaps he was delayed. Wei WuXian has proven his hostility towards LanlingJin. Does no one remember the lives lost at Qiongqi Path when he unjustifiably took the prisoners of war left to our keeping? The way he threatened Jin ZiXun beforehand at a banquet he had barged into uninvited? My son may have had honourable intentions but the invitation to such a man was dangerous. It may have even made him arrogant enough to cast the curse in the first place in order to get away with it! As for Sect Leader Jiang’s accusations of ‘banal’, who would call such a grisly curse as the hundred-hole curse, ‘banal’?”

Jin ZiXuan went pale and then bit his cheek to prevent from saying something he shouldn’t have. This was not due to his father undermining him but something else. Since his father mentioned the prisoners of war, Jin ZiXuan could only think of the people he’d met at the Burial Mounds. The wary Luo Yaling, suspicious teenager Xia Bolin, jolly Chang Jianhong and the terrified, pale face of Wei Yuan.

Wei Yuan who had run screaming at the sight of Jin ZiXuan in his gold clothes; who his kinsmen had orphaned at less than a year old.

Lan XiChen had also paled at the remembrance and Lan Wangji’s fists tightened on his knees.

Whispers started up. Talking about the hundred-hole curse.

“Besides,” Jin GuangShan continued, seeing Jin ZiXun had gained the audience’s sympathy, “Jin ZiXun may have gone with a number of people, he’d have needed the help in protecting himself, but he only wanted to confront Wei WuXian in a way where he not only couldn’t get away from what he had done but had the privacy to undo his curse before it became a public spectacle.”

“That was a rather violent way to ask,” Jin ZiXuan said flatly.

“My son,” Jin GuangShan sighed, “You only came in towards the end after the negotiations had already broken down. It was only because of Wei WuXian’s shameless refusal that things had escalated the way they did.”

“But what I was informed,” Nie Mingjue cut in, “There were 300 people present, 200 of whom were archers.”

Jin GuangShan was very annoyed. He resisted the urge to turn and glare at his wife even though he usually feared her. He knew she’d been the one to tell Nie Mingjue such things. Not only that, but of all things, his son had to take after her far too much in personality! He just knew it was her influence that had led to this rebellion.

Not only that, but Jiang Yanli had proven herself to be more than the plain meek girl he’d assumed she was and her marriage to his son had not given him the benefits of an alliance with YunmengJiang he’d wanted. Then his son had turned out to be actually smitten with her! It was unfathomable to Jin GuangShan.

(In the rafters, a crow ruffled her feathers slightly. The motion was more static than most birds.
It was nearly time.

(In a shadowed forest not too far away, red pupils gleamed in a handsome face. The man smiled and gave a motion to his two companions. As one, they kicked their horses into a canter.)

“And yet, weren’t many of those who accompanied my nephew harmed grievously by the Ghost General? That dead dog obedient to the Yiling Patriarch?” Jin GuangShan beseeched.

Those who have met Wen Ning felt uncomfortable at how he was spoken of.

(The crow’s red glow strengthened briefly.)

“Did that dangerous corpse not try to attack my son when he attempted to talk down his master?” Jin GuangShan turned to his son, “Can you so easily forget how you nearly lost your life?”

“I remember,” Jin ZiXuan admitted grudgingly. It wasn’t like he could defend that without revealing that he’d visited the Burial Mounds after the attack.

Triumph flashed across Jin GuangShan’s face. He’d finally found his opponents’ weak spot.

“You see? Sect Leader Jiang and his sweet-natured older sister might want to claim Wei WuXian as their family, but can you really claim someone as family when they tried to widow their so-called older sister?”

Jiang Wanyin’s face darkened.

(The crow closed her eyes for the first time since entering the room. If she had not, the red glow might have been noticeable.)

(The lookouts at the gate leading to Koi Tower gave an exclamation at the sight of horse borne travellers closing in fast.)

(Jiang Yanli, blissfully unaware of the insults levelled at her family, stopped humming to her son at the noise from the gate.)

“Unless Jin ZiXun’s curse is broken, he is condemned to a slow humiliating death,” Jin GuangShan orated to his audience, “So when the opportunity came, Wei WuXian took aim at my son and heir, the pride of LanlingJin! We of LanlingJin have been nothing but friendly to the Yiling Patriarch! But since the war, his arrogance and greed have grown and he has done nothing but attack my Sect! Can we really allow such a beast to continue to prowl in the shadows just out of our sight, to attack whenever he feels like it? He is too dangerous! Even in the Sunshot Campaign, when he used his Stygian Tiger Seal, he attacked his own allies as well as our enemies! He still keeps such a dangerous artefact and refused repeatedly to give it up despite everyone voicing concerns!”

There were murmurings at this. Everyone was getting caught up in Jin GuangShan’s rhythm and were remembering the how discomfited his abilities had made them.

Jin ZiXuan gritted his teeth, but was momentarily distracted by a crackling sound. He looked to his right and realised Jiang Wanyin had his hand caressing the ring Zidian which was releasing purple sparks. His expression did not bode well.

Lan XiChen and Lan Wangji were unhappy with the way Jin GuangShan had finally turned the conversation in his favour. Nie Mingjue looked disgusted at how easily distracted the others were.

(There was a shout at the realisation that the riders were not slowing down or responding to their
hails. But they’d started trying to close the gates too late. The horses thundered through the gate, the air ringing with their cries.

The horses thundered up to the very entrance to the building where they were reigned in with a wild circle. The horses acted completely untamed, rearing and giving out horse screams.

Jiang Yanli leaned forward and beamed with delight, recognising the riders.

Everyone else either pissed their pants or close to it in utter terror at the realisation of the riders’ identities.)

Eventually, Jiang Wanyin could take it no more. There was a loud crackle that silenced the crowd immediately. Jin GuangShan and Jin ZiXuan managed to prevent themselves from flinching, feeling static electricity crawl up their arms, raising their fine hairs.

(“If any harm comes to my horse,” the sole female rider said, sneering down at the terrified lackeys, “I will take it out of your organs.”

All three riders entered the tower.

None were able to stop them.)

“Or perhaps,” Jiang Wanyin said, silky and dangerous, focussing unerringly on Jin GuangShan, “You should cease provoking those more dangerous than you. Especially when they so generously leave you be after you continue needling them for things that aren’t yours. Tell me, which is more arrogant: the flying dragon or the lizard who keeps biting the dragon to try stealing its wings?”

(The horses continue to rear and buck, not letting anybody near.

It was with a moan of horror that a more eagle-eyed disciple realised the truth.

The horses were all dead.)

The silence only held for a second before Jin GuangShan pulled himself together. He refused to be cowed by an upstart younger than his legitimate son! Jin GuangShan was a contemporary of the boy’s father, the feared Wen RuoHan, QingHeng-Jun and others!

But just as he opened his mouth, there was a bang.

As one, everyone looked at the magnificent doors.

Another bang.

Jin GuangShan spun around to berate Jin GuangYao who had already left his post to hurry forward.

Before he reached it however, there was a slow creaking sound.

The cultivators and servants watched in shock as the doors slowly began to open.

Many made to stand and grasped their swords.

When the doors were halfway open, they paused. Those closest strained their eyes. It was dark in the corridor outside. All they could see was a black figure in the shadows.

Suddenly the doors flew all the way back and hit the walls with dual booming sounds.
Every cultivator in the hall felt their heart pound with adrenaline.

A single figure stood where he had flung the doors all by himself. He straightened from his crouch and they got a good look at him.

His face was pale and grey like it was drained of blood but there were black lines all up his face like veins. As they watched, the lines receded. His eyes looked at the hall blankly. His hair had been tied back in the loosest style imaginable but still revealed his ghastly face. He was dressed in fine black robes edged in ruby red swirls. Visible around his throat was a black cord looped many times with a blood-red pendant hanging off it. He had no visible weapons.

But he did not need any. Many quickly figured out this being’s identity and whispers erupted spreading this knowledge.

It was the conscious fierce corpse; the Ghost General, Wen Ning!

Wen Ning stepped aside and a taller man stepped forward with a woman beside him.

The woman’s face was pretty with a haughty arch to her brow and a disdainful air. Her hair was half in splendid twin braided buns with additional braids down the length of her hair. She was also dressed in magnificent black robes with jewel-bright reds lining and edging in artistic swirls. In one hand was a sleek black wooden fan with a red tassel. Her other hand was clenched in a fist with silver needles poking out from between every finger. The needles gleamed in the afternoon sunlight shining in the hall from the windows. The more observant noticed that she bore a resemblance to Wen Ning.

The man in front was a recognisable, if terrifying figure. He was also dressed in fine black with red swirls drifting from the edges. A black flute with a red tassel was tucked into his belt. Like Wen Ning, his hair was only loosely tied back with no top knot or bun but with the addition of accent braids in the back of his hair. His face was handsome and he had a smile on his face.

But such a description would not be able to indicate how horrifying his appearance truly is. He might be genially smiling but there was definitely something menacing in his expression, though if asked, no one could tell you what. All the man was doing, was standing there, but he was like a figure from a waking nightmare, generating all-encompassing terror onto his hapless spectators.

When he had entered, it seemed as if a shadow had passed over the sun, despite the afternoon light being as strong as ever. His very presence seemed to bring a weight like his spirit was much bigger than his body. Its oppressive aura seemed to affect everyone nearby making them still in fear. Like a rabbit identifying a much larger predator, all they could do was pray they were not noticed for they would surely die if they were.

The trio began casually walking up the free space in the middle. The hall was silent except the minor sect leaders swore they could hear the pounding of their hearts in their ears.

(In the rafters, the crow was very pleased.

Her master was here.)
What do you think? When did you figure out the bird?

It finally happened! This was one of the scenes I’d had in my head from the very beginning! Wei WuXian and the Wen Siblings crashing the Discussion Conference. Others include A-Yuan and Wifi’s interactions when he was bedridden in the first chapter and Wifi’s reaction to realising it was JZX who accidently scared WY.

Was this as awesome as in my head?
This chapter's a bit longer. Unfortunately, thanks to that and work etc. picking up my writing schedule has fallen behind. Hopefully, I'll still be able to update next weekend though. I'll do my best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Forgive the abrupt intrusion,” Wei WuXian said, his smooth baritone echoing in the Golden Hall, “But, considering this Discussion seems to be about myself and those under my protection, we thought it best to attend.”

Jin GuangShan seemed to be almost turning purple. This was a familiar expression to Wei WuXian as it was a common one on his more prim and proper teachers. Wei WuXian cocked his head to the side slightly. He was careful to keep his body language harmless and non-threatening. The contrast between that and his judiciously heightened aura full of resentful energy that seeped through the room was confusing everyone.

Cultivators had well developed survival instincts as people, and descendants of people, who regularly went out into dangerous situations. These instincts were especially well-tuned to resentful energy. The most common creatures encountered, after all, were ghosts and walking corpses and they were the ones that produced and used resentful energy. This meant that when they encountered the constant aura of resentful energy around Wei WuXian, they became discomforted because something in their hindbrain said: this is a danger.

Fight.

Or flee.

But humans weren’t the best at translating base instinct into knowledge. They believed that their instinctual dislike and fear of Wei WuXian meant that Wei WuXian was doing something or had become someone who was sinister, malicious and not to be trusted. Their reactions to his aura meant that their perceptions were warped. Wei WuXian’s appearance hadn’t changed much since becoming a demonic cultivator except, perhaps, gaunter and more worn. Unless he was angry, his smiles were the same as always.

To everyone else, his malevolent aura twisted his features into becoming sharper, crueler, more arrogant. His smiles, once contagious, became slashes on his face showing teeth that seemed too sharp.

Wei WuXian hadn’t noticed this difference at first. After taking revenge on Wen Chao, he’d simply returned to fight alongside Jiang Cheng. It was only after about the third time Jiang Cheng jumped, startled, that they began figuring it out.

The more resentful energy brought to the surface, the more his appearance appeared warped into something shadowy and menacing. Wei WuXian had tried to reduce it as much as possible outside of battle, but it proved impossible to diminish entirely. He simply had too much resentful energy to bottle up. He suspected that even if he could, locking up such energy might not have been good for
him.

And so, Wei WuXian had resigned himself to having people constantly become unnerved by his very presence. He’d tried joking more to get people to forget it but had often defaulted into exuding more arrogance then he’d felt so everyone had an excuse on why his presence agitated them. This way no one would realise how saturated his body had become with resentful energy.

But now Wei WuXian was through babying the scared little cultivators. He’d grown used to living on the Burial Mounds where he didn’t have to restrain himself so much. None of the people there balked at him anymore and they were all aware of his resentful energy.

Besides, he’d tried getting them to forget him and think he’s harmless. They’d tried to kill him and attack his people. So, now?

Now, he would get them to fear him.

He tried not to feel too pleased at the clear nervous twitching in Jin GuangShan. He wasn’t even close to the man. Wei WuXian had halted at the invisible line marked by the start of Jiang Cheng and Nie Mingjue’s tables.

“Jin GuangYao,” Wei WuXian addressed, turning his head to face the man, “Last time I was here, you set up a table for me. Regretfully, at that time, I could not accept due to urgent business. But I hope you will still set up places for the three of us this time. I have nowhere else I need to be today.”

“Shouldn’t you be asking the master of this Sect for a place here?” Jin GuangShan said before Jin GuangYao could move.

Wei WuXian inclined his head in acknowledgment and turned his head in the other direction.

“Madam Jin?”

“You are welcome here,” Madam Jin said. She was viciously pleased by Wei WuXian’s acknowledgment of her, “We may as well set the tables where you are standing. As you said: you are the topic of today’s emergency Discussion along with my husband and nephew.”

Jin GuangYao sprung into motion. Jin GuangShan sent a blistering stare at Madam Jin which she just sneered at. But the Sect Leader did not protest his disfavoured son’s actions. Jin GuangYao was efficient and quickly set up simple tables for the new guests. Each thanked him. Jin GuangYao could not restrain a twitch of surprise when the fierce corpse spoke to him. Wen Qing set her fan down on the table with a click that echoed in the silent room.

“Now, which topic shall we address first?” Wei WuXian asked pleasantly.

“Perhaps it would be best to address the current life-threatening matter,” Nie Mingjue spoke cutting off Jin GuangShan, “The curse on Jin ZiXun. What do you know of it?”

“The hundred-hole curse. The victim would gradually develop holes all over their body which would grow steadily larger and larger until they look like a human sieve. After the skin was covered the curse would extend to the organs. A curse that’s rather hard to remove after being cast. Only two methods for removal: get the person who cast it to remove it or kill the person who cast it,” Wei WuXian recited.

“Do you know who placed it?” Nie Mingjue asked.

Wei WuXian shrugged indifferently, “How should I know? I’m sure there are many candidates.”
“Liar!” Jin ZiXun shouted lunging from his spot lurking in the corner, “You did this to me! Who else could have done it?”

“Many?” Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow, “You’re not as popular as you seem to think you are. Besides,” Wei WuXian continued past Jin ZiXun’s sputtering, “as I told you at Qiongqi Path, if I wanted to kill you I wouldn’t use something that can be used by anyone. After all, I have so few test subjects these days for experimenting with demonic cultivation. If I wanted you dead, why would I not also use this chance to test out something new?”

Murmurs filled the hall. On one hand, they could see where the Yiling Patriarch was coming from. On the other hand, the idea he could potentially do more than what they already knew he was capable of was unsettling. It was also possibly a lie, but privately no one thought it was likely with Wei WuXian’s confident, if not arrogant, demeanour.

“But the real reason I can say, I did not curse you, is simple,” Wei WuXian leaned forward and rested his head on his hand. With the way he was sitting, it was an insultingly casual manner. Everyone leaned forward in anticipation. Wei WuXian smiled wider.

“You aren’t worth my effort.”

Stunned silence.

For a moment the words did not seem to click in Jin ZiXun’s brain. Then comprehension dawned and the man purpled. The brazen audacity! The insult!

“If it helps prove my innocence,” Wei WuXian continued after a beat, “I imagine you’ve done a lot of rituals to rebound the curse. That would leave marks similar to the curse on the caster’s body. I am willing to prove in front of everyone here that I have no such marks.”

“Then, if Young Master Wei would be so kind,” Lan XiChen requested politely, “Perhaps we can offer some privacy…?”

Lan XiChen looked to Jin GuangYao to see if he had many options, and Jin GuangYao did look thoughtful. But Wei WuXian waved him off.

“No need,” he said cheerfully, “Everyone knows I am shameless, and I have nothing to hide anyway.”

As such he immediately began removing the top half of his garments. First the black outer robe then the red inner robe. When he finally shrugged them off, they lay crumpled around his waist. A gasp seemed to go through the hall.

Indeed, Wei WuXian had no marks from the hundred-hole curse. But he was definitely not unmarked. Cultivators, with their spiritual energy and access to first-rate medicine, never gained scarring except by certain objects.

This made Wei WuXian the most scarred cultivator any of them had ever seen.

The scars Wei WuXian had collected prior to arriving at Lotus Pier, such as the dog bite, were faded to the point of being barely visible. Only close attention and an expert eye like Wen Qing could have noticed them.

On his front, facing the four Great Sect Leaders and their subordinates, there was only one scar. The seared mark of the Wen Sect. Most, if not all, had heard about the circumstances leading to this scar. The remembrance and evidence of formerly praised heroic and righteous behaviour made some
doubt their previous assertions of villainous behaviour.

On the back was a different matter. At first, no one realised they were scars at all. Thin purple lines criss-crossed Wei WuXian’s back. Everyone from the minor sects were shocked.

What on earth caused this?

Nie HuaiSang, noticing their reactions, tried to lean over so he could stare, nearly falling over in the process.

In addition to the strange purple marks were three pale starbursts. One near the left shoulder-blade. One on the right of the spine mid-way down the back. The last was also on the right side of the body but half-hidden by the crumpled clothes.

These were the last remnants of the three arrow-wounds from Qiongqi Path.

“As you can see, there is no evidence of such a curse,” Wei WuXian said.

“Young Master Wei,” Sect Leader Ouyang called out. Wei WuXian glanced back at him. This Sect Leader was under YunmengJiang’s protection and, while not close, the two and Jiang Cheng had been friendly with each other, “May this person ask what caused the marks to your back?”

Wei WuXian shrugged, making the purple lines shimmer in the afternoon light, “The three white marks are from the arrows I was hit with at Qiongqi Path, they’ll fade entirely soon, no doubt. The purple ones are from Zidian.”

That made many people stare at Jiang Cheng who rolled his eyes. His idiot brother had forgotten entirely about the marks until Jiang Cheng had noticed them one day during the Campaign and was given the full explanation behind them.

“When the Wen Sect came to Lotus Pier after the XuanWu’s defeat, they did not initially tell us that they were going to take over our Sect. Instead they simply demanded punishment on Wei WuXian for ‘distracting’ that Wen-dog Chao during the hunt. Since it was believed that no retribution would fall on our Sect if we punished Wei WuXian, we went for the safer option. Mother used Zidian on Wei WuXian. We turned on the Wen delegation when they went too far; demanding Wei WuXian’s hand cut off and gloating about Lotus Pier becoming a supervision office,” Jiang Cheng said impatiently, laying out the facts. He hadn’t liked his mother’s actions but in hindsight he could understand it, “Due to being on the run afterwards the injuries were not able to be healed all the way. Wei WuXian had also been taken and trapped in the Burial Mounds shortly afterwards which hadn’t helped.”

The purple colour was from the residual energy trapped in the scars. It was harmless and didn’t affect Wei WuXian’s demonic cultivation at all, not unlike how the resentful energy in the food grown in the Burial Mounds didn’t affect spiritual energy.

“You are capable of many things with Demonic Cultivation that the rest of us cannot do,” Jin GuangShan said, wanting to move on before anyone could recollect that Wei WuXian had once been justly praised, “How do we know you did not block such a backlash?”

“Because I don’t have the time nor inclination to mess with curses?” Wei WuXian asked wryly. He had been warned that they would try such a response. He continued before they could attempt to answer his rhetorical question.

“Despite what Sect Leader Jin and his nephew like to think, I have more important things to do than sit in my cave and think of petty retribution. I just don’t care. Not about your opinions of me nor
your petty insults or even your worthless, power-hungry politicking; trying to throw your weight around and messing with business that does not concern you. I. Don’t. Care.”

Jin GuangShan did not know which was worse: the increasing pressure like a weight upon his chest, the fact that Wei WuXian just said that all of Jin GuangShan’s ambitions were worthless to him or how he seemed to treat them as annoying pests. Like flies hanging around his food.

“What I do care about,” Wei WuXian said, voice dropping dangerously, leaning forward and his eyes starting to flicker red, “Is the safety and well-being of the fifty-something people in my care. I have been busy, because I have spent the last two years learning how to manage fifty-something people and making the Burial Mounds hospitable for them. The latter of which is still on ongoing process.”

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. The confrontation was something they could not look away from.

“So, no. I don’t care about the inaccurate rumours you start about me or your power-mongering or even your idiotic nephew’s, frankly bewildering, grudge or whatever against me. It is not my fault that your nephew finally offended someone who cares more for such things and is less forgiving than I am. Considering what I know of his conduct, this was an outcome that would have occurred sooner or later. So, let me be blunt: if he dies from his curse, all I would think is, ‘that is not a good way to die’ and move on. It has nothing to do with me. If he survives the curse? Fine, I don’t care, just don’t get in my business because, as I have mentioned, I have more important things to do than to deal with someone who, ultimately, doesn’t matter.”

Wei WuXian had a lot of time to think and ruminate on the encounter at Qiongqi Path. The more he thought about it and its potential outcomes, the more he became upset about it. This small speech was the culmination of his annoyance.

To be so insolently called unimportant and have his very life so undervalued, enraged Jin ZiXun. Immediately, ignoring the shouts from his uncle and cousins, he drew his sword and lunged to attack Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian didn’t move. To everyone’s surprise, the fierce corpse didn’t move either. Instead, it was Wen Qing who snapped open her fan and swept it at Jin ZiXun. The breeze that resulted was disproportionately large and filled with black miasma. Resentful energy, some realised. The wind stopped Jin ZiXun in his tracks with its force and he continued to stand there, coughing. The miasma had fouled the air and Jin ZiXun had to pant to gain some fresh, breathable air into his lungs after accidently breathing the miasma in. It was only a second, but a second was all the famed medic needed and she threw a single silver needle at the man. It hit the mark and he slumped over, immobile.

Only Jin GuangShan’s coughing broke the silence. The edges of the miasma had reached him and he had also accidently breathed some in, though not as much as his nephew.

Everyone was stunned. None of them had ever seen someone taken down so quickly and efficiently – and from a sitting position too!

Indeed, Wen Qing retained her proper sitting posture as she examined her fan with a pleased air. She then promptly used it as it was meant for and fanned her face. Some people momentarily panicked but nothing happened.

“I like this fan,” Wen Qing mused into the near-silence. The fan was made of black silk with red designs. Some of the designs, it was noted, looked like arrays.
Wei WuXian chuckled, “I’m glad you like your present, Qing-jie.”

“Wei Ying.”

“Yes, Lan Zhan?” Wei WuXian turned to Lan Wangji who seemed to be aggravated. The audience, used to the shocks that kept coming in this Discussion Conference, barely noted the familiar exchange between noted rivals.

“Fix your clothes,” Lan Wangji ordered.

Wei WuXian blinked than looked down. Sure enough, he hadn’t put his clothes back on, yet. He fixed them.

“Would you look at that,” he said mildly, “No wonder there seemed to be a breeze.”

Lan XiChen cleared his throat, “Regarding Wei-gongzi’s prior comments: a life should still be saved whenever it can.”

Wei WuXian nodded amiably in agreement.

Are we just going to leave Jin ZiXun like that? Jin ZiXuan thought, I guess it keeps him from interfering…

“What about my own life then, Zewu-Jun? More importantly, what about the lives of those innocents under my care? Should I just let the Jin Clan kill them? Repeatedly, the Jin Clan has attempted to invade my home and try to kill us.”

“What innocents?” Someone demanded, “You protect Wen-dogs!”

Wen Qing’s grip tightened but Wei WuXian had to force himself not to grin.

He’d been waiting for this.

“Once, that was true. However, now you’ll find that there is no one living on the Burial Mounds who go by the name ‘Wen’,” Wei WuXian said.

“What does that mean?” Nie Mingjue demanded, leaning forward with narrowed eyes, “Aren’t these the same people you took from Qiongqi Path? The prisoners-of-war from the QishanWen Sect?”

“They are the very same people,” Wei WuXian nodded at Nie Mingjue, “Although, their status as ‘prisoners-of-war’ can be debatable for quite a few of them. Despite what many of you might think, even in the Wen Clan, Wen RuoHan’s actions, and those of his… sons… are considered detestable. Those under my protection condemn those that agreed with Wen RuoHan’s ‘vision’. As such, in a decision that has been a long time in the making, they have decided to cast off the clan name Wen and take on,” here Wei WuXian had to raise his voice to be heard over the clamours of shock and disbelief, “New family names honouring others they love as family. There are no more Wen’s of QishanWen.”

Wen Ning stood and handed Nie Mingjue an elegant scroll. He moved and handed each Great Sect Leader with an identical scroll. Nie Mingjue immediately unrolled it and his eyes widened at the list. Nie HuaiSang peered over his brother’s shoulder.

“I’m afraid I cannot give everyone a copy,” Wei WuXian said in apology, “We had little time to make this. But on those scrolls is a list of those under my care with their new names. Their ages and closest living relatives are also listed as well.”
All the Great Sect Leader’s examined the scroll except for Jin GuangShan who merely glanced at it in barely veiled disgust and threw it aside. Madam Jin, arm like a striking snake, snatched it up and began to read it instead. Jin GuangYao tried to read it over her shoulder. Madam Jin didn’t object.

“This is…” Nie Mingjue was growing furious again. There were a growing number of implications in this simple list that Nie Mingjue did not like, “Who is Xia Bolin?”

“A boy who found a teenage girl fleeing from members of the LanlingJin Sect and tried to hide her and lied to the cultivators after her,” Wei WuXian said.

“Unfortunately, it was all for naught,” Wen Qing said. Former Wen Qing? “They found him and Wen Shijing, as she was known at the time, beat them up and sent them both to Qiongqi Path. They’ve become very fond of each other and recently married.”

Many eyes in their audience widened. They looked longingly at the scrolls eager for more information.

“I have a nephew now?” Jiang Cheng asked drily.

“Ah, yes,” Wei WuXian laughed, “I meant to notify you. He is the other reason I’ve been busy these past couple of years. Toddlers really do have quite a lot of energy. Good luck with that, Jin ZiXuan.”

Jin ZiXuan scowled at him.

“Wei Yuan,” Madam Jin read, “He’s three?”

“That’s right,” Wei WuXian said, “He was a little under a year old when I met him at Qiongqi Path. I’ve been helping to take care of him and recently adopted him as my son.”

“What was a baby doing among prisoners-of-war?” a woman demanded from the throng. A man next to her tried to quiet her but she slapped his hand away.

Sect Leader Ouyang, who had a son about that age, was also furious, “Sect Leader Jin, what is the meaning of this?”

“I did not authorise this!” Jin GuangShan protested, eyes wide at the sudden outrage directed at him.

“Someone did!” Nie Mingjue snapped. He was furious about the treatment of people he didn’t want to defend and furious that he was furious about it, “And it is you and your Sect that is responsible!”

Murmurs began echoing throughout the hall. People began speaking, against the Wens, against their treatment, suspicions against LanlingJin, protests of LanlingJin’s just innocence, debates on the Wen’s changing their name and so on.

Jin GuangShan attempted to protest his innocence against Nie Mingjue’s increasingly tenuous hold on his temper. Nie HuaiSang had rescued the scroll and was examining it with wide eyes. Jin GuangYao, who normally tried to mediate between his father and sworn brother, was distracted by the scroll. His ever-present smile had faded to a slight frown.

Jiang Cheng had allowed minor Sect Leader’s to come see his copy of the scroll, warning them that he wanted it back. Wei WuXian was tapping his fingers against his small table. Finally, Wei WuXian’s patience ran out and he let out a piercing whistle.

Immediately, silence fell, all eyes on the irritated Yiling Patriarch.
“I wonder why so many are surprised at this,” Wei WuXian began, “When I requested the location of my friend, Wen Ning, two years ago, I told a sequence of events to jog Jin ZiXun’s memory. A group of free Wen’s had been night-hunting, doing their righteous duty, headed by Wen Ning. Jin ZiXun had come across them while hunting for the same creature. He decided to force that group of Wen’s to use my invention, the Spirit-Attracting Flag, despite its clear dangers. Naturally, they protested, as the likelihood they would be killed using such a dangerous method was high. Jin ZiXun did not care and eventually sent them to Qiongqi Path to be used as slave labour instead. When I first heard of these events, I thought ‘wow, this person is just like Wen Chao.’”

This time Wei WuXian tapped his chest where the Wen brand was, reminding everyone how he got such a mark.

“Just. Like. Wen Chao.”

Humiliated, Jin ZiXun could only lie there and listen. No muscle was under his control. He could not open his mouth to try and defend himself or divert attention.

“A-Ning is not as lucky as I am though,” Wei WuXian continued, “The ones in charge of Qiongqi Path beat him to death. But, that was fine wasn’t it? Wen-dogs can’t be considered human after all.”

“That was an isolated incident,” Jin GuangShan protested.

“It wasn’t,” Wen Ning said. His voice was quiet but this was the first time he’d spoken except to thank Jin GuangYao. Many had to keep from startling.

The fierce corpse talked!

“There were others in addition to myself,” Wen Ning continued. As a corpse, Wen Ning did not need to blink and it made his stare creepy.

“Not only deaths, but LanlingJin imitated the Wen Sect in other ways,” Wei WuXian said, “Among those under my protection is a man named Chang Jianhong.”

Those who had visited the Burial Mounds recognised the name. He had been the large, cheerful man who enjoyed cooking and had married a tiny smiling seamstress. He had wanted to kneel before Jiang Yanli for her recipe despite his bad leg which made him walk with a pronounced limp. He had been the one to give the Lans and Jin ZiXuan vegie buns.

“He now walks with a permanent limp due to a thigh injury which was so severe it damaged the nerves in his leg,” Wei WuXian’s eyes bored into Jin GuangShan’s, “That injury was a burning brand like the ones the Wen Sect’s servants had carried around. Only this brand was not in the shape of a sun. It was in the shape of a peony. He is not the only one to bear this mark either.”

Jin ZiXuan closed his eyes in disbelief. Was there no end to this?

“I had no idea destroying the Wen Sect gave you leave to act like them, Sect Leader Jin,” Wei WuXian said in faux politeness.

Whispers continued to erupt. It was difficult to ignore a situation once someone forcefully shoved evidence in front of your nose. But there were still people who closed their eyes and ears to the facts.

“Why did you not notify anyone of this, Wei WuXian?” Sect Leader Yao asked.

“Who would have listened? Those people had to be treated and the Burial Mounds pacified. By the time I had an opportunity to say my side of the story, everyone had already made up their minds,”
Wei WuXian said shrugging.

“Not true,” Sect Leader Yao refuted, “Of course we would have heard you.”

Others agreed. Of course they would have been against such things!

They would not have. At that time, no one would have listened to Wei WuXian. They were sympathetic to Jin GuangShan for losing four people to the Yiling Patriarch. They were also patting themselves on the back saying ‘I always knew that Yiling Patriarch was no good!’ Congratulating themselves on foreseeing a danger they did nothing about and didn’t have to do anything about. Glorifying in their self-satisfaction in being right.

Even if he did tell someone, who would have spoken up? The only reason any of them had the courage to do so now was because Sect Leaders Nie and Jiang criticized Jin GuangShan so badly first. Even then, they were parents naturally outraged over a child’s mistreatment.

But, of course, no one there thought about such things. Wei WuXian wanted to argue but Wen Qing gripped his wrist and gave him a look. That wasn’t what they were here for. Wei WuXian exhaled but let it go.

“Therefore, your attempted raids of my home are unjustified on many accounts, Sect Leader Jin. There is only myself and a group of innocents wishing only to live their lives out in peace. So, I will make myself clear, and I hope everyone will listen and heed my words,” Wei WuXian said. He shifted the passive resentful energy in his body so it was much closer to the surface and made his eyes glow red. He grinned, knowing it looked too sharp to the eyes in front of him.

“Next time someone uninvited tries to force their way through my protections, I will have their corpse join those protections.”

He paused there, letting that sink in, “Understood, Sect Leader Jin? Or should I give a demonstration?”

“I think you’ve made yourself clear,” Jin ZiXuan said into the horrified silence.

Wei WuXian snorted softly before looking at Jin ZiXuan. The red glow faded and he let the resentful energy settle down to gently rest and curl like incense smoke under his skin.

“Jin ZiXuan, my… brother-in-law,” Wei WuXian said, sounding like he had to force the last words out of his mouth, “I owe you an apology.”

Now Jin ZiXuan was thrown off. Wei WuXian? Apologise to Jin ZiXuan? Perhaps some things weren’t truly impossible after all.

“I am grateful for your invitation and regret that I could not make it to the celebrations. I am sorry for believing the implication about the true purpose of your invite,” Wei WuXian said. He had practiced this apology in his head, trying to remember what he was taught about polite ways of speaking, “It is truly a shame that certain others continue to mess with things not their concern, making life harder for the both of us. Most of all, I must apologise for the attack on your person.”

Here, Wei WuXian gave a bow to the wide-eyed Jin ZiXuan.

“It was a false reaction and I take full responsibility. I am glad you are alive. I don’t get along with you, but even if you were not married to my beloved elder sister, my preference would still be having you alive, not dead. Also, if possible, away from me.”

Wei WuXian smiled and turned back to the more annoying Jin’s. Jin GuangShan was apoplectic. Nothing was going his way. Everyone had been distracted by the Wen’s treatment of all things. Why did that matter? Wasn’t it better that the QishanWen Sect quietly disappear? And the Yiling Patriarch! Who let him in? How did he come to know about this? Why couldn’t he have just died at Qiongqi Path?

He really was too dangerous to let live.

How could he just barge into Koi Tower and threaten them? Accuse them of being the same as the Wen Sect? He also took away Jin GuangShan’s previous advantage by apologising publicly to Jin ZiXuan who accepted much too easily!

Jin GuangShan needed to think quickly before things degenerated further. Unfortunately, Wei WuXian moved forward before he could think of something. Wei WuXian had truly taken over all control of the Discussion Conference.

“I would like to get to the two other points I wanted to get to in the Discussion Conference,” Wei WuXian said formally, “They are attached to a previous one.”

“You may speak,” Madam Jin said before her husband could pull himself together.

“Jin ZiXun,” Wei WuXian said like a death knell. All eyes were drawn to the immobile form on the ground in front of the dais where his uncle sat. He hadn’t moved and so was forced to only listen to those around him. He’d never been this humiliated in his life.

“If the reputation that appears to precede me was true, you and your clan would be ash, right now. Fortunately, I am no ‘Lord of Evil’ or merciless demon. That being said, even the most saintly person has a limit to their mercy and forgiveness and I am only a man.”

Everyone was frozen, listening to Wei WuXian’s smooth baritone echo in the otherwise silent hall.

“Considering your treatment of, not only myself, but of my elder sister – who is now married to your cousin – and of my newly adopted brother, I have to conclude that, long before you were cursed, you held a death-wish. Specifically, you seem to want, very dearly, for me to kill you. I can come to no other conclusion to explain your behaviour to me. It must truly sadden you that someone else gave you a death sentence before you could succeed in your attempts to commit suicide by angering me.”

Wei WuXian’s tone seemed pleasant but was also almost cold. Shudders ran up people’s spines.

“However, if you ever try to attack me or mine again, I will grant your wish of dying by my hand, and I promise you, it won’t be as dignified as the hundred-hole curse.”

Jin ZiXun was struck dumb. He couldn’t have spoken even if he were not immobilised. For the first time, he wondered if the terrifying actions he’d heard Wei WuXian did during the Sunshot Campaign were true.

Everyone else were internally panicking, what was more undignified than the hundred-hole curse?!

“As for you, Jin GuangShan,” Wei WuXian said, redirecting everyone’s attention from the pitiful man on the floor to his uncle behind him.

“You’re not much better. Since the Sunshot Campaign, you have lusted after my power and what
you see as the symbol of such power. You have been ceaseless in nagging for an artefact you have
no right to. You did not make it, you do not own it and you most certainly do not deserve it. I have
not, nor will I ever, trust you anywhere near the Stygian Tiger Seal. If I were to ever be forced to
give it up, you and the rest of your Sect, would be the last ones I could trust it to. If anyone here did
trust you with it, I would call them fools. So I will tell you now, I have every intention of destroying
the Stygian Tiger Seal.”

Gasps echoed in the hall and whispering started again. Destroy an object of such power? Was Wei
WuXian insane?

“Why would you destroy such a useful tool?” Jin GuangShan blurted out, too shocked to moderate
his words.

“Because it is too dangerous to be allowed to exist. I regret ever making the damn thing! It’s been
nothing but trouble. I do not trust it to remain in the same world where any greedy idiot tries to get
their hands on it, blind to the dangers. I have no doubt that, if I had died in that valley, my body
would have been searched for the cursed thing, which was probably just as much your intent as
supposedly curing your jerk nephew. So, yes, I’m going to destroy it.”

Wei WuXian narrowed his eyes at Jin GuangShan’s flabbergasted face. Wispy bits of hair seemed to
begin floating around Wei WuXian’s face and his eyes had flicked back to red.

“However, do not make the mistake of thinking that its destruction diminishes my power. If such an
attack does occur again from LanlingJin, or any sect, not only will I kill those attempting to carry it
out, I will return and slay anybody who masterminded the idiotic idea. I am sick and tired of seeing
those under my care afraid for their lives because of the crime of being related to the real criminals. I
am sick and tired of continuously being provoked by children pretending to be men who cry that it is
the villainous Yiling Patriarch’s fault when you were the ones to instigate things! I had secluded
myself from the world. I only came out for the love I bear my sister, to meet her son, my nephew.
Yet, I find myself unjustly accused and attacked without provocation. Jin ZiXun announced his
presence that day by shooting an arrow to my chest. If A-Ning had not caught it, things would be
very different. Now heed my words. This is the only warning I will give you: leave me alone and I
will leave you alone. Attack me and I will defend myself. Attack those under my protection and I
will slaughter you.”

By the time Wei WuXian had finished, all his hair was floating around his head like he was
underwater. Invisible energy buffered the hair and shimmered around him like a heatwave. His eyes
were glowing like red-hot coals. There was no smile on his face. It was cold, cruel and sharp. The
oppressive feeling was harsh, pressing down on everyone like they were standing deep underwater.
The room seemed dark like it was full of shadows.

In that moment, none doubted he would do exactly as he said.

Wei WuXian held for a moment before returning the invisible aura of resentful energy to his body,
carefully collecting it from every corner. This was entirely a mental exercise. To everyone’s eyes, he
did not move a muscle but the room appeared to brighten and his hair finally stopped defying gravity.
Yet, his eyes remained red.

“Agreed, Sect Leader Jin?” Wei WuXian asked in a mockery of politeness. He had learned this tone
from Jiang Cheng.

Jin GuangShan, who had been the focus of Wei WuXian’s attention did not seem to be able to speak
yet. He had previously thought only Wen RuoHan could be so frightening.
“We will not allow you to kill without evidence,” Nie Mingjue said.

Immediately, everyone wanted to bow at his feet. After such a terrifying display, Nie Mingjue still challenged Wei WuXian! Truly, was there anyone braver?

“I am not unreasonable, Sect Leader Nie,” Wei WuXian said, turning to look at him and forgetting that his eyes were still red. Nie Mingjue, to his credit, decided to ignore them. His more cowardly younger brother seemed to have stopped breathing at some point.

“I am merely frustrated and rapidly losing my patience. Of course, we will not strike first nor will I kill indiscriminately or without a surety of their crime. The only reason those cultivators were attacked in the last two weeks is because they attacked A-Ning as soon as they saw him,” Wei WuXian said, eyes finally fading to their normal dark colour.

“He is a fierce corpse,” Nie Mingjue observed, curious about the colour change.

“But I am not mindless,” Wen Ning said. If he were alive, he would have ruined the image they made right now by his continuous trembling. But he had given himself pep talks since they discussed what to say at the Conference all the way up to galloping through the gate of Koi Tower. Having the strength of his sister and Wei WuXian beside him helped. But he was still grateful that fear was distant in this body and that it was incapable of trembling or stammering.

“I make decisions the same way you or anyone else here does. If I decide to harm or not harm someone, it is my decision. The same decision everyone here makes every day. My body might be dead, but my mind and conscious are the same as it was when I was alive,” Wen Ning said.

Every one stared at him in shock. Wen Qing and Wei WuXian were proud of him, knowing how difficult speaking up would be for him.

Nie Mingjue considered them for a moment. He had a wealth of different feelings. Usually, he went with his gut instinct (which usually said to behead something) but he had a feeling beheading Jin GuangShan or Jin GuangYao wouldn’t help. Finally, he shrugged.

“I think I can agree with you having the right to defend yourself and ‘those under your protection’,” Nie Mingjue’s eyes narrowed in warning. “Don’t take it too far.”

Wei WuXian grinned at him, his aura making the usually sunny expression darker.

“I believe I can agree that leaving you be is the best option,” Lan XiChen said. He hid his uncertainty. He had no idea Wei WuXian would be so aggressive about it and his old doubts rose again. But Wangji had indicated to trust Wei WuXian so he would, “But I hope everyone would keep the needless death to a minimum.”

“Yes of course,” Wei WuXian acquiesced easily.

“Next time just visit Lotus Pier,” Jiang Cheng said grumpily. Wei WuXian laughed.

Trapped, Jin GuangShan could only stare in horror at his crumbled plan. This Discussion Conference had been to get rid of the Yiling Laozu not agree to leave him alone!

“It’s agreed then,” Nie Mingjue said.

“Wait a minute!” Jin GuangShan shouted.

“Three against one; Wei WuXian and his people are to be left alone,” Nie Mingjue said impatiently.
He suddenly turned to the minor sects, “Unless any of you have problems with this?”

Like anyone was going to object!

“In the meantime, someone should investigate LanlingJin for misconduct on the behalf of the prisoners-of-war left in their keeping,”Nie Minjue said grudgingly.

“Sect Leader Nie, Sect Leader Lan,”Wei WuXian said, “When I have figured out a method, could I bother you to be impartial witnesses to the destruction of the Stygian Tiger Seal? Oh, and Jin ZiXuan as well, I suppose.”

They agreed. Jin ZiXuan cast a glare his way. Why did he keep treating Jin ZiXuan as an afterthought?

“If that’s everything…”Wei WuXian started but Jin GuangShan cut him off.

“What about Jin ZiXun?”he snapped, “And do you really think you can just get away with attempting to murder my son with an insincere apology?”

“If I really was insincere I would not have given an apology in public,”Wei WuXian retorted. Saying that Wei WuXian gave insincere apologies was a common critique. No matter how he modulated his tone or chose his words,Wei WuXian’s apologies always seemed false even when he actually was sincere. Wei WuXian actually tried to seem sincere this time, utilising all of his A-Jie’s advice.

“Also, have I not done enough to prove that I did not do it? That you jumped to conclusions and immediately took the opportunity to try and kill me without proof?”Wei WuXian asked impatiently, “You are becoming irrational and very annoying.”

Jiang Cheng internally sighed. For all of Wei WuXian’s fondness for wordplay, he had to learn more subtlety in his insults. For once, it was Wei WuXian who was the more impatient of the two.

“There is no proof that you haven’t figured out how to circumvent the backlash!”Jin GuangShan insisted. He couldn’t lose here.

“What deformed logic are you saying?”Wen Qing demanded, “If there is no proof he is capable of doing so, then it can be assumed he cannot do so! You cannot demand proof of his inability! What form would such proof even take? You ask for something that cannot be proven!”

“Even if it were not some new ability from the heretical path,” Jin GuangShan said, switching his attention to the pretty medic, “Perhaps the famed Wen Qing aided him in his endeavour.”

“My name,”the famed medic said in a voice like a glacier, “is Wei Qing. As for your accusation: I have more important things to do than bother with mitigating the damage caused by maliciously harming others. I have patients to see, medicine to make and a family to take care of.”

“What?”Jin GuangShan said startled. He’d seen Wen Qing before when she was in Wen RuoHan’s service. He had thought her pretty but exceptionally frigid. She shut down all advances towards her and focussed entirely on her work and her younger brother who she was often caught berating. Jin GuangShan believed that she held a heart of ice due to this. It didn’t stop him from thinking lustful thoughts towards her but he didn’t have to like someone to think lustful thoughts about them.

“You’re married?”Jin GuangShan assumed. Wei Qing’s lips curled in disgust at the man. While he had been the Wen Sect’s ally, he had made advances to her and had not let up until she had left his presence despite making her rejection clear. Needless to say, she’s had a low opinion of him since.
“No,” Wei WuXian and Wei Qing said in unison with identical annoyed tones.

“It says here that Wei-gongzi adopted Maiden Wei and Wei Ning, formerly Wen Ning, into his family as siblings,” Lan XiChen said, holding up the list given before.

Jin GuangShan turned towards his wife and his bastard son nodded in confirmation to him.

“My elder sister Wei Qing,” Wei WuXian introduced, “and my younger brother, Wei Ning, courtesy: Qionglin.”

“Isn’t he dead?” a minor cultivator asked his neighbour in a whisper.

“Better not mention it,” came the wise reply.

“So you have put aside the Jiang family who raised you to be replaced by a new family?” Jin GuangShan said slyly, glancing at the annoyed Jiang Wanyin.

Jiang Cheng glared at Jin GuangShan, knowing what he was attempting. What was annoying was that it might have even worked to drive a wedge between them if it weren’t for the fact that Jiang Cheng had already yelled this accusation directly into Wei WuXian’s face. It was a voice to Jiang Cheng’s exact insecurities. Having this person speak them just made him furious.

Wei WuXian, very obviously, rolled his eyes.

“One would think, that with such a large family as your own, you would realise that a person can have more than one brother or sister,” he said dryly, “Wei Ning is my brother. Jiang Cheng is also my little brother and has been so for a lot longer. Wei Qing is my older sister and so is Jiang Yanli, Young Madam Jin. That makes Jin Ling my nephew and,” here Wei WuXian let out a sigh and continued in an almost glum tone, “Jin ZiXuan my brother-in-law.”

Jin ZiXuan glared furiously at Wei WuXian. He was taking time out of this important Conference to go on about this?

“And what do you think about this Sect Leader Jiang?” Jin GuangShan asked in false sympathy.

“Does it matter?” Jiang Cheng asked, indifferently, “Just because they are my older brother’s siblings doesn’t make them mine. They can be considered distant… distant cousins at best.”

Wei Qing and Jiang Cheng seemed to have a moment in looking at each other in mutual, agreeing dislike.

“We aren’t here about family squabbles,” Nie Mingjue snapped, “If everyone is so concerned about Jin ZiXun, then checkpoints should be set up to find the true culprit with the rebounding marks on them. Is LanlingJin incapable of doing so?”

Jin GuangShan flushed. The checkpoints Nie Mingjue suggested would require a lot of manpower, and therefore, wealth. Something LanlingJin boasted having a lot of. Nie Mingjue was clearly being mocking on this point.

“We can do so,” Jin GuangShan said stiffly.

“Then this meeting should be drawn to a close,” Nie Mingjue said bluntly, “No one’s going to come after you. Yiling Laozu will only come after you if you attack him first by his own words. The remains of QishanWen are no more and that so-called sect will never rise again. LanlingJin needs to be investigated for malicious misconduct toward the prisoners in their care. In the meantime, they can
set up checkpoints for Jin ZiXun’s attempted murderer. Is that everything?”

Everyone was slightly stunned at the quick summary of the meeting. Many could tell that Nie Mingjue was impatient and thought the meeting was over even though if certain people had their way they would have argued long into the night – or had the Yiling Patriarch and his new siblings in chains or dead.

“Sounds good to me,” Wei WuXian agreed standing, “Hey, Jiang Cheng, Jin Peacock, I want to see A-Jie and meet Jin Ling! That’s ok, right?”

“Who are you calling a peacock?” Jin ZiXuan burst out, having enough of this grating personality. He also stood alongside Jiang Cheng. All of them determined the meeting finished.

Everyone was in shock. Is this ok? Has it all ended? No one’s dead?

The ending led by Nie Mingjue seemed a bit too abrupt. When compared to the expected lynch mob Jin GuangShan hoped to form or a panicked tirade or the long and circular arguments that were expected to form, some, like Jin GuangShan, felt a bit cheated. Only the remembered terror of Wei WuXian’s threats kept any complaining at bay. As soon as the minor sect’s had the opportunity they started talking about the excitement caused by the meeting.

Wei Qing casually pulled out the needle she’d stuck in Jin ZiXun who still would take a few moments to be able to move again. She took the opportunity to murmur something to him.

Above in the rafters, a crow watched her master leave the hall and remained settled to carefully watch the shiny three at the top of the hall. Her master wanted her to be cautious so she would. She would see where he could not.

After all, without him, she would be truly dead.

Chapter End Notes

‘You’re not worth my effort’ is one of my favourite lines from Yu Yu Hakusho’s Hiei.

So, I was thinking about characters who contrast and act as foil to each other and I realised that Su She and Jin ZiXun are alike. Both hold an irrational dislike and jealousy over someone much more talented than they are. SS attempts to imitate perceived perfection and so, becomes a shadow. JZ attempts to outshine and burns out. Both are unacknowledged by their perceived ‘rivals’ as they are considered unimportant and both die by other’s hands.

You know, I never intended to have so much outrage erupting for the sake of the Wen Remnants but it progressed naturally because their treatment was not right in any form of the word. But it did distract from the conversation.

Headcanon:

Jin GuangShan: I was thinking about his family and I decided that his parents had a very healthy sex life that resulted in a lot of children. Jin GuangShan inherited his libido from his father except his father settled down and just had a lot of sexy fun times with his wife.
Demonic Cultivation Aura: Yay! More information on how resentful energy works! This is part of my headcanon about why everyone keeps saying that Wifi changed when we see him in MXY’s body pretty much acting the same. Yes, pressure, grief and war would have made him act different but the way people (LWJ and LXC for example) talk, it’s like he became a different person. This perception is wrong so I believed that the perception is warped by the instinctual fear of resentful energy. Because Wifi’s body was saturated with resentful energy he couldn’t completely get rid of the fear-inducing aura. Ghosts and zombies regularly induce fear and this energy is the same so it’s not a far stretch. No matter what Wifi does, he’s going to have everyone he talks to, think something’s wrong with him even though the reality’s different.

Also, we can tell he played up his arrogance (though he probably was legitimately quite a bit arrogant for a while) so that nobody would guess he didn’t have a GC. It wouldn’t surprise me if he did it to cover up other things as well.

MXY’s body doesn’t have this problem. Wifi’s soul is also saturated with resentful energy but it’s contained by the living body of MXY. In addition, Wifi-as-MXY limits himself to simple things that require more knowledge and finesse than raw power. The times when he’d need the raw power are useless anyway because of the Stygian Tiger Seal.

MXY’s body is untouched but like releasing water from a dam through pipes, Wifi can still channel resentful energy from his soul, through the body and out into the tasks required. But not much stays stored within the body. In comparison Wifi-as-YP has his body equally marinated in the stuff and using that is like opening the floodgates albeit in controlled releases. Wifi can alter MXY’s body to store resentful energy like his old one but he’s not going to because than he’d have the same problem as before.
Rumours and Worry

Chapter Notes

Hi!

So... I'll be going on holiday tomorrow so I won't be able to update for at least two weeks. Sorry! But at least a major ‘Arc' of sorts is finished and I'm not leaving you hanging.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the weeks after the crashed emergency Discussion Conference gossip ran wild. There was so much to talk about! There wasn’t even any time to embellish most of it because there was so much to get through and the reality was so outrageous anyway.

“Did you hear? The Yiling Laozu interrupted and took over the Discussion Conference LanlingJin called!”

“Well, they deserved it! The Yiling Patriarch hasn’t done anything since creating the Ghost General. Provoking such a dangerous person; they should consider themselves lucky to still keep their lives!”

“Yeah, the Discussion Conference was called because they panicked about their failed attack on him!”

“I heard they believed he would do something underhanded to Jin ZiXuan. You know, he’s threatened to kill that person before. So they decided to do something underhanded first but it’s backfired so terribly on them!”

“That’s what happens when you overreach your power. Can you believe that Sect Leader Jin still wants to become Chief Cultivator?”

“After this disaster?”

“When the Yiling Patriarch threatened to slaughter all of LanlingJin if they tried to attack him again, he looked like a living ghost! He must be a demon or something. No human can do things like that.”

“His hair started flying around, his eyes were like fire and it was so horrible just being in his presence!”

“Such a heretical path probably turned him into such a monster.”

“But Sect Leader Jiang claimed him as a brother.”

“No way! After that fight they had?”

“It’s true! Sect Leader Jiang said every sibling fights and said that they both have horrible tempers as well.”

Once more, everyone in hearing range of that felt dread depress them.
“But Wei WuXian also adopted Wen’s?”

“He even called the Ghost General ‘brother’”

“A fierce corpse? Don’t make me laugh. Do you think I’m gullible?”

“That’s what he said! And the famed medic, you know, Wen Qing? It’s Wei Qing now.”

“I can’t believe a whole troop of Wen’s would just cast away their name.”

“They said there was a baby as a prisoner at Qiongqi Path.”

“No way! Even LanlingJin wouldn’t do that. That’s too cruel. It has to be the Wen’s lying.”

“I don’t know… If there was no evidence, do you think Sect Leader Nie would order an investigation into LanlingJin’s conduct towards their prisoners?”

“But, maybe he’s right. I mean, what’s going to stop LanlingJin from acting like QishanWen? They’re already the richest and largest Sect…”

“Come off it! LanlinJin nowhere near as bad as the Wen-dogs.”

“I can’t believe that Wei WuXian is so audacious! Ignoring how he came to a Discussion Conference uninvited, how can anyone accept him threatening the Great Sects into doing what he wants?”

“I think he said he just wanted them to leave him alone…”

“That’s what he says now, but mark my words, he’ll be demanding more sooner or later.”

“But, you know, that certain artefact of his?”

“The Stygian Tiger Seal? That’s a dreaded thing.”

“The Yiling Patriarch said the only reason LanlingJin orchestrated that was to get a hold of it.”

“That’s terrible! Can anyone trust the LanlingJin Sect to hold on to it now?”

“But the thought of the Yiling Patriarch having such a thing makes me uneasy…”

“He said he was going to destroy it.”

“Who did?”

“The Yiling Patriarch!”

“What? Destroy such a powerful weapon of his? No way! Without it, people would certainly try to erase his heretical path from the world.”

“He said that destroying it wouldn’t diminish his power at all and if anyone attacked him he’d kill them and all their family.”

“Can any one person be that powerful? Maybe he is a demon…”

“Did he really raise horse corpses to use as his steeds?”

“That’s impossible! Everyone knows animals can’t become walking corpses!”
“It’s true though! I saw it with my own two eyes. Those horses were dead and yet, were ridden in by the Wei siblings and reared and made such awful sounds.”

This made everyone uncomfortable.

“The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation… is there nothing sacred he won’t trample?”

When bolder townspeople in Yiling eagerly asked about the rumours, Wei WuXian laughed.

He was in an inn famed for its alcohol and surrounded by eager gossips who paid for the steadily increasing amount of drinks in return for the truth behind the rumours. Wei Ning, Luo Yaling and Wei Yuan were accompanying him. Luo Yaling and Wei Yuan were eating the food that had also been gr aciously bought for them. They had been shopping when a bold person offered to buy Wei WuXian a drink in return for confirmation of things in the rumours. Unable to resist the temptation of free alcohol Wei WuXian agreed.

“Animals don’t normally become walking or fierce corpses by themselves,” Wei WuXian confirmed, “I gave them a little help, that’s all. Khan, my horse, is a bit unruly, but compared to A-Ning, everything’s unruly.”

There was laughter at this as Wei Ning attempted to protest in a meek voice. The Yiling townspeople had grown used to the fierce corpse. It was still bizarre to see him, but from the beginning, most of them had decided to ignore the fact that he was dead and continue to do business with Wei WuXian. It wasn’t like the corpse did anything and he didn’t even smell that bad. This turned out to be the best option but there was still jolts of surprise when they remembered that he was a fierce corpse.

“Did you really threaten LanlingJin?”

“I told them that I’d leave them alone if they left me alone.”

“They say Demonic Cultivation turned you into a living ghost or an actual demon. Is that true?”

Wei WuXian laughed at this, “Do I look like a demon to you? I’m still a human man. No more different from any of you than a normal cultivator. Just in a different direction. And, what’s a living ghost, anyway? Doesn’t that defy the definition?”

“Did you really adopt Maiden Wen as your sister?”

“Yes, which gives her more leave to abuse me so.”

There was laughter at this. Some of them had seen or heard Wen Qing – now Wei Qing – berate the feared Yiling Patriarch in the middle of the marketplace before.

“And my name’s Wei Yuan now!” Wei Yuan piped up, having finished his soup.

There were coos from their audience and a few nice ladies gave the toddler some sweets.

Eventually they all went away, discussing the news.

“It’s good to see that they don’t fear you anymore,” Luo Yaling said.

“Yeah,” Wei WuXian agreed easily. Inducing fear wasn’t a reaction that Wei WuXian normally wanted or took any pleasure in. The only exceptions had been for people like Wen Chao. Wei WuXian preferred smiles and laughter, annoyed anger and scandalised expressions. Having random people fear him was not something Wei WuXian liked. So, the reactions of Yiling were a very good
thing. Hopefully, he could keep a good reputation here even as he was feared elsewhere for his actions at the Discussion Conference.

Hopefully, that fear was enough to make them stay away and not enough to make them wipe out what made them afraid.

After the conference, Wei WuXian had gone to Jiang Yanli’s rooms with his other siblings and Jin ZiXuan where they regaled the woman with tales of how the Conference had gone. Wei WuXian ended up holding a fussy Jin Ling who seemed to want to continuously grab onto Suihua. It made Wei WuXian laugh as he compared it to how Wei Yuan continuously tried to reach for Chenqing.

Jiang Yanli had clapped her hands in delight at many things her brothers and husband had done. She, in turn, regaled them with the attempts the LanlingJin disciples had made to try and control the horses.

The three had reacted in shock at the realisation that the horses were, in fact, conscious fierce corpses like Wei Ning. Laughing, Wei WuXian assured them that they should meet the horses. But first, they had to meet someone else. By that time, the crow who had been faithfully keeping an eye on Jin GuangShan had escaped the Golden Hall. Wei WuXian opened a window and the crow landed neatly on his outstretched hand.


“Is that the dead bird that was in your cave when I visited?” he asked.

“Yes!” Wei WuXian said. He stroked the dead crow, “Her name is Mulan.”

Jiang Cheng had to comment at that point.

“Lan again? You named Jin Ling, Rulan: like an orchid, and now you’ve named your pet, Mulan? Beautiful orchid?” he demanded. Wei Qing gave a look with raised brows to her youngest brother.

“What’s wrong with orchids?” Wei WuXian said defensively, “Maybe I like them! Anyway, they’re better than your names. What would you have called her? Blacky? Darling?”

“Better than naming her after the Lan clan!” Jiang Cheng retorted.

Jin ZiXuan looked at the fierce Sect Leader in disbelief before looking at his wife. Jiang Yanli just gave him a look that said, ‘see? This is why I got A-Xian to give A-Ling’s courtesy name instead of A-Cheng.’

When Jiang Yanli said it was better for Wei WuXian to give Jin Ling’s courtesy name because Jiang Cheng was bad at naming things, he hadn’t expected this. Suddenly a suspicion arose in his mind about why his wife was so insistent that he pick their children’s names.

“Mulan likes her name, thank you!” Wei WuXian continued, oblivious to the married couple’s byplay. The crow cawed in agreement.

“How intelligent are Mulan and the horses?” Jiang Yanli asked curiously. That response had been too intelligent for most creatures to respond to in such a way.

“More than they were alive,” Wei WuXian admitted, “Which I didn’t realise would happen. I mean, A-Ning didn’t increase in intelligence when he was resurrected. At least, not that we could notice?”
But Mulan and the three horses did. I think it might be the connection to me as well as the resentful energy. Bringing them back as conscious fierce corpses instead of just simple fierce corpses also helped.

Not that Wei WuXian could have brought them back as simple fierce corpses. Animals, it seemed, could only rise again as conscious fierce corpses. It was interesting because Wei WuXian had no idea why that was.

“Anyway, since Mulan here is so intelligent, I can ask her to do things for me! You guys can give her letters and stuff and she’ll deliver them to me!”

“Good idea!” Jiang Yanli brightened.

“Isn’t this a bit too much secrecy?” Jin ZiXuan asked, “After a while, you don’t need to do everything in the shadows.”

Everyone else looked blankly at him, even the crow.

In truth, none of them had thought of simply communicating normally and not hiding what they were doing. Wei Qing and Wei Ning were used to hiding their more altruistic actions and any emotional attachments out of fear of Wen RuoHan and his people. The three Jiang siblings were used to being forced to downplay their familial relationship and hide things to reduce gossip. Wei WuXian had become very secretive after becoming a demonic cultivator out of fear of others figuring out and abusing his power. Plus, the past two years had the three Jiang siblings pretend to have cut ties to protect YunmengJiang from the consequences of Wei WuXian’s outrageous actions.

It was strange to think that they didn’t have to hide from the world.

“No offense, A-Xuan,” Jiang Yanli said quietly, “But I’d prefer it if I had a direct way to communicate with A-Xian. I can’t really trust most of the people here.”

Jin ZiXuan struggled with that for a moment but acquiesced. As much as he hated to admit it (and he really, really hated it), his wife had a point.

Eventually the three had come away from Koi Tower with a promise to meet up at Yunmeng’s Lantern Festival. Since then, Wei WuXian had already had a letter via Mulan from Jiang Yanli who took the time to gush over each of her son’s developmental milestones.

In the time since the Discussion Conference the former Wen’s were still cautious. Wei WuXian warned them that he wasn’t sure if his forceful actions would backfire or not. Eventually, when no more raids came, they started to relax but kept the stockpile of arrows nearby and maintained. They’ve moved on to planning the communal hall which would be the largest and most extensive building they’d complete yet. Because they wanted it to be perfect, they were taking time to plan things and practicing skills by improving the homes already made. Some even went off to explore the Burial Mounds a bit further, staying away from the rotting field and taking Wei Ning or one of the horses with them. Wei WuXian sometimes came along to make suggestions.

Everyone was still wary of the outside but after Yiling’s support and the lack of attacks, they started wondering aloud about visiting Yiling. Luo Yaling decided to accompany Wei WuXian on his shopping trips a lot more much to Wei Qing’s gratefulness. Luo Yaling was shrewd despite her delicate face and could calculate arithmetic in her head so quickly that Wei WuXian was impressed.

This meant the issue of a token to allow people to bypass the protections was raised to top priority in Wei WuXian’s mind. He mentally turned over the problem this way and that. Thanks to making Jin
Ling’s bell, Wei WuXian had a head-start on what to do. The problem was, he didn’t know what material to make the token out of. It had to be something that could be filled with resentful energy but not affect those wearing it. The plant life on the Burial Mounds could work but the energy seeped; it needed to be more contained. Something more solid than growing things.

But overall, Wei WuXian was cautiously pleased with how things had gone.

**The Unclean Realm; Qinghe**

Lan XiChen wasn’t sure if he was doing the right thing. He’d been thinking about this since his visit to the Burial Mounds, a place his thoughts kept drifting to again and again. Since the Discussion Conference, he’d alternatively been meditating on the matter and carefully examining the list of former Wen’s given to him. He’d asked some juniors to copy the list to distribute to the minor sects if asked. Several concerning, and sometimes downright strange, things kept turning up.

Lan Qiren had nearly tugged his beard off in agitation upon a thorough read-through.

Xia Bolin, who’d been mentioned at the meeting, married to Xia Shijing at fifteen and nineteen respectively.

Luo Yaling, whose story the Twin Jades told their uncle.

Wei Yuan who had been less than a year old and in a labour prison when his newly adopted father had met him.

Wei Ju who wasn’t even a cultivator. Who was 97 years old and in a labour prison trying to keep her great-grandson, who, to reiterate, was less than a year old, alive.

Lan XiChen had been very aggrieved after going through the list. Lan Wangji, who had also gone through the list, was actively frowning. Lan Qiren was torn between his own dislike of the unjust actions and his sense of propriety.

Xia Bolin was too young to be married in his opinion and the reminder that the boy had been punished by association and was not even a cultivator had rankled. Then there was the mention of a Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing who were also married – and were also two women. The scandal had frozen Lan Qiren who’d only moved to spluttering when Lan Wangji asked what was wrong about two people in love marrying. They were in their fifties or sixties anyway. Lan Qiren had finally said nothing was wrong about it. He’d had an expression on his face that said that he thought there might be rule against it anyway but couldn’t remember it.

In the end Lan Qiren’s conclusion was that the treatment of the Wen Sect Remnants was wrong but thought there definitely could have been a better solution than the one Wei WuXian offered.

Lan Wangji asked him why he hadn’t offered one at the time.

“The only solution they had was the one Wei Ying gave them,” Lan Wangji said in his normal placid manner. Lan Qiren had stared at him ashen-faced because he was right.

“The only thing we can do now is ensure they are left to live in peace,” Lan XiChen said, feeling that such a solution was inadequate but not knowing what else to do.
“In Yiling’s Burial Mounds?” Lan Qiren said in disbelief.

Gusu was not nearby Yiling so the Twin Jades of Lan hadn’t heard much about that place before it became known that Wei WuXian had been trapped and escaped from there. They knew that it was a forbidden place full of resentful energy and that no one had ever escaped before Wei WuXian but that was all. As such, they didn’t have the same perspective as Lan Qiren did.

When Lan Qiren was young, he travelled around night-hunting and heard many tales, including those of Yiling’s Burial Mounds. An old battleground turned dumping place for nameless corpses and the victims of many murderers. The terrifying tales of glory-seeking cultivators who went in and were never able to leave. Tales of horrible screaming and cries of those cultivators who’d gone mad in such a place they were unable to escape. The black peak had fed from these horrifying deaths and grown even stronger in resentful energy. These tales had gone on for generations. It was a typical warning by Lan Qiren’s youth not to go near it. It ate up even the cleverest, most experienced and renowned cultivators and never spat them back out. Lan Qiren didn’t even know for how long that forbidden place had been like that. For generations at least.

It was entirely understandable how Wen Chao thought he would never have to deal with Wei WuXian again and believed he had sentenced him to a cruel and unusual death.

For a time, older and more experienced cultivators like Lan Qiren hadn’t even believed Wei WuXian’s story of being trapped there. But when they saw Wei WuXian on the battlefield with Chenqing controlling the corpses with his red eyes they recalled their glimpse of the black peak from the town of Yiling. The things they had felt from the mountain, they now felt from Wei WuXian.

When people visited the mountain after, it was still the black peak, but it seemed less foreboding than in the past. None had dared to venture beyond the safety line however.

It had created rumours that it wasn’t really Wei WuXian at all but the yao or demonic spirit of the mountain possessing his body.

To be fair, it had been more likely than Wei WuXian conquering such a place.

This is what led to Wei WuXian’s new name of the Yiling Patriarch.

Recalling his own memory of that place, it was incomprehensible to Lan Qiren that anyone could live there.

Oblivious to this, Lan XiChen replied warmly: “They seemed to be doing well there. They’ve built many homes and farms.”

“You went there?” Lan Qiren only just managed to keep himself from shouting.

“Yes,” both of his nephews replied, seemingly oblivious to their uncle’s near heart attack.

Lan Qiren tried to calm down but the thought of his beloved nephews trapped by resentful energy and becoming just two more corpses on that dreaded mountain unable to return home made him want to panic.

Lan Qiren had always had a different sense of priorities to his nephews, concerned with propriety, facts and dignity in a way his nephews weren’t, so his reaction was presumed to be from a different reason entirely. So his nephews, oblivious to their own recklessness and their uncle’s worry, just waited patiently for him to calm down.

“Wei Ying has made it quite habitable,” Lan Wangji offered.

“Did that boy sell his soul for that kind of power?” Lan Qiren nearly shouted.

His nephews thought this was an overreaction. Lan Qiren, after attempting to articulate how wrong the place was, simply gave up.

He did, however, add a rule stating that Yiling’s Burial Mounds were off limits. He grudgingly agreed to add a stipulation of ‘without permission’ at Lan XiChen’s coaxing.

With great foresight, Lan XiChen knew, even without that stipulation, Lan Wangji would be breaking such a rule.

But after these revelations and a lot of time meditating on his trip to the Burial Mounds Lan XiChen came to an uneasy conclusion.

Jin ZiXuan had been ranting, but from the beginning he’d been against Jin GuangYao knowing too much about the place. His assertion that Jin GuangYao planned the assassination attempt was worrying. Looking back, Lan XiChen guiltily wondered how much Jin GuangYao had a hand in the Wen Clan’s misfortune. At the very least he seemed to have diverted attention from the situation.

Guilty and uncomfortable with his uncharitable thoughts towards his sworn brother, Lan XiChen had all but secluded himself to decide what to do. In the end, there was only one thing for it.

He went to visit Nie Mingjue.

His elder sworn brother had always been Lan XiChen’s closest friend and he had been overjoyed when he found that his new friend had met him and they got along. Unfortunately that had been short-lived. Lan XiChen was at a loss to the strange dynamic they had, as neither would reveal just what actions made Nie Mingjue so critical of Meng Yao.

“He’s got potential to be great,” Nie Mingjue grumbled at him once, “But he’s going the wrong way about it. He needs me to remind him that this kind of shit isn’t acceptable and that what he was doing was wrong. He needs you to continue believing he’s a good person because he wants to become that person. Between the two of us… maybe one day he can be.”

To this day, Lan XiChen still wasn’t sure if he understood what the other man is saying. But now he wondered at these words.

Nie Mingjue was permanently grumpy, bad-tempered and preferred hacking problems to tiny little bits in as efficient and violent a way he could think of. But he was intelligent and highly perceptive. When Lan XiChen had a problem that his brother and uncle couldn’t help with, he went to Nie Mingjue.

Lan XiChen had a feeling that Nie Mingjue wouldn’t be surprised at the things Lan XiChen was dwelling over.

He wasn’t.

“Let me get this straight,” Nie Mingjue said pouring more sake for himself. They had both started from tea but as Lan XiChen communicated what happened on his visit to the Burial Mounds, he claimed this subject necessitated something stronger. The tea stayed for Lan XiChen and his hands cupped the comforting warmth. Between them was QingheNie’s copy of the former Wen members living on the Burial Mounds.
“The Wen’s living in Qishan are all gone despite the decision to continue letting the surrendered and weak cultivators plus civilians and, most importantly, children live there. Apparently, LanlingJin assumed they were also prisoners of war under their control and essentially kidnapped them to take them to various labour camps.”

Lan Xichen nodded.

“It’s possible that they took off to make new lives for themselves and took on new names. But many were children who need a caretaker and the people under Wei WuXian’s protection believe these relatives would have contacted them if they were able.”

Lan XiChen nodded again.

“So, we have 950 people, many of whom were children or non-combatants, missing, presumed dead; presumably by the LanlingJin Sect.”

This time when Lan XiChen nodded, Nie Mingjue cursed and tossed the alcohol back. He poured himself a new one.

“And you think Meng Yao knew.”

“I don’t know,” Lan XiChen said quietly, guiltily, “But after what Jin-gongzi said about Wei WuXian’s attempted assassination…”

“One thing at a time,” Nie Mingjue grumbled.

“A-Yao did say he took over a lot of administrative duties and he backed up what Sect Leader Jin said about how deaths occurred at the labour camp Wei-gongzi liberated his people from,” Lan XiChen said, voicing thoughts that had consumed him for so many days, “Surely he must have known or realised something wasn’t right? There’s no way he could have missed it…”

Nie Mingjue nodded in agreement. With Jin GuangYao’s memory and eye for details, even just from the paperwork, he should have picked up on the inevitable discrepancies such as new prisoners replacing dead ones.

“LanlingJin might not have recorded many of the things they did to those prisoners,” Nie Mingjue muttered, “We really need to have that investigation, preferably without Meng Yao as a part of it. Perhaps that Jin-gongzi. He seemed to have had his head deflated quite a bit since his marriage. He was quite rational at the Discussion Conference too. Defending someone you dislike is not easy.”

Lan XiChen sighed. He wouldn’t really know. The only people he had held a strong dislike towards were the ones who burned down Cloud Recesses and harmed his brother and father.

“As for that other matter… I don’t know that Jin with the hundred-hole curse, but considering his actions at the Discussion Conference, he can’t be that bright. Or he’s too desperate. Either way, I doubt he was the one who planned everything Madam Jin told me about. They prepared the place and took out all the corpses so Wei WuXian would be defenceless since that person doesn’t carry his sword anymore. I wonder if his normal cultivation is impaired from his demonic cultivation techniques.”

Lan Xichen blinked at that and considered it. He would bring it up with Wangji later, he decided.

“What do we do?” Lan XiChen asked. Nie Mingjue sighed and stared into his sake.

“You want to confront him, don’t you?”
“I just… want to know why,” Lan XiChen said lamely, “Innocents don’t deserve this and despite everything, Wei-gongzi hasn’t done anything bad except for killing those four people at Qiongqi Path.”

“Considering those people were responsible for Wei Ning’s death perhaps it was revenge for that. Wei WuXian cared enough about him to adopt him and two years ago he must have been a good friend. Although, why and how he became friends with a Wen is beyond me,” Nie Mingjue grumbled.

“He said, two years ago, that he owed Wen Ning his life,” Lan XiChen said, trying to remember. It had just been one sentence, quickly overshadowed by other things, so he added: “I think.”

“Life-debt would do it,” Nie Mingjue said, scowling, “But that just adds to the legitimacy of Wei WuXian saying that those people never agreed with Wen RuoHan. If a Wen had saved the life of someone the Wen-dogs hated…”

Nie Mingjue trailed off, grumbling curses and threats under his breath.

“As for Meng Yao,” Nie Mingjue said, looking up at his dearest friend, “We’ll summon him and ask him about everything, if it makes you feel better.”

So they had.

Ln XiChen was unaccountably nervous. He hated having to ask his sworn brother if he’d done awful things. People always accused and blamed A-Yao for things just because of his low birth, which was incomprehensible to Lan XiChen, and he never wanted to become like those people. So, this situation was one Lan XiChen hated. But he needed to know.

He just hoped he wouldn’t hurt A-Yao’s feelings by having to ask such things. He’d feel absolutely awful if he did.

He was interrupted from such thoughts by the man in question.

“Er-ge? Da-ge?” Jin GuangYao asked curiously. He was surprised to see Lan XiChen there but was pleased to see him.

“Come and sit,” Nie Mingjue said. His tone only just managed to make it sound like an invitation instead of an order.

“Is there a reason you’re visiting da-ge, er-ge?” Jin GuangYao asked, accepting a cup of tea.

“We want to ask about the situation with Wei WuXian and the former Wen’s,” Lan XiChen said.

Jin GuangYao’s customary smile dropped and a frown took its place. That situation had become very complicated very quickly. Also, thanks to Lan XiChen’s tone, Jin GuangYao immediately picked up that something was bothering him.

“Well, we have yet to find anyone who is responsible for Jin ZiXun’s curse,” Jin GuangYao started, “Thanks to Wei WuXian’s… display at the Discussion Conference, we can’t do anything unless someone else is found to be responsible and the likelihood of that is low.”

“You can’t seriously think Wei WuXian developed a way to avoid curse rebounds?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“We don’t know what demonic cultivation is truly capable of,” Jin GuangYao pointed out, “All we
have is what Wei WuXian allows us to know. Even if not, is there any way to check the Wen’s in his encampment? One of them might have done it.”

“We can ask when we have our investigation,” Nie Mingjue said. The investigation would be a joint effort between the three of the four Great Sects. Nie Mingjue was deciding whether to have his brother or cousin join it, “But that’s not what we’re asking about.”

Jin GuangYao looked confused.

“A-Yao, did your father ask you to help plan Jin ZiXun’s ambush?” Lan XiChen asked gently.

For a moment, Jin GuangYao had no words.

“Yes,” Jin GuangYao admitted, continuing before any admonishment could come, “If I did not, Jin ZiXun would have gone in with any old plan and gotten himself killed. I thought this was the best way to reduce loss of life.”

“By planning another murder?” Nie Mingjue asked sarcastically.

“All those people really did volunteer,” Jin GuangYao insisted, neglecting to mention that they probably had different reasons than helping Jin ZiXun. Like shared glory in killing the Yiling Patriarch or that bonus Jin GuangShan promised, “I wasn’t there but I heard negotiations broke down very quickly…”

“Why weren’t you there?” Nie Mingjue interrupted.

“I had been held up and when I tried to leave, Jin ZiXuan caught me and managed to get what was happening out of me. He ordered me to stay at Koi Tower and flew off immediately.”

Nie Mingjue’s eyes narrowed. Jin GuangYao was much better at words than most. If he didn’t want Jin ZiXuan to know what was going on than he wouldn’t find out through Jin GuangYao. That meant, it was likely that Jin GuangYao told the Sect Heir on purpose. Why? So, something bad would happen to Jin ZiXuan? To sow discord among LanlingJin? He’d certainly succeeded in the last one.

Jin GuangYao tried to hide his nervousness from the shrewd, suspicious eyes of his eldest sworn brother. This person always seemed to see through him. It was very annoying yet also made Jin GuangYao respect him a lot.

“Did you really think Wei WuXian deserved to die, A-Yao?” Lan XiChen said sadly, oblivious to the atmosphere between his sworn brothers.

“I have no opinion on that,” Jin GuangYao said, thinking: I do think he’s too dangerous to live but deserving is another matter entirely.

“I just thought that my cousin deserved a chance to live,” lie, “I did my best to ensure that my clan came out with as few deaths as possible,” truth, “I did not decide to attack Wei WuXian, all I could do was make the plan for a decision that my father made.” Also true. But, what he would have decided himself, was a mystery even to Jin GuangYao.

“So you did plan it,” Nie Mingjue said flatly.

“What else was I meant to do?” Jin GuangYao protested, holding his hands up in supplication, “They would have tried to kill him with or without my help. I just hoped to minimise the bloodshed.”
“Well, that’s happened. But only because Wei WuXian decided not to kill anyone,” Nie Mingjue said.

“For now,” Jin GuangYao agreed.

Nie Minjue snorted. Wei WuXian had also clearly tried to resolve the matter without killing anyone and, so far, succeeded better than Jin GuangYao. Nie Mingjue wondered how many people realised that Wei WuXian could have caused a lot of death if he had decided to retaliate violently before anyone would have been able to take him down.

Perhaps he knew that. If Wei WuXian reacted violently, yes, there’d be a lot of death but the cultivation world would kill him in the end and scour the Burial Mounds from existence along with all who lived on it.

Or, perhaps, he simply preferred not to kill people. Likely both. But, if Wei WuXian had preferred not to kill people, and Nie Mingjue was becoming sure he didn’t, then he was a lot more benevolent than he appeared. The question was, in that case: would he still go through with his threat?

As curious as the thought was, Nie Mingjue preferred not to find out.

“Try not to commit suicide by going against his requests,” Nie Mingjue suggested sarcastically.

“We’re just going to allow such a person to do as he likes?” Jin GuangYao blurted out in disbelief. Surely Wei WuXian’s arrogance in demanding things from the cultivation world had incensed the bad-tempered man.

“No,” Nie Mingjue said in annoyance, drawing out the no, “I’m going to give him the same courtesy everyone is afforded in doing what is necessary to defend themselves. Any malicious acts and I’ll kill him myself.”

“That is the best thing to do,” Lan XiChen said firmly. He saddened by the confirmation that Jin GuangYao had planned the ambush but felt that Jin GuangYao had a point. Even so, it left him disappointed.

“As you say,” Jin GuangYao said, helpless in front of Lan XiChen’s beseeching look.

“What about the prisoners? Surely you picked up that something was going on,” Nie Mingjue pressed.

Jin GuangYao frowned at that. While he considered himself willing to do a lot of dirty work to rise in the world, children such as Wen Yuan and Xia Bolin being at the camps was not something he’d been aware of or exactly approved. Xia Bolin, at the very least, didn’t deserve to be there. Wen Yuan could have been adopted into other, more righteous families before deciding on his death. There was no point in him or his doddery great-grandmother being at a labour camp.

“I was so busy that I never checked myself what was happening. Everyone, the inspectors and the guards, all reported that things were fine. There were many accidents reported, but I assumed it was due to cultivators being unused to such work or a deficiency in safe equipment. I had no idea about the children,” Jin GuangYao said.

Lan XiChen frowned, unsettled. He peered anxiously at his tea like it held the divine answers under the liquid with his eyebrows drawn together.

“What about the abductions like the one that cursed Jin was accused of?” Nie Mingjue demanded.
Jin GuangYao almost leaned back but thought better of it, “I just thought they’d been moving prisoners around. I never calculated the numbers. It just wasn’t a priority at the time.”

“And the 950 missing people? Does A-Yao know?” Lan XiChen asked.

Jin GuangYao shook his head helplessly, “They probably went to live somewhere in small groups if they weren’t in the prison camps. Somewhere without the discrimination of being from QishanWen.”

“And the prisoners under LanlingJin? Do you know about those?” Nie Mingjue asked.

“Is… is this an interrogation, da-ge?” Jin GuangYao asked.

“We just want to know, A-Yao,” Lan XiChen said, “I’m worried about you.”


“After all this, it shows that LanlingJin under your father is becoming… not a good place to be,” Lan XiChen said. He struggled with trying not to say bad things about LanlingJin’s recent conduct.

“He means it’s becoming corrupt,” Nie Mingjue said bluntly.

“I know you want to succeed and become a great cultivator,” Lan XiChen continued, deciding not to acknowledge Nie Mingjue’s ‘translation’, “But do you really need to be a part of LanlingJin? Do you really think that this is the correct path to take? You know we’ll help you if you need it. Their recent actions and forcing you to become complicit in such things… I am worried. It doesn’t seem like a good place to be, that’s all.”

Jin GuangYao was stunned and warmed by Lan XiChen’s concern. Even how Nie Mingjue didn’t refuse the help it was implied he would give to Jin GuangYao touched the man. For a moment, fantasies of becoming a GusuLan cultivator or even QingheNie flashed through his mind. But…

“Thank you. Both of you,” Jin GuangYao smiled reassuringly at his sworn brothers, “I’ll do my best to think of such things in the future. But, right now, I think I can best serve the cultivation world as a part of LanlingJin. Hopefully, nothing else like this that will necessitate such harsh choices will come up in the future. Besides, I have friends in LanlingJin that I’d like to help.”

The other two glanced at each other. Neither seemed convinced. Lan XiChen still looked worried and Nie Mingjue’s narrowed gaze showed he was still suspicious.

“If you’re sure…” Lan XiChen said helplessly.

“I am,” Jin GuangYao confirmed, “But perhaps I’ll try to ask your advice in the future if something else like this pops up. Although, I certainly hope it doesn’t.”

“It really was a clusterfuck,” Nie Mingjue muttered, pouring himself more alcohol.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE READ FIRST NOTES IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY!

The rumours: it’s so hard to badmouth my MC… but I hope I did it right?
Lan XiChen… my poor naïve baby… this cruel world is a struggle.

Headcanons:

Jian Yanli’s naming habits: Yep, Jiang Yanli is as bad at naming things as her brother and father. At least, she’s aware of this. Remember, it was actually JF who named Suibian. The only name JF gave that wasn’t bad was WuXian and I believe he had input for that. JC probably had suggestions from his mother on what to name Sandu. After all, JL has the exact same naming habits as his uncle.

Jin GuangYao and redemption arcs in general: The problem with redemption is that the only person who can decide whether redemption arc succeeds, fails or even starts is the person being redeemed. You can be as kind or as inspiring as you want to that person; you can do your best to change their circumstances. But without a resolution and commitment to bettering themselves? They’re not going to change. The only way someone can be saved by a redemption arc is if they step forward and try to save themselves. This is true for RL as well. There might be an instigation, or one might have been needed, that can be credited to the redemption. But the one making the hard long slog to becoming a better person is that person themselves. It’s their own hard work and resolve that leads to redemption.

If they don’t feel it’s needed or they don’t hold themselves to it? There’s no redemption no matter what others might do.

As for JGY, NMJ still thinks he can become the good person LXC thinks he is and that JGY wants to become. At this point he hasn’t done the more reviled and irredeemable actions yet such as killing his sworn brother, orchestrating his son’s death etc. He still has a chance. Whether he takes it or not is another story entirely. And I’m not telling you my plans for the story yet so nyah
Meet Mo XuanYu and the Burial Mounds

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Everyone! Please give suggestions for names. This is for both future disciples and their swords etc. Please tell me the name and meaning and if it’s for a girl or boy or sword or flute or guqin.

I do not know Chinese so while I have come up with various names but I’m always open to more. Admittedly I mostly need names for swords and instruments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Ba-Boom… Ba-Boom…_

Breathe in. Breathe out.

_Ba-Boom… Ba-Boom…_

Inhale. Exhale.

_Ba-Boom…_

Deep within the mountain where spiritual energy has birthed life, the sound beats unheard… save for one person.

To Wei WuXian, the sound is constant in his ears. Fainter, the further away from the source, but always there.

The sound is like a giant heartbeat.

The sound is like war drums.

Within his dark cave, Wei WuXian sits in lotus position. Under his slightly opened eyelids is a red glow. Black smoke becomes visible drawing into his person upon every inhale like he is breathing it in. Upon every exhale the smoke disappears like it never was.

Resentful energy and spiritual energy are both a form of energy. But their similarities equal the amount of differences between them.

This is not the first time Wei WuXian has meditated and done his version of demonic cultivation. The similarities and differences nagged at him. What is now natural to him versus his memories of golden light.

The beats echo in his ears, a focal point as his thoughts trail off into half-formed theories.

There was something he was missing. He felt like it was obvious. That it would be very obvious in hindsight and he could figure it out if he just took another look…

But it was like someone had pinned his face to a picture so he could only see the details in front of
his eyes even though he knew there was more to see if he could just move his head back!

Spiritual energy ran like a river. It was warm and felt like solid light.

Resentful energy drifted in the wind like smoke. It was cool and seemed like shadows.

Spiritual energy, once cultivated enough, condensed into a solid ball in the chest. A Golden Core.

Resentful energy spread throughout his body until it sunk into every cell. Wisping beneath his skin until he called for it.

Light and shadows. Solid and gaseous. Warm and cool.

Opposites.

And yet they were both energy. Both ways followed the basics of cultivation. The basics of the basics really. Stuff that Wei WuXian vaguely remembered doing even before his parents left on their last night-hunt. But, at a certain point, it would diverge. The energy flowed differently.

Spiritual energy was directed, guided. It was always moving, even if it was sluggish, you just had to learn how to make it move your way.

Resentful energy didn’t really move. It found a nice spot and sunk in to bask like a cat. To use it was like rousing someone from their bed and getting them excited.

Or at least that’s how Wei WuXian tried to explain it to Wei Qing who accused him of being fanciful.

Wei Ning’s attempted explanation wasn’t any better. Unlike Wei WuXian, Wei Ning could actually produce resentful energy instead of absorbing and storing it the way Wei WuXian did. But in reverse, he couldn’t absorb and store resentful energy the way Wei WuXian could and he could only manipulate his own resentful energy.

This had caused problems in their experimentation as when Wei Ning roused his resentful energy too much, he lost control of himself. He regressed back into a normal, if abnormally strong, fierce corpse.

Wei WuXian believed he’d simply raised too much, too quickly and he’d be better if he went more slowly. But, Wei Ning, terrified of losing control and hurting somebody, refused to experiment further. Wei WuXian, unable to do anything but feel sympathy towards the fear, and unwilling to push his wishes onto someone who stood up for himself so rarely, only pushed the issue once. Not to insist on doing more, but advising him of the advantages if he learned to harness his own energy properly.

Wei Ning’s return of consciousness had allowed Wei WuXian to dismiss, revise and come up with new ideas about how resentful energy worked. Raising Mulan and the horses had done even more.

Wei WuXian was so close to a breakthrough. He knew it.

What was it?

Instead of directing the energy, flow and bring it with you.

Spiritual energy condensed into a Golden Core. Spiritual energy flowed like a river to reach every part of the body. It was akin to a heart and blood veins.

Resentful energy didn’t condense in a single place. It occupied every part of Wei WuXian’s body
equally, like air in a room.

But the Burial Mounds had a heartbeat.

The heartbeat sounded like war drums. The war drums that had beat during that ancient battle so long ago that washed the dirt and greenery with blood.

Wei WuXian did his best to ignore the insidious whispers in his ears trying to tell him about it. The echoes across time of an army who fought for righteousness against people who thought they were in the right. The countless murder victims who had been dumped in such a conveniently forbidden place.

He already knew their stories.

But with so much energy it had created a limited form of sentience in the mountain. Wei WuXian theorised it was like the old legend about how the Great Sect’s had an accord with certain spirits to settle a cultivation sect in those places. YunmengJiang had a river spirit; QingheNie had their valley spirit; LanlingJin had its garden spirits and GusuLan also had a mountain spirit.

QishanWen claimed they held an accord with the spirit of the sun itself. Even in the legend this was met with doubt. The Nightless City was just a city taken over by the Lord Wen Mao and his descendants to be the centre of his Sect. Why would the sun deign to notice him? No one had even heard of a sun spirit anyway.

So many years on and everyone believed it to be just a story. A little-told one in the height of QishanWen’s power, which had supposedly warned, even then, of Wen Mao’s aristocratic arrogance.

But, knowing the Burial Mounds as he now did, Wei WuXian wasn’t so sure the legend was just a legend. The mountain was alive. Not in the way Wei WuXian was or even the way Mulan and the horses were.

More aware and knowing than trees and plants; less than dumb beasts.

Wei WuXian hadn’t been sure he could convince the mountain to accept the Wen’s living there full time. But the Burial Mounds had been pleased, in its slow steady way, that Wei WuXian would stay. Wei WuXian had absorbed most of its energy after all. The Burial Mounds was now a part of Wei WuXian. It had been wary of the living humans, but now, over two years living with them, it seems lazily content at their liveliness. Like a cat in the sun.

The energy of the Burial Mounds had been despair. It tasted like screams and smelled like pointless death. It had reduced the growing consciousness of the mountain into agonised hatred of itself and all life. The mountain’s spirit had been created in pain and endless and unanswerable why’s. And so, like a misshapen creature whose very form gave it pain, it also cried out ‘why’ for an answer that never came about how its maker could start creating and then abandon it.

Wei WuXian had absorbed it and forced himself through it to make the energy his own. In its way, the Burial Mounds loved him for that.

Now, with people residing here with all their emotions, not just agony and despair, but a fierce determination to live, the Burial Mounds’ energy seemed to become… cleaner. It was still resentful energy. But the pain lessened, the hatred drained. The tangled knot of agony smoothed and settled.

Spiritual injuries that were slowly healing.
Wei WuXian, upon realising what was happening, did his best to help. He smoothed out the energy and calmed it like petting the ruffled fur of an angry cat until it started purring.

The Burial Mounds loved him for that too.

Wei WuXian tried to communicate with the mountain. The echoes of long ago stories in his head made him wish for the mountain’s opinion on a cultivation sect.

All he got back was lazy pleasure at the idea that more people would make it their home.

Wei WuXian tried to introduce the idea of more demonic cultivators like him.

The Burial Mounds considered Wei WuXian as belonging to it. Like a cat would say: this is my human. The idea of more humans belonging to it was hesitant, but curious acceptance.


Wei WuXian shuddered. He wasn’t sure if the Burial Mounds had picked up on his own aversion to being alone or if it was something that came to it naturally.

The Burial Mounds had limited awareness of emotions that weren’t pain, anger and despair. It was sad. Like an abused child. Anything that was good was simply classified as not-pain.

Wei WuXian reached out for it with his own energy. Resentful energy absorbed from the Mountain in the first place, removing the agonising weight from a newborn spirit who only knew pain. He ran his own energy gently alongside the Burial Mounds in a caress. The Burial Mounds keened in shy delight.

Yes, he whispered to it in his mind, more people to come here. More people to see you as home. More people who will love it here.

Trust came back.

Wei WuXian shuddered again, coming out of his meditation and its closer bond to his home. The beat of the war-drums dulled along with the sound of his own heart that beat alongside it.

Trust. It was like having the responsibility of another child to take care of. Except this one wasn’t as independent even if it required less of his time.

But, by returning and waking the mountain he’d agreed to this responsibility. One that he’d shied away from during his time in Lotus Pier after the Sunshot Campaign.

But things were different now. He wasn’t one person. Whether the former Wen’s knew it or not (and they didn’t) they were helping this place heal. Just by living here and considering it home. By growing to love it.

Love could heal quite a lot of wounds if done correctly.

Wei WuXian sighed. At least he had accomplished something even if he hadn’t made his breakthrough yet.

He stood and stretched before exiting his cave. Mulan came to him and perched on an outstretched hand. He petted her gently then settled her on his shoulder. Wei WuXian looked at the sky and determined that there was still some time before dinner. He set off to check in on A-Yuan and the horses.
Mingna, Wei Ning’s horse, was content to help out with the farming efforts. The only mare of the trio, she had the most agreeable temperament. Khan had the worst. He was a proud warhorse and quite playful, often goading the competitive Shang, who was Wei Qing’s horse.

As he walked he evaluated the list of things to do. He had to make tokens but he needed better material for permanent ones. Temporary ones were all he could make at the moment which were necessary. Nie Mingjue had sent a letter via Jiang Cheng about needing to interrogate the former Wen’s as part of the interrogation into LanlingJin.

Wei WuXian planned to restrict the number of people allowed into the Burial Mounds and had sent a letter back by messenger to ask who would be in the interrogation party. He had yet to receive a reply, but it was still early days.

The former Wen’s were split on the incoming interrogation party though none protested. Many wanted to know what happened to the others. Many just wanted to be left alone.

Wei WuXian sighed, looking over the fields being prepared for winter. Then there was that damned Stygian Tiger Seal. Wei WuXian had figured out how to destroy it, but he’d need Wei Qing there for sure. The Seal wouldn’t go easily. To witness, he’d need all the Great Sect heads – barring Jin GuangShan. Jin ZiXuan or his mother could attend instead. Maybe Jin GuangYao so they’d have all the Venerated Trio. Lan Zhan might also come.

It’d be nice to see him. Last time, and the time before that, he hadn’t even demanded that Wei WuXian give up Demonic Cultivation like before. It made Wei WuXian hope that he could have a more amicable relationship than what had developed between them during the Sunshot Campaign. Maybe he’d get Lan Zhan to start teaching him that song.

The only thing was the location. Considering the Burial Mounds spiritual health, Wei WuXian didn’t want to do it here. The Seal would definitely backlash and while the mountain would aid Wei WuXian, and he was certainly strongest at the Burial Mounds, he felt that the damage that would probably incur would set back the healing process.

If Wei WuXian wanted to develop YilingWei (and a part of him still felt a shocked sort of panic at the thought of the mere name) than he needed to help the Burial Mounds grow strong to support the generations of Demonic Cultivators and others to come.

After much thought, he dismissed the XuanWu cave. Like how Wei WuXian was strongest where he’d become a Demonic Cultivator, the Seal would be strongest there. But a place with resentful energy would be best so Wei WuXian could also use the backup energy. Others might think a place with strong purifying spiritual energy would be best to destroy an object filled with resentful energy, but that would only hinder Wei WuXian. He did not need someplace trying futilely to purify him while he was performing such a task.

There was no place in the vicinity of Yiling or Yunmeng, so where?

Giving up, Wei WuXian decided to ask Wei Qing. Or Wei Ning. Whichever he came across first. Actually, one of the former Wen’s used to be a teacher in the same vein as Lan Qiren (with a more practical focus). Shu-something. She was infamous for her knowledge on monsters and beasts of all kinds and had interrogated him thoroughly on the XuanWu when she’d had the chance. Maybe he’d ask her?

Whistling, Wei WuXian decided to wander around greeting everybody cheerfully, glad they seemed more happy than scared at the sight of him now.
The beats continued to echo unnoticed. Long used to them; they’d been relegated to background noise.

It was a soothing sound.

*Koi Tower, Lanling*

What was his father up to?

It was a fair question at all times now, Jin ZiXuan could admit. But this? This made his stomach turn with anger at the implications. He had to work so his face did not show his disgust at the situation. He did not want someone to get the wrong idea about what he was upset about and who he was angry at.

The boy beamed up at him and Jin GuangYao. The way he shifted, fidgeted with his hands and kept looking down at his feet before remembering to look up indicated that the boy had a rather shy, possibly meek nature. But his whole face shone with excitement.

The boy, Jin GuangShan informed them with a sly look, was named Mo XuanYu. He was newly fourteen and one of Jin GuangShan’s bastard sons. He was here to learn how to become a cultivator.

Jin GuangShan gave them an arrogant slimy smile, patted Mo XuanYu’s shoulder and told them he had an appointment to keep. Oh, and would Jin ZiXuan tell Madam Jin?

Jin ZiXuan tried not to glare at his father. Appointment? Yeah, right. He was heading off to another brothel somewhere. The boy’s eyes widened and he seemed to grow far more nervous at their father’s absence. He hadn’t said much yet.

Jin ZiXuan tried to soften his features, but he knew it was a wasted effort. His emotions were furious with his father for this entire situation and his fists clenched, unseen, where he crossed his arms. His face was good for being impassive, but not for being approachable or friendly. Not like the man beside him.

This must have hit Jin GuangYao much more. After all the work he did to become one of them and their father had just waltzed in with another bastard son who hadn’t had to do anything. Yet, he continued to smile although Jin ZiXuan doubted it was real. Jin GuangYao gently asked Mo XuanYu questions.

Where are you from? Have you been assigned a room yet? Do you know anything about cultivation?

Mo XuanYu seemed to relax a bit though he still seemed shy at the friendly questions. He still sometimes glanced nervously at Jin ZiXuan who had progressed to unknowingly scowling at the floor.

Fourteen was late to start cultivating. Not as late as Jin GuangYao, which had led to his weaker cultivation skills, but still late. If their father actually wanted him to become a cultivator then he should have been brought four years ago. Twelve years old at the latest.

Mo XuanYu was gangly, all long limbs that looked clumsy. Like a colt trying to find its legs. He
didn’t look that much like their father. Not as much as Jin ZiXuan or even Jin GuangYao. But there was something in his chin and the shape of his hands. Long-fingered hands that would look graceful if the boy would stop twisting them about all the time.

He seemed too innocent. Like a lost little lamb or white lotus.

Dear Goddess of Mercy, this boy would be eaten alive.

The state of his sect was in more disarray than ever. Half the elders were enraged at the loss of face and reputation for their sect. The other half were arrogantly convinced, as his father was, that this was only a setback.

The younger ones were in confused turmoil. Their learned LanlingJin arrogance could not stand up to the barbed and accurate comments and jokes at their expense. Confused they returned to lick their wounded pride in disgrace.

In addition, the checkpoints had been set up, but they hadn’t found anything yet. But that was of no surprise. Jin ZiXun had been cursed for ages at this point and the rebounds had also been done some time ago. The checkpoints should have been set up at the start!

But that didn’t matter to Jin ZiXun. He was convinced it was Wei WuXian who did it. He probably wouldn’t believe otherwise unless the truth was shoved in his face. When Jin ZiXuan had tried to talk to him to try and determine who might have cursed him, he went hysterical. He accused Jin ZiXuan of aiding his murderer.

*How could you help someone as loathsome as that person who tried to murder me? I’m your cousin! You hate him too! So, why aren’t you on my side?* Jin ZiXun had screamed.

Jin ZiXuan didn’t want his cousin to die. He was thoughtless but once you earned his good regard, he was a good friend.

Or, Jin ZiXuan thought bitterly, thinking of things his wife had told him, perhaps Jin ZiXuan only saw that because he was the clan heir. As much as he hated to think it, even his cousins would likely angle to try and get more power and influence.

Not for the first time, he envied his wife. He did not get along with his brothers-in-law, but she did. Those three adored each other and despite recent disagreements between the two boys, they would back each other up in an instant. The only people he could fully trust in his clan were his mother and his wife.

And now this. Mo XuanYu was only here so his father could send a message.

*I have other sons.*

Like that mattered to Jin ZiXuan. He was aware enough that everyone supported him as heir to LanlingJin. Even the ones on his father’s side preferred Jin ZiXuan over Jin GuangYao or anyone else – legitimate or not. Jin ZiXuan had the reputation and deeds to his name. He even had an heir himself, further securing LanlingJin’s line. If his father was attempting to shake him it wouldn’t work. Jin ZiXuan’s place as his father’s successor was too certain at his point for even Jin GuangShan to dislodge.

A part of him rolled in disgust at having to think of his son’s existence as an advantage. Couldn’t he just be able to secrete himself away with his wife and child? But, then others would play their games and the close call in Qiongqi Path warned him of how dangerous that could be.
Jin ZiXuan eyed Jin GuangYao. He seemed perfectly amiable. He was still smiling. Mo XuanYu seemed to shine at the attention from his only brother who’d also been a bastard and yet had gotten himself legitimised.

Jin GuangYao’s position was much more tenuous. It was his plan that backfired. He had a growing number of supporters both outside the clan and with some of the more open-minded elders and youngsters inside it. But his cultivation was low and Father never made a secret of his dislike of him.

More than that though, Jin GuangYao cared about the way he was seen. About the power and influence he held. He cared more than Jin ZiXuan did at such things. Jin ZiXuan, at least, knew that skills and influence had to speak for themselves. Appearance was too easily cast aside once challenged.

But the question was: would Jin GuangYao blame Mo XuanYu for their father’s threat?

Mo XuanYu had no idea of the political riptide he’d been thrown into. The animals in this zoo would rip him apart. Including the snake currently smiling at him and pretending there were no fangs in his mouth.

The boy just looked happy. That he could learn cultivation. That seemed to be all he wanted.

Jin GuangYao gave a last pat to his shoulder and walked off, claiming to have some work to do.

Jin ZiXuan eyed him a bit. He had to figure out what work Jin GuangYao was doing. He always seemed to be running about the place these days.

That left Mo XuanYu and Jin ZiXuan standing awkwardly alone. Great. What the hell was he supposed to say?

“He should have brought you here earlier,” Jin ZiXuan finally said bluntly. Mo XuanYu jumped and stared at him, “You’ll have to catch up with others your age. Have you been given a manual yet?”

Mo XuanYu shook his head, “I’m supposed to get one in class.”

Jin ZiXuan considered leaving it at that. But he felt uneasy, so he grunted and turned to walk away. He stopped and looked back in annoyance when he realised that the boy (was he really a younger brother?) wasn’t following.

“Come on,” Jin ZiXuan snapped. The boy jumped, but hurried after him, “You’re already behind so you may as well read it even if you don’t do anything practical yet.”

“Oh, thank you,” Mo XuanYu stammered.

What was he meant to do with this kid?

He’d have to ask A-Li. Come to think of it, this was right up her alley. Lost boys in a big new unknown sect. Which means…

Jin ZiXuan sighed.

“My wife would probably like to meet you at some point. She likes cooking, so I’ll talk to her and we’ll invite you to dinner at some point,” Jin ZiXuan glanced at a wide-eyed Mo XuanYu, “Is that fine with you?”

“Y-yes!” Mo XuanYu kept nodding. “I, uh, didn’t know you had a wife,” he said shyly.
Jin ZiXuan softened, “She’s the most wonderful woman in the world. We have a son as well. He’s only a few months old.”

“Oh,” Mo XuanYu said, eyes round.

Jin ZiXuan frowned upon entering the library, trying to search for manuals for the very basics. The easiest ones he dismissed as being too childish, meant for six or eight-year olds. Finally he unearthed a more in-depth one for ten-to-twelve year olds, skimmed it and decided it was acceptable. When he turned around Mo XuanYu was fidgeting with himself again like he wanted to ask something or go to the bathroom.

“What?”

Mo XuanYu jumped.

“Um, well,” he stammered again, making Jin ZiXuan internally sigh. Eaten alive, definitely.

“Does, I mean, am I considered your son’s uncle?” Mo XuanYu finally blurted out. He backtracked as realisation crossed Jin ZiXuan’s face, “I mean, I know we just met and everything. It was just a question…”

Jin ZiXuan hit him on the head with the manual. Mo XuanYu stopped talking, stunned. Jin ZiXuan sighed.

“You can’t be a worse uncle than the ones he’s already got,” Jin ZiXuan decided. He just knew Jiang Wanyin was going to try and teach A-Ling to call Wei WuXian ‘yima’. He just knew it.

Mo XuanYu took the manual with wide eyes.

“If you don’t understand something than ask. Stay away from my mother, Madam Jin, wherever possible, but be polite when you do see her. In fact, just try not to draw her notice. Do you remember where your rooms are?” he waited until he got a hesitant nod, “Good.”

With that he left the library. Just as he was about to exit the door he realised that there was something else he should warn this – little brother? Boy. Boy was better.

“Mo XuanYu,” he said. The boy looked up from where he was examining his manual, “Do not make the mistake of thinking Father cares for you. He cares for little outside of political power these days.”

“Not even you?” the boy said in surprise.

Jin ZiXuan sighed, “Not even me.”

He turned and left.

Once Jin ZiXuan had been assured that his father cared for him. That, despite Jin GuangShan’s fear of his wife, he cared for his son.

Now, an adult and a father himself, he had to wonder: did his father care for his son? Or, did he only care about his heir?

Had things changed as Jin ZiXuan grew older? Or, had the scales simply fallen from his eyes?

*He cares for little outside of political power these days.*
Burial Mounds

“‘You want what?’” Wei WuXian asked, taken aback.

The builders and architects in front of him shifted sheepishly.

“Er, well…”

“No-ones using them,” one reasoned.

“Everyone thinks the Nightless City is cursed anyway,” another said brightly.

“Because of you,” was a low mutter to the back.

“I heard that,” Wei WuXian said.

Someone coughed. Once more, Wei Qing looked half amused, half exasperated at her relatives.

Wei WuXian rubbed his temples.

“You want to loot the Nightless City?” he finally said in disbelief, “You know it’s already been looted, right?”

“Yeah, but how many cultivators think to take doors or room fittings?” Someone asked.

“We can use them for the communal hall or our other future projects!” another said.

Wei WuXian was tempted to ask what future projects. But he was usually let in on the plans after they reached a certain point and they wanted to ask for approval to build on a prospective patch of land.

“You want to loot the Nightless City… for building materials?” Wei WuXian asked slowly.

Nods.

“How do you think you’ll get them back here?” Nightless City wasn’t close to Yiling.

“The new horses and some wagons and such,” one said.

“We’ll need to make some sturdy horse-drawn carts but it should be fine,” another said blithely.

Wei WuXian looked at Wei Qing. But his new sister seemed to have buried her face in her hands.

Thinking about it, he could see the appeal. If anyone had a right to whatever was left in the Nightless City, these people did. Reusing the material caused less strain on the resources they had accessible here, allowing for more to be built. The only problem was they had to travel to Nightless City, remove the parts they wanted and ship them back here. Preferably without anybody knowing. Wei WuXian didn’t know what the outside world would think of something like this, but he was assured they’d find some way to twist it so it was something sinister.

There was also the matter of protection. Wei WuXian couldn’t, in good conscious, let a group of
them go out alone. Bows were poor protections against the things that tended to haunt the roads. Bandits might also be a problem. No one had their swords anymore.

“If you can make the carts, I’ll ask A-Ning to go with you for protection if I can’t go myself,” Wei WuXian told them. They brightened and went away to discuss how to make a big sturdy cart.

“What do you think?” Wei WuXian asked Wei Qing.

“It’ll be good if it succeeds,” Wei Qing finally sighed, “We might even get lucky and find things that’ll be useful for us, but that are too common to be stolen by the average cultivator. Even if it’s just things like bowls and cooking utensils.”

Wei WuXian nodded in agreement, thinking about the Nightless City and what he could remember about it. Suddenly a thought struck him.

“The Nightless City is fairly full of resentful energy now isn’t it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“After your army and the loss of an entire sect? It’s like a ghost town. Such places usually start developing resentful energy. Didn’t the Sect’s put up measures to contain it?” Wei Qing asked.

Wei WuXian hmm’d.

“I’m just wondering if it might be a good place to destroy the Stygian Tiger Seal,” he said.

Wei Qing considered.

“From what you’ve said, maybe.”

“Why don’t I go with our potential looters and check it out? If it is, then I can let the other sects know while we’re dismantling the city.”

“Do you want A-Ning to go with you?” Wei Qing asked.

“Hmm,” Wei WuXian considered. The Burial Mounds needed to be protected. Things hadn’t completely died down after the Discussion Conference yet, so the situation might change at any moment. Wei Ning’s strength would be useful for the dismantling as well, but if both of them went then who would protect the Burial Mounds? The only reason Wei WuXian went to Koi Tower with A-Ning was because it had been two years of no activity and he thought it was better for others to know what the ‘Ghost General’ was really like. Turned out he had needed the fierce corpse’s protection as well.

Wei Ning would be very useful on the road as protection and heavy lifting. Wei WuXian needed to go to check out the Nightless City for himself. The horses had to go for labour purposes. Mulan needed to go as delivery bird and Wei WuXian’s eyes in the sky. But that left the Burial Mounds unprotected. The only physical protections would be bows and arrows and the relatively benign defences of the walking corpses. The Nightless City was so far away that it would be impossible to turn around quickly if something happened.

“Transport talismans?” Wei WuXian suggested, “To summon me or A-Ning or both back here if something happens?”

Wei Qing considered that. Transport Talismans required a lot of spiritual power, but it was possible, if difficult, to pre-load one. One or two former Wen’s could make them however, and Wei Qing knew everyone would donate the energy required once told what it was for. Finally, she nodded in agreement.
“That seems like the best option,” she said, “Four talismans: one for both you and A-Ning here and two for the group going with you, just in case.”

“We’ll leave them in your care,” Wei WuXian promised her.

“Of course you will,” Wei Qing said haughtily, “Who else helps run this madhouse?”

Jiang Cheng,

Hope you’re doing alright! I’ve had a letter from A-Jie recently. She kept talking about how A-Ling kept trying to grab Suihua and sticking his foot in his mouth.

I wanted to let you know that I’ve figured out how to destroy that damn seal, but I need to choose a better location than the Burial Mounds. I’m going to take A-Ning and a couple of people to check out the Nightless City. Truthfully, the others are coming to loot building supplies from the place, but we’re trying to keep that on the down low, OK? If I think it’s a good enough place I’ll send messengers to you, Jin Peacock and the Venerated Triad to tell them about it so I can get it over with.

But I’m worried about people taking advantage to try and raid us if both me and A-Ning are gone. Do you think you can keep an ear out and an eye on it while I’m gone? I know you’re busy, but I’d really appreciate it.

Treat Mulan kindly. Try not to drive your disciples too hard. Try to smile once in a while. Think about it – you might give your disciples a heart attack if you do!

Your brother,

Wei WuXian

Wei WuXian,

Sounds like A-Ling is already taking after his father in regards to shoving a foot in his mouth.

Let me know when you’re finally going to get rid of that thing. Are you really going to the Nightless City for building supplies? Wouldn’t thieves and looters have already taken anything of use?

If you’re that worried, I can send a few more trustworthy and open-minded disciples over there to help out. Actually, that would make a fairly good punishment; farm work. It should also help if they knew what the reality is over there as well. They keep wandering why you and I are helping former Wen’s when I hate them so much. They think it’s out of my earshot and I haven’t corrected them on that yet.

Your bird keeps trying to steal the meat off my plate. She’s dead, why does she need it?

And I do smile. Usually when I’ve thought of a punishment that Mother would approve of. Like right now with helping you out with farming. I say you, but I know you don’t do anything.

Don’t get attacked again.

Your brother,

Jiang Cheng
A-Cheng,

Was Jin Peacock really that bad? I remember he acted downright weird on Phoenix Mountain and he did seem to not say the things he wanted to. Or not in the right way? It was weird. Even A-jie had been confused.

Apparently, the Nightless City is said to be cursed, so there may not have been looters nearby who were all that brave. It’s be good to check anyway.

You’d send disciples to help me?

(a sketch of a ridiculously wide-eyed puppy with a blurred wagging tail and sparkles all around)

Would you send some disciples? There wouldn’t need to be that many. Qing-jie will keep an eye on them. Actually, it’s be fine even if they just stayed in town. They might prefer that anyway. I can’t imagine anybody with nefarious purposes trying anything if they knew they’d be angering you. Your temper precedes you.

Fierce Corpse feed off flesh and blood the same way we consume food for energy. Mulan can usually hunt her own food though, so I’m not sure why she’s trying to take yours. Come to think of it, A-jie said Mulan stole food from Jin Peacock as well. Maybe if you offer her bits of raw meat, she’ll leave it alone. She deserves a reward for delivering these letters anyway. You can give her the meat that’s bad or gone off and isn’t fit to be eaten anyway.

Don’t remind me of Madam Yu’s punishments. I cleaned so much of Lotus Pier…

Of course, you’d smile when deciding punishments. You probably even look just like your mother when you do. Do you enjoy making your disciples freak out?

What am I saying? Of course you do.

Your beloved big brother,

Wei WuXian.

Wei Ying,

Yes, I’d send some disciples to help out. They can reside in Yiling and go up the mountain every day until your return. Let me know when you’re leaving and I’ll send them over so you can meet them, threaten them and maybe make them cry.

You should thank me for graciously allowing you to use my good reputation.

Does that mean you feed your horses and Wen Wei Ning raw flesh? Also, your bird is probably just trying to con me into giving her free food. And you’re indulging her.

I was with you most of the time cleaning Lotus Pier as well, remember? That’s why I’m getting such joy in watching other people do it.

If you have ideas about punishments, please let me know. I can always use more ideas.

The one with the superior reputation,
Jiang Cheng

ChengCheng,

Thanks! I’ll let you know. Right now, we’re still in the preparation stages.

(Doodle of a crow kowtowing to a haughty cat sitting on a giant lotus. The cat’s paw is raised like a commanding emperor’s and lightning issues from it.)

Yes, the horses get fed raw meat. A-Ning gets ‘special meals’. He still has a living person’s sensibilities, so we try to make it look appetizing even if he can’t taste it.

Mulan deserves many good things.

I usually bury A-Yuan in the turnip field, but you’d need a bigger hole for an adult. I’ll think about it. It’d be fun.

Fourth ranked of the best cultivators in our generation,

Wei WuXian

Who are you calling ChengCheng?

And why am I drawn as a cat? I prefer dogs!

You idiot.

(Doodle of a generic caricatured face with its tongue sticking out)

Chapter End Notes

At first I was going to leave it after Wei Qing. But, then I had an idea for the letters and I couldn’t resist.

Jiang Cheng might like dogs, but he is so cat-like.

Headcanons:
The Burial Mounds: So much energy can create a limited form of sentience, but in a place like the Burial Mounds with its history… yeah, it’s a tortured spirit. Wifi helped though! It’s still a place that produces resentful energy, but it’s… cleaner? I always theorised that Wifi and the Burial Mounds would have a connection since he got most of his resentful energy from there.

So, in my perspective, he really did tame it by taking on the worst of the painful memories. This is important for YilingWei. All the Great Sects are categorised by their homes and the places described are simply beautiful. So, the Burial Mounds will always be an important aspect of YilingWei. It’s their home. One day it will be very beautiful as well. In the same vein as Halloween Town or a gothic artwork. I mean, black bamboo. Also, it will produce the resentful energy to be absorbed by the future generations of
disciples to become Demonic Cultivators.

Also, Wifi was trapped there for three months. It was his prison and likely the place where he died among other things that will come up later. But he eventually turned that place into his home? Something good must have come out of his time there to be so content living there now.

Also: Yay! More information on how resentful energy and Demonic Cultivation works!

Mo XuanYu: So, he comes in at fourteen after Jin ZiXuan’s death in canon. This time JZX is still there and alive. We’re never shown examples of what he was like, but we do have notes in the narrative about him being a meek doormat and that he was known for being a cut-sleeve, so this is my interpretation of his personality. He might be shy, but he’s determined! He’s going to become a great cultivator in his father’s sect! *MXY gently fist-pumps, eyes shining in determination*

JZX’s perspective: Too innocent and naïve! Get him away before he is tainted! How can someone like this exist?
An Outsider's View

Chapter Notes

I'm not as happy with this chapter, it feels like mostly filler. Unfortunately, this might be due to things at work getting a bit more hectic. I might have to change my usual update schedule. Maybe once every two weeks. We'll see how much I can write in the future.

A reminder that I would like to request naming ideas for courtesy names, weapons and instruments. A special thanks to Muggelschumuggel who was the only one to offer something last week. I really like the suggestion, too. These are predominantly for future YilingWei disciples.

Once the Seal is dealt with I might be able to introduce YilingWei's First Disciple.

This punishment was way too harsh, Chu Ping thought in despair.

The Sect Leader was sending them to Yiling to ‘help out with whatever they ask’. Not to Yiling town, Chu Ping and his friends could deal with that. No, they were being sent to Yiling Burial Mounds. Under the Yiling Patriarch.

Weren’t they not getting along? All the new disciples had been warned not to mention the Yiling Patriarch because it made Sect Leader angry.

But, apparently, now, they were getting along. A shixiong of theirs swore up and down that Sect Leader called him ‘that idiot brother of mine’.

So, Chu Ping thought the rumours about LanlingJin trying to kill Yiling Laozu were accurate. Holy shit, who thought that was a good idea? But, Sect Leader probably did care for Wei WuXian, despite everything. They had grown up together after all.

So, if their Sect Leader cared for Yiling Laozu, then they absolutely had to fulfil their orders and help out.

“I want you to help them out with whatever they need in that settlement of theirs,” their Sect Leader told them, “Wei Qing will be in charge of you. If I have to deal with her because of you messing around, I won’t be happy.”

“Not Yiling Laozu?” a brave friend of Chu Ping’s asked.

“He’ll meet you at the beginning, but he has other places to be,” Sect Leader said, “That’s part of the reason you’re going. If some other Sect tries anything to the people on the Burial Mounds, you have to send someone to inform me immediately while the rest of you try and stop the buffoons.”

Eyes widened, but they all nodded seriously. Sect Leader really wants to help Wei WuXian! They couldn’t let him down.

“In addition, I want you to tell me your impressions of everything there. Don’t go snooping. I just want to know what it’s like living there. What the people are like. What kind of things they asked for
your help on. Understand?"

Of course!

That didn’t make going to the Burial Mounds any less terrifying.

A cursed mass grave? They’d only recently been permitted to go on night-hunts without a senior’s supervision. That was way beyond anything they could deal with.

But, they’d gone and checked into an inn in Yiling. They’d been given directions by the innkeeper who’d been surprisingly suspicious of them. He’d only given them directions after they’d told him that they were going there to help out.

So, there they were after trudging up the mountain path. Before them was a swaying shambling line of walking corpses. Chu Ping already had to stop someone from drawing their sword.

It was strange. The line of the dead were just standing there, swaying and shuffling amongst themselves. Some of them had turned their heads towards the five boys, but… that was it. The corpses didn’t leave their posts. To see walking corpses in broad daylight and that weren’t going after them was… really strange.

At least, Chu Ping could sigh in relief at seeing none of the corpses were wearing Sect uniforms. He’d heard about Yiling Laozu’s threat.

“...wait? For someone to let us in?” One boy asked. He shifted from foot to foot, discomforted by the line of corpses.

“Yeah,” Chu Ping muttered, “That’s what Sect Leader said.”

They didn’t have to wait long.

A tall man in black came striding down the mountain path. Chu Ping took in his first look at what must be the feared Yiling Patriarch. He had a face that Chu Ping knew girls would probably swoon over, but Chu Ping thought he looked a little gaunt. His hair was mostly loose which seemed too wild. His clothes were black, but as he came closer, Chu Ping noticed that they were fairly old and worn. His expression seemed amused, like he was entertained by an inside joke. Tucked into his belt was a black flute with a red tassel that could only be the ghost flute: Chenqing. His stride was confident and, to Chu Ping and his friends surprise, he didn’t slow down when he neared the corpses.

They’d expected that he would take out the ghost flute and command the corpses. In fact, they’d been looking forward to getting a first-hand demonstration of Yiling Patriarch’s powers.

Instead, as Wei WuXian approached the shambling line, the corpses reacted in – fear?

Chu Ping watched with wide eyes as the walking corpses seemed to almost scramble over each other to get out of the way of the Yiling Patriarch. They seemed to actually cower, as if hoping not to draw his notice.

What the hell?

The dead weren’t afraid of anything. They were dead.

The Yiling Patriarch didn’t seem to notice the corpses. He hadn’t slowed down one bit. He’d been expecting the corpses to move aside for him.
Well.

That was…

Terrifying.

*Holy shit.*

The Yiling Laozu stopped where the previous line had been and turned to the side, inviting them through. Chu Ping gulped, but obeyed. The five boys tried not to seem like they were hurrying in case the corpses or the Yiling Patriarch changed their minds. As they passed the Yiling Patriarch, it felt like a shiver up their spines.

So.

It hadn’t even been half a minute in just seeing the man behind the rumours and Chu Ping could already tell why people thought he was some kind of demon or ghost pretending to be human.

“Come on,” The Yiling Patriarch said. He had a smooth deep voice, lightened by amusement. He led the way up the path. Gulp.ing the five boys followed. When Chu Ping looked back, he could see the corpses shuffling back into position.

Chu Ping looked around in curiosity. The path was worn away by use, by someone walking and a cart. It was still quite rocky and uneven. The trees around them were different types. Some were dark brown with dark green leaves. Others had black bark, black leaves or both. In the branches nearby the path, Chu Ping could spot unlit homemade red lanterns.

Eventually, the trees cleared away, the incline lessened and Chu Ping started spotting fields. Small fields for growing root vegetables, tubers and similar things. People with straw-hats were among the fields doing some farmer-type work. Most of the people looked up at them. They didn’t say anything, but in every face, Chu Ping could spot wary suspicion.

They couldn’t be *Wen’s*, could they? They were people hired on by Yiling Laozu, surely. But those suspicious looks…

The Yiling Patriarch didn’t seem to notice. He continued to lead the way to a cluster of ramshackle houses. The houses were all made of black wood, but apart from that, they had no similarity. The roofs were all different shapes. The sizes and layouts were all different. Some had decorations, some didn’t. It looked rather disorganised. Quite a few houses had more plants in front. Vine plants like tomatoes and a more than a few with pots full of herb plants as well. The people in this little village were also dressed in peasant clothing and looked at the five boys in their bright purple YunmengJiang uniforms with suspicion.

In the centre was a great horse currently being lashed to a cart of some kind. It didn’t seem content to just let people tie it peacefully. It whinnied in dissatisfaction and stomped its foot. Wei WuXian went up to it and stroked its face and neck, murmuring to it.

The boys kept their distance. They’d heard about the horse corpses the Yiling Patriarch had used. It was difficult with a creature covered in fur, but Chu Ping eventually was able to confirm that this horse really was dead.

“So,” The Yiling Patriarch said, glancing at them from his position calming his undead horse, “What are you being punished for?”

The five boys shifted, sheepish and unwilling to answer.
“There is very little you could have done, that I have not, when I was a YunmengJiang disciple,” Wei WuXian told them.

They’d almost forgotten he’d once been a part of their Sect.

“We were passing around a book not related to study during theory class,” one finally, reluctantly, admitted.

“So, porn then?” Wei WuXian nodded in understanding.

“No!” most protested.

“How did you know?” One blurted out, receiving horrified looks from Chu Ping and his friends.

“Like I said, there is little I haven’t done to earn punishment when I was your age,” Wei WuXian had said. Then he’d paused. ‘When he was their age?’ That had not been long ago! Wei WuXian was only 22! Why was he talking like an old man?

Disturbed by that, Wei WuXian allowed the subject to change.

Chu Ping wanted the earth to swallow him. Did the Yiling Patriarch mean he had once looked at porn during class at Lotus Pier?

A woman, also dressed in black with her hair in a ponytail approached them and eyed them critically. She was very pretty, but seemed very stern.

If she was the Wei Qing their Sect Leader had told them about, then Chu Ping had a feeling it would take a lot to keep her satisfied with their work.

“So, these are our helpers?” she asked. She seemed unimpressed.

“This is my older sister, Wei Qing,” The Yiling Patriarch introduced casually, “Qing-jie and Shen Shuyi – that’s Maiden Wei and Madam Shen to you – will be the one’s supervising you while you’re here.”

The five boys saluted Maiden Wei.

Crap. They had to keep her satisfied so she wouldn’t have cause to complain to Sect Leader!

More people were crowding around the horse-drawn carts. Now, that Chu Ping looked, there were two more horse-drawn carts behind the first with another two horses already hooked up. Some had begun to sit on the carts in preparation for departure. Despite how spacious the carts looked, there were only a few supplies loaded.

Wei WuXian looked at them then glanced at Wei Qing.

“Mulan will be here for a while to help you keep an eye on things,” Chu Ping heard him say to his adopted sister in a low voice.

“Hopefully, we won’t have any problems,” Wei Qing murmured back, clearly unhappy.

“Jiang Cheng will help if anyone bothers you,” Yiling Laozu murmured in reassurance.

“He hates us,” Wei Qing said, “You’re an exception.”

“He doesn’t go back on his word. If he says he’ll help, he’ll help. That lot’s proof,” Wei WuXian
said, jerking his head at Chu Ping and his friends.

Wei Qing huffed.

“But I don’t want you to go!” a small child’s voice wailed.

Chu Ping jerked his head around. A crone shuffled forward with a toddler darting ahead. Before Chu Ping could react, the child dashed forward and clung to the Yiling Patriarch’s leg. For a moment, Chu Ping panicked. How would the Yiling Patriarch react?

“I don’t want you to go!” the child repeated, starting to cry.

Wei WuXian softened, bent down and picked up his son. A-Yuan wrapped his arms around his mother’s neck.

“I’m only going to be gone for a little while,” he comforted, “We can ask Mulan to send letters, how about that?”

“I wanna go too!”

“Maybe when you’re older,” Wei WuXian said, “While I’m gone you have to be good for Granny and Auntie.”

Chu Ping watched this in slight bafflement. Don’t tell him the Yiling Laozu had a kid?

If you’d told him, even mere moments ago, that the Yiling Laozu was a parent, he wouldn’t have believed you. Yet, now, looking at this scene, Chu Ping couldn’t say it was anything else. Wei WuXian looked like a parent trying to comfort his clingy son.

“What if you get hurt again?” The child asked, sniffling.

Again? The Yiling Patriarch had been hurt?

It must have been from LanlingJin that time. Wow, the rumours really were true. Chu Ping looked at this scene again with a softened gaze.

Seeing a child so young be worried about his parent getting hurt was heart-breaking.

Even if that parent was the terrifying Yiling Patriarch.

*Nightless City*

Looting the Nightless City went better than Wei WuXian thought. Only the outskirts of the barren City showed signs of the more common looters. About a dozen former Wen’s seemed to take dismantling the Nightless City in stride. As people who knew their former home fairly well, and often the people who ended up performing more labour work like fetching things, they knew where all the nooks and crannies where useful things might be hidden.

In addition to the wagon which had predominantly been filled with timber, screens, room fittings and other building materials, both ripped straight from the less damaged buildings and found as spare supplies, there were many things of note. Small sacks filled with coins in various hidey-holes were found, for instance. Most of which had been found when a specific office had been dismantled with
curses about always knowing the previous occupant had been a stingy cheating bastard. The kitchens
had been carefully looted for tea sets, pottery and cooking supplies. A few containers of spices had
been found, to their delight.

Shen Jinjing, on orders from her wife, had looted the libraries, both the massive one that had been
open to all of QishanWen and any private ones. If they wanted to form a Sect, any scrolls, books and
manuals should be collected, Shen Shuyi had informed Wei WuXian gravely. Even the most
common ones will be useful. Indeed, only the common ones had been left. GusuLan had been very
thorough cleaning out QishanWen’s libraries to be compensated for their own burned one.

Medical bays had been raided under the direction of a widow named Lai Ai, a medic who’d served
under Wei Qing for as long as Wei Qing could remember. Various medical tools, supplies and even
medicine that could still be used was added to the carts.

Offices had been raided for calligraphy brushes, ink stones and paper. Personal rooms became
searches for fans, shoes and any clothing without QishanWen’s sun and flames. Less than a handful
of jewellery had been found secreted away in secret spots that had been overlooked by raiding
cultivators.

To Wei WuXian’s amusement, some people had gone and raided the stables for horse-care gear and
tack. Fair, they’d been forced to hire tack for their trip to Koi Tower. But Wei WuXian almost
wanted to tell them that undead horses didn’t need brushes and combs. In the end, he hadn’t had the
heart to in front of their earnest expressions.

Luo Chen, who had been a sword-maker, had immediately left for the forges with a few people and
had returned with quite a few tools and even a few small lumps of iron. This had led to a discussion
on the way back about what, exactly, was required to make cultivation swords.

Wei WuXian had found three elders burning what turned out to be a picture of Wen Ruohan in a
thick wooden bin.

No cultivation treasures had been found. Not even cultivation swords had been found. This had not
been unexpected, so it didn’t disappoint people too much.

But the amount of useful things they found did surprise Wei WuXian. To be fair, most cultivation
sects didn’t need menial things like basic furniture. They only took the pretty, expensive looking
things. Some decorative object to put somewhere so they can point at it and use it as a talking piece.
The real treasures had been split. Everything that could be proven as having once belonged to Lotus
Pier had been returned and not counted towards the spoils. Despite that, there had been many
treasures from Lotus Pier that had never been seen again.

The sheer size of the city meant that, despite damage to many parts of it from fighting, they were able
to find a great many useful things. Enough to fill all three carts with packs on every shoulder, even
Wei WuXian’s, and made him wonder if they should make another looting when he came here next.

It actually was the perfect place for Wei WuXian to finally destroy the Seal. Its resentful energy was
low and mild. The many generations of spiritual treasures and cultivators had done that much to
protect the place, including hidden arrays Wei WuXian had had someone copy down around the
periphery of the city. Despite this, it was otherwise perfect. It certainly had the space.

The three horses had been lashed to the wagons with various ease. Khan didn’t like drawing carts.
Mingna seemed perfectly happy. The men’s praise for her had made Shang also behave himself in
the hopes of being praised as well. Khan had to be promised some of Wei WuXian’s blood at the
end of the journey if he managed it without letting anything on his cart break.
It was a promise well kept. Wei WuXian had gladly bled over the spare lumps of meat to give to all
three horses as a reward. They had done well.

On the way back to Yiling, Wei WuXian had hired two messengers to head off to GusuLan and
QingheNie to inform them of the location of destroying the Seal and asking which time would be
convenient for them. Naturally, he had to be polite.

He’d also sent Mulan off with two letters, one for Jiang Yanli and her husband and one to Jiang
Cheng, informing him of when they expected to arrive in Yiling.

It would be interesting to see how the disciples Jiang Cheng had sent over did. They were young,
still teenagers, and had been awed, curious, jumpy and skittish in turns. Watching them and the wary
and also skittish former Wen’s had been amusing. Like an animal discovering its reflection.

That had been before he left. Now it was time to see how they did.

As it turned out, the answer was simple. They were not suited to farm work. At all.

When Wei WuXian asked after them, he had been greeted with amused expression and pointed
directions. He’d found them collapsed under the shade of a large darkened tree, moaning about their
back or legs or arms. They didn’t notice him come up to them. Amused, Wei WuXian crossed his
arms and waited.

It didn’t take long for one boy to notice something wasn’t right. Wei WuXian pegged that one as the
most likely to live longest. Wei WuXian’s aura blended in to the Burial Mounds, but not that much.

Opening his eyes, Chu Ping noticed the Yiling Patriarch standing over them with arms crossed,
looking unimpressed. Terrified, he smacked all of his friends within reach. Protesting, they shut up
when they saw the tall dark figure staring down at them.

Wei WuXian had to work to keep his expression blank and not break out into laughter. How did Lan
Zhan do it all the time?

Responding to an unseen cue, Wei WuXian held his hand out and Mulan landed on it, a letter tied to
her leg and a smaller note in her beak. She dropped the note into Wei WuXian’s hand and he read it
in front of the statue-like terrified boys.

As Wei WuXian thought, it was from Jiang Cheng, stating that he was on his way to the Burial
Mounds to pick up his wayward disciples.

“Your Sect Leader is on his way. I would suggest checking out of that inn and returning here as
quickly as you can,” Wei WuXian told them. He walked away, Mulan perched on one hand and the
other coming up to muffle his snickers. The looks on their faces!

Moaning, one slumped back on the ground, “I can’t keep up with that guy.”

“Is Sect Leader really friends with him?”

“I heard they call each other ‘brother’.”

“Really?”

A few hours later, they were regretting everything again. Their Sect Leader was in a glaring contest
with Wei Qing. Wei Qing was as harsh as Chu Ping had expected, always accompanied by an ebony
fan and had watched the five of them with an eagle eye during their time at the Burial Mounds.
Nothing got by her or Madam Shen.

Madam Shen was a tall, impossibly elegant woman in her sixties, who also carried a fan around everywhere. She was austere and had been carelessly critical and sharp about everything. She had probably been a great beauty in her younger years and still was in many ways. She’d idly mentioned an injury to her meridians which had harmed her cultivation long before the Sunshot Campaign happened.

Between the two of them, the five boys had been worked down to their bones. They endured many scrapes and small cuts to their hands, helping with carpentry work. They nearly broke their backs in the fields. Chu Ping had been used as a pack mule to help a delicate-looking woman called Luo Yaling with her shopping. Their arms had nearly fallen off, lugging water back from the disturbingly murky river water. They chopped wood for winter, helped pickle weird blackened vegetables.

Throughout it all, they’d been watched over by the former Wen’s, headed by Wei Qing. Wei Qing, they learned, ran the entire place, usually in tandem with Wei WuXian. She helped organise everything and whenever she was busy, she had Shen Shuyi watch over them.

The work was hard, but it wasn’t bad. The people weren’t bad either, despite being former Wen’s. A man called Uncle Fourth taught them drinking songs. Chang Jianhong, a man with a limp, made sure everyone got good enough meals. Chang Jianhong’s wife, Chang Ting, expertly repaired their clothes when they’d been torn. Even Shen Shuyi, had asked them about their lessons in Lotus Pier and turned out to have a wealth of information about all kinds of monsters and beasts that they could run into on a night-hunt.

They… were actually pretty good people. Chu Ping wondered why they were living here instead of somewhere else.

Because it turned out the worst part about this punishment wasn’t the hard work, but the location.

They’d worked out a roster where they’d take turns staying the night in the Burial Mounds and the other four would stay in the inn at Yiling.

It took less than a night to decide that they hated that more than anything. They rarely got a good night’s sleep no matter how exhausted they were. Nightmares were frequent. The shuddering feeling they got about not being alone in the dark was paranoia inducing. The revelation that there were many walking corpses on the other side of the mountain hadn’t helped. It wasn’t right for a cultivator to sleep when they knew there were walking corpses nearby.

Even in broad daylight, whenever one of them went off somewhere alone, the nervous paranoid discomfort came. The unnatural plants and food grown here didn’t help. Everything felt wrong.

Madam Shen had casually said it would fade.

It didn’t.

How could anyone live here?

One day Chu Ping had asked someone named Gu Liang exactly that question.

Gu Liang was an older man with steady hands who worked black wood into tables, chairs and cupboards. He had a thousand yard stare like he’d seen terrible things and Chu Ping had never seen him smile. He’d always answered questions frankly. At this question, Gu Liang had turned that stare onto Chu Ping before grunting. He carved into the wood a bit more before answering.
“Everywhere else would’ve killed us,” Gu Liang said.

Chu Ping’s first reaction was to object. There had to be somewhere, anywhere else. Fortunately, he swallowed that reaction down and simply listened quietly.

Gu Liang glanced at him. Seeing that he was listening, the old man continued.

“You might not like this place, and to be honest, we weren’t happy here either at first. But it was safe. You have no idea what that felt like. For so long, we were never safe, not in Nightless City, not in that encampment the Great Sect’s drove us too. But here, here was safe, as long as Wei-Laozu willed it. That was the hardest part: trusting the Yiling Patriarch. He’d killed so many of us. Dug up our ancestor’s corpses to use them against us. He was unstoppable. A black figure, his eyes glowing red and the haunting sound of that damn flute as he used the corpses of our family to kill us all. The sound of a flute haunted all our nightmares for so long.”

Gu Liang paused there. He turned the wood over to brush off the excess.

Chu Ping had stopped whatever he had been carving. During his time among these people, he had never once heard them speak about Wei WuXian with anything but fond adoration. The way they spoke, he was anything but a figure to be terrified of.

But this implied they’d been far more terrified of him than anyone else had been. They’d had reason, good reason, to fear him.

As far as Chu Ping knew, Wei WuXian hadn’t done any of those things after the Sunshot Campaign. How easy would it have been to dig up LanlingJin’s ancestors and use them as an army on Koi Tower in retaliation?

Had anyone even thought of that?

“Then our worst nightmare saved us,” Gu Liang said, “In the end, our worst nightmare turned out to be the only one we encountered who granted us mercy or kindness.”

Chu Ping’s stomach rebelled against his last meal.

“He brought us here and told us we’d be safe here. And we have been. The only danger that’s come to us was when Wei-Laozu was attacked outside of the Burial Mounds. That was the first time outsiders tried to invade us, when Wei-Laozu was injured,” Gu Liang looked up at Chu Ping.

“You might not like it here. We didn’t at first. But it’s become our home. It’s dark and full of resentful energy, but we can live here. We’re safe here. We’re even starting to thrive here. I’ve… come to like living here. I don’t want to leave,” Gu Liang considered the stunned Chu Ping for a moment. He returned to his carving.

“Even if it was safe outside for all of us, I don’t think I want to leave anymore. This is my home. Even more than Nightless City ever was. You might not like it, but I’m comfortable here.”

Chu Ping did not sleep comfortably that night. Everything Gu Liang said was whirling inside his head.

Everywhere else would’ve killed us.

A memory a few years old came to Chu Ping. His family gathered together toasting to the end of the QishanWen Sect.
“The sun’s finally been shot down!”

“Any Wen-dog’s left will be hunted down and killed!”

“Good riddance!”

“The world won’t forgive any Wen-dog!”

“I certainly won’t!”

Laughter.

He’d remembered that night due to getting his first taste of alcohol. Far too young, according to his mother and yet…

Yet…

He wasn’t the only one getting uncomfortable answers. One of Chu Ping’s friends asked where all the children were. The only child they saw was Wei Yuan, the Yiling Patriarch’s son. The only other teenagers were a recently married couple: Xia Bolin and Xia Shijing. That was it.

“They said that A-Yuan was the only one left. They didn’t know what happened to the others,” his friend told them, pale-faced and haunted.

Chu Ping wondered what they could tell Sect Leader.

The place was creepy and nightmare inducing. The people were grimly determined, yet optimistic. The work was long, hard and there was always more to do. If it weren’t for various anecdotes and the way they talked, Chu Ping would be hard pressed to realise they were even cultivators. There were no cultivation swords or other tools. The only things were Spirit-Attracting flags or Demon Wind Compasses that were being made here to be sold. The only weapons were bows and arrows. Chu Ping saw Xia Shijing teaching her new husband how to shoot a bow one day.

Chu Ping comforted himself that he didn’t have to talk to Wei Wuxian as the man had left with about a dozen people, his undead horses and the Ghost General for what the people were calling a supply run.

A supply run that eventually returned. Chu Ping swore his heart had stopped when he looked up and saw the Yiling Laozu standing over them with a blank look on his face. Chu Ping swore to himself then and there that nothing could be as terrifying as Wei Wuxian.

Yet the man hadn’t even done anything. He left them wondering what was going through his head. On their way to the town of Yiling they saw everyone greeting those who returned and vice versa. The toddler appeared quickly and deafened people nearby with his excited shrieks. The Yiling Patriarch only laughed and picked him up easily. They saw him heading to the old crone everyone called Granny while hugging the toddler. The undead horses had been released and prancing around the crowd, excited by the commotion. The three carts were full of what could only be labelled as stuff.

They saw Wei Qing hugging someone tightly, who hadn’t put his hair up and looked a bit dishevelled. They took a detour from the harsh mistress only to nearly run into Madam Shen. Madam Shen was the kind of woman who saw three idle hands and immediately put them to work while ‘directing’ them from the back, standing there fluttering her fan. Needless to say, the five boys panicked slightly and tried to detour again to avoid the austere woman before she put them to work unloading all the miscellaneous items.
They were then given the shock of their lives. They saw another woman, about a decade younger than Madam Shen, run up to her. Despite her age it was clear that this had once been a legendary beauty, but a fierce burn scar covered part of her face, narrowly missing her eye. This new woman, upon reaching Madam Shen, dipped her and gave her what looked like a very passionate kiss. Another shock: Madam Shen had dropped her fan and kissed her back!

For a moment, they stood there in mind-blanked shock. There were two old women kissing! In public! How was no one else noticing this?

It was a shock to end their shock-filled stay at the Burial Mounds.

And now they had to deal with their Sect Leader and Wei Qing clearly not liking each other at all.

“They were tolerable,” Wei Qing allowed.

Jiang Cheng twitched, but before he could retort, Wei WuXian came up and slung an arm around both Jiang Cheng and Wei Qing. Both looked trapped, like they wanted to be anywhere but where they were. They particularly seemed to be trying to get away from each other more than their shared brother.

“The most important thing,” the most feared man of their generation said, “Is that nothing got blown up, broken beyond repair or otherwise ruined. Oh, and that no one’s dead. That’s important too.”

“Wei WuXian…”

“You idiotic…”

The Yiling Laozu laughed, carefree.

“After all, I brought so much stuff home,” he said brightly.

“It’s going to take ages to go through everything,” Shen Shuyi said behind the disciples who jumped. Most of them couldn’t look at her, turning their heads in red-faced embarrassment. The woman who’d delivered that passionate kiss was holding hands with the Madam. They later found out that her name was Shen Jinjing and the two were married. Apparently, Madam Shuyi had been terser and grumpier due to this separation from her wife.

The whole thing boggled their minds.

In the meantime, Jiang Cheng and Wei Qing had managed to remove themselves from his grasp.

“Your disciples suck at doing farm work,” Wei Qing informed Jiang Cheng. She seemed to be determined not to acknowledge what just happened, “But the important thing was that they did help with the workload that developed from losing a bunch of people for a few weeks.”

For once Jiang Cheng seemed to be in agreement with Wei Qing. He also ignored Wei WuXian’s antics.

“At least, they were useful. It seems like no one tried for any of you, during this time,” Jiang Cheng said. He eyed his disciples critically before nodding at them in approval.

Chu Ping and his friends experienced the odd feeling of both wanting to relax in relief at their Sect Leader’s approval and wanting to straighten in giddy pride at the same time for the same reason.

“So,” Jiang Cheng finally addressed Wei WuXian, “You’re finally going to destroy it?”
Wei WuXian carefree smile faded. He nodded with a serious, grim look. From his sleeve, he took out half a military seal. The metal was black and odd-looking. Chu Ping could practically feel some sort of hair-raising malevolence from it.

“The Stygian Tiger Seal,” Chu Ping’s shidi whispered in disturbed awe.

An object only ever used once that led to an untold amount of deaths during the Sunshot Campaign. Some of those deaths, Chu Ping recalled, were from their own side.

To Chu Ping, this was the first time he could look at an object and be able to decisively say ‘it’s evil.’

Wei WuXian held it up to the fading sunset light and frowned at it.

“Honestly, it would be nice to get rid of this thing. It’s really caused a lot of trouble,” Wei WuXian said, “but it’s not something easily destroyed.”

“But you will,” Jiang Cheng prodded.

“Oh, yes,” Wei WuXian said, smiling humourlessly, “Whether others like it or not: I will undo the problems I made.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess where Shen Jinjing’s burn came from.

Also, Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing are genderbent expies.

Actually, most of the disciples I’ve started developing for the future YilingWei are expies of other characters. I’m still setting up preparations for the sect, but you’ll meet the First Disciple sooner or later. Unfortunately, it won’t be MXY as he’s still in KT.
Well, I managed to get this done. I thought about changing the perspective from Lan XiChen to someone else. But then I realised that I’ve used the other two Lan’s. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t include LXC.

In my end notes are part of a headcanon narrative I’ve written. Hope you enjoy that bit along with the actual chapter!

Dear A-Xian,

I’m glad you figured out a way to destroy the Stygian Tiger Seal, but is it safe? When you tried to destroy it before, it backlashed terribly. It was a good thing the repairs on the forges hadn’t been completed yet or you would have had a roof caved in on your head. I’m glad you said Wei Qing will be there, but I would prefer it if you didn’t get injured at all.

A-Xuan will be there and we won’t be telling anyone except Aunt Jin about this. Do you really think Sect Leader Nie and Sect Leader Lan will do as you ask and only bring Jin GuangYao in on the day it happens? Also, are you sure bringing Jin GuangYao at all is a good idea? A-Xuan is convinced that he planned that assassination attempt on you and I believe him. Jin GuangYao has always been nice and helpful, but something about him…

I’m coming by the way. Don’t argue, A-Xian. Madam Jin is happy to take A-Ling for the day and I want to see you and A-Cheng. I also want to see Wei Qing, though it’s a pity that Wei Ning has to stay home. Don’t worry, I’ll stay out of the way and in whatever safe place you think of while you’re dealing with the Seal.

In somewhat lighter news, Jin GuangShan brought home one of his illegitimate children. A fourteen year old boy named Mo Xuanyu. A-Xuan doesn’t seem to know what to do with him. It’s adorable. I had him over for dinner recently and he’s very shy, but seems excited to be here and learning how to become a cultivator.

Unfortunately, the bad side is that Jin GuangShan was trying to threaten A-Xuan and Jin GuangYao’s positions within the Sect by ‘subtly’ pointing out that he can have more sons. A-Xuan wasn’t impressed. I’m not sure how Jin GuangYao has reacted, but I do know that Mo Xuanyu is too sweet-natured to be a pawn in Jin GuangShan’s political games. Hopefully, my area of the tower can give him a reprieve from other’s political manoeuvring.

I hope to see you soon!

Your sister,

Jiang Yanli

(In a different handwriting)

P.S. Would you make your bird stop stealing my meat?
Lan Qiren didn’t like being here. The sight of a great sect reduced to a ghost town was disturbing. A looted ghost town, he corrected himself. Had someone stolen the doors of that building?

It was unnerving to be in such a large city and have it be so empty. Lan Qiren still remembered coming here as a teenager as a guest disciple. Lan Qiren remembered so many people walking everywhere, most with the sun and flames robes, but others with more simple clothing. Seeing the empty houses and streets with neglect obvious at every corner was unnerving. Would Cloud Recesses become like this one day?

No, Lan Qiren told himself. Lan Huan was doing well as Sect Leader even if he was too young for his post. GusuLan would never become as arrogant as QishanWen either. They wouldn’t have anything to fear on that front.

It was still unnerving.

Lan Qiren stroked his beard in thought as he followed his nephews through the ghost town of the Nightless City. It was just the three of them from GusuLan. Lan Qiren and Lan Zhan would be GusuLan’s contribution to the investigation into LanlingJin. Beside Lan Huan, up the front, were his two sworn brothers. Nie Mingjue had brought his younger brother and his cousin Nie Minsheng. Lan Qiren didn’t know what Nie Huaisang could contribute to the investigations. Most likely, it was just Nie Mingjue’s attempt to get his brother to do something useful instead of spending his days idle.

Jin ZiXuan was up ahead escorting his wife who was eager to see her brother. Or, brothers? A strange state of affairs. It was Lan Qiren’s first time meeting Jiang Yanli. His impression was that she was nothing like her brother or shidi. She was pretty, but not excessively so. She was polite and unobtrusive. Jin ZiXuan obviously adored her.

Up ahead in the former plaza was movement. That must be Wei WuXian and his group. For some reason, he thought he needed to bring a group of former Wen’s to their disgraced and dilapidated former home.

In the plaza a tent was set up. A woman was directing people in and out of it with a closed fan. A horse-drawn cart full of supplies was parked out of the way. A selection of people, most of whom were in black robes edged in jewel-bright reds, were loading and unloading supplies.

Lan Qiren paused. Why were they all dressed like Wei WuXian?


Jiang Yanli didn’t run, but Lan Qiren could tell she wanted to. Wei WuXian and Jiang Wanyin had been arguing together in a way reminiscent of the behaviour Lan Qiren saw many times over their joint time as his students. He half expected one to put the other in a headlock like he’d seen many times before. As soon as Jiang Yanli reached them, she pulled them into a hug. Jiang Wanyin looked like he wanted to protest, but instead simply endured it sullenly. Wei WuXian tried to hug her back, but Jiang Wanyin made the attempt look awkward.

Lan Qiren frowned in disapproval. Such public displays. Also…

His nephews told him about how the Jiang siblings claimed Wei WuXian as their brother and vice versa, but it still didn’t sit right with Lan Qiren. Wei WuXian wasn’t related to them at all. It was all highly improper.

“That’s strange,” Jin GuangYao said, “What are they doing over there?”
Several people in black seemed to be preparing the ground for something. They were cleaning a large area of dust and dirt. As they watched, one person stood as a marker while another took many deliberate paces from him.

“They must be marking an array,” Nie Mingjue muttered, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Let’s ask,” Nie Huaisang said brightly. Before anyone could stop him, he walked forward and called out: “Wei-xiong! Jiang-xiong! It’s been a long time!”

“Nie-xiong!” Wei WuXian greeted loudly, waving an arm, “Ah! You’re all here!”

Lan Qiren moved with the group to talk to Wei WuXian, but made a detour when something caught his eye.

It was a woman, elegant in her black robes lined in red. Her hair was up in a simple yet elegant style with a polished and red painted wooden pin. In her hand, gently waving was a black ebony fan painted with red spider-lilies and a red tassel. Her face was beautiful, but unreadable. Gently smiling, but no one could tell what she was thinking.

So, it was her.

When Lan Qiren first read the list of people living on the Burial Mounds, the name of Shen Shuyi jumped out at him. It claimed her original occupation was a teacher which matched and that her next of kin was her wife, Shen Jinjing which did not make sense.

Wen Shuyi had been a famous cultivator of Lan Qiren’s generation along with her twin brother. Many had admired the elegant mysterious pair. But then Wen Shuyi became injured somehow which damaged her cultivation and she retired from night-hunting. Her brother, now alone and unaccompanied by his sister, proved unsociable and frequently used underhanded tricks which quickly made him unpopular.

They had learned and briefly teamed up together in their youth, but Lan Qiren hadn’t heard from her in decades. He’d assumed she’d died before the Sunshot campaign had even begun. Her twin brother had been killed in one of the first skirmishes of the Sunshot Campaign. Despite having been warned from the list, he was still surprised to see her here in Wei WuXian’s black clothing and not in the usual sun and flames.

“Wen Shuyi,” Lan Qiren greeted.

“Who?” she said placidly, eyes sliding his way, expression unchanging.

Lan Qiren was brought up short in surprise.

“…Shen Shuyi,” Lan Qiren hesitantly corrected himself.

The woman inclined her head in greeting, finally directing that mysterious smile at him.

“Lan Qiren, it’s been a long time. Would it be rude to offer my condolence for your brother?” she said politely.

“Not at all,” Lan Qiren said. His thoughts turned briefly to his brother with an inevitable clenching of the heart, “I’m surprised to see you here.”

Wen – Shen? – Shuyi eyes seemed to narrow slightly.
“Were you expecting me to be dead? Or, were you simply surprised I left the safety of the Burial Mounds?”

“Safety?” Lan Qiren spluttered.

“Safest place I’ve ever lived in,” Shen Shuyi said.

“The Burial Mounds?” Lan Qiren’s voice went up an octave. He felt like he was repeating himself. Unlike his nephews however, Shen Shuyi knew where he was coming from.

“I know. I never would have believed it either. If I’d been in a better state of mind when we were heading there, I may have protested. But it’s truly changed from how it was before. Wei-laozu has tamed it somehow. As long as Wei-laozu accepts us there, so will the mountain,” Shen Shuyi said.

Lan Qiren didn’t know which part to address first.

“Wei-laozu? Why do you call him ‘patriarch’?”

“He is what he is,” Shen Shuyi said. She was completely serene while Lan Qiren felt he was getting closer and closer to pulling his hair out.

“He leads us, protects us. The people of Yiling like him. The mountain obeys him. He lets all of us live free without the insidious fear that choked us before,” Shen Shuyi said.

“After the Sunshot Campaign,” Lan Qiren acknowledged, “No one had any idea about any of that and I am sorry it happened to you.”

Shen Shuyi’s eyes narrowed and she closed her fan with a snap. Her smile was gone. Instead she was cold and distant, almost seemed to be looking down at him. Lan Qiren was irritated. He wasn’t a student or a teenager anymore. That expression had no right to make him feel so small.

“Ah, yes. The fear of being in someone else’s trap waiting for the next hit as we were picked off one by one by the snakes surrounding us, enjoying our helplessness. Nowhere to run to. No one who would help us. All compassion, mercy and kindness gone from the world. Never to be directed at anyone named Wen ever again. Or… so we thought,” Shen Shuyi gestured with her fan to Wei WuXian.

Lan Qiren was speechless. Shen Shuyi continued before he could rally himself, however.

“Yes, that’s one part of our lives when we lived in fear. But I was also referring to when we lived here,” Shen Shuyi gestured to the abandoned buildings around them.

“Whe- but you…” Lan Qiren was very confused.

“You should know what Wen Ruohan was like,” Shen Shuyi said, her voice like a frozen wasteland, “Did you really think those outside of QishanWen were the only ones subjected to his cruelty?”

She looked at him, cold and sharp.

“There were many among us who would have cheered at you taking down Wen Ruohan and his supporters. But that didn’t make any of you happy. All Wen’s, innocents included, must be wiped out of the world. We did not deserve compassion, mercy or kindness and everyone made sure to remind us of that at every turn. And what would the world give us without that? Nothing but cruelty. From within, then from without,” Shen Shuyi said, gaze frigid.
“I tried to protect my students, too young to know the realities of outside these walls. Too naïve to
know what our Sect Leader was really like. After the Campaign, I continued to try and protect them.
But then LanlingJin came and took us away and separated me from my students. I don’t know what
happened to them. I don’t know where they were taken or what happened to them. They,” Shen
Shuyi’s voice shook. The cold woman showed emotion for the first time. She closed her eyes and
hid her face behind her fan.

Lan Qiren had whitened as she spoke. The words were like icicles in his skin, digging ever deeper
and spreading their burning cold.

“They would have come,” Shen Shuyi said, more to herself than Lan Qiren, “They would have…
Throughout two years, they would have come. Even if they didn’t trust Wei-laozu, they would have
checked who was in the Burial Mounds.”

Lan Qiren felt sick. He couldn’t imagine being in Shen Shuyi’s situation. He thought of all of his
own students, bright-eyed and eager to become cultivators, in their bright stainless robes and
carefully tied forehead ribbons. He thought of being separated from them by people who condemned
them for being Lan’s… and he failed. He couldn’t imagine it. It was so far from reality because who
would do such a thing?

“Are you part of the investigations?” Shen Shuyi asked him.

“Yes, alongside my younger nephew,” Lan Qiren said.

“If you find out what happened to my students, to the children of QishanWen…” Shen Shuyi trailed
off.

“I will let you know,” Lan Qiren said, trying to do something about the wrenching feeling in his gut.

“No,” Shen Shuyi said sharply then hesitated, “Yes. If they’re alive, I want to know. If they’re
dead… I… I don’t think I can know. What happened to them. I can’t.”

Shen Shuyi ducked her head. Lan Qiren had never seen her this emotional before.

“Shizun?”

They turned to spot another woman looking at Shen Shuyi in concern. Lan Qiren couldn’t resist
recoiling. Half of the woman’s face was horrifically burned. The burn was circular and centred on
her right temple. Her right ear, peaking through uneven hair, looked partially melted. The only thing
that had saved her right eye was the ridges of her skull, but Lan Qiren wouldn’t have been surprised
if he could see her cheekbone through the scarred flesh. The burn looked oddly familiar.

“Are you alright?” the woman asked, looking at Lan Qiren suspiciously, ignoring the way Lan
Qiren’s eyes kept skittering back and forth from her scarring. It kept drawing his eye whenever he
would try and avoid it from horrified disgust.

“Just talking to a former… colleague, of sorts,” Shen Shuyi assured, voice noticeably softer,
“Shouldn’t you be ensuring Khan doesn’t drink the blood?”

“What?” the scarred woman blinked. She spun around quickly. Some distance behind her was a big
horse trying to nose into buckets that had been unloaded from the wagon.

“Khan! Don’t you dare!” the woman called out, she spun and bowed quickly with a ‘your pardon,
shizun’ and ran off trying to chase the horse from the buckets.
“Blood?” Lan Qiren said faintly, staring at the buckets in horror. How much was there?

“For the array,” Shen Shuyi explained, unconcerned. She glanced over at Lan Qiren shrewdly, “You didn’t recognise her, did you?”

Lan Qiren paused in his mental gibbering, “Should I have?”

“Wen Jinjing, a former student of mine. Now Shen Jinjing,” Shen Shuyi said.

That was a name Lan Qiren did recall, both from real life and the Burial Mounds list.

Wen Jinjing was a student that Wen Shuyi had bragged about the last time they had spoken at a competition. Already an incomparable beauty, she had done her shizun proud in her graceful swordsmanship and excellent cultivation skills. Yet, she’d faded into obscurity, not unlike her shizun.

That horrifically scarred woman couldn’t be her. Could it?

“It was written on the list that the two of you were wed,” Lan Qiren observed. Surely it was a mistake. It was more likely that the shared name was from adoption. A master and student marrying? Two women marrying?

No, of course not.

“What’s wrong with two people in love marrying?” his younger beloved nephew asked.

Lan Qiren ignored that. Impossible.

“We are,” Shen Shuyi said, softer in voice and expression than Lan Qiren had ever seen. He recognised those eyes. They were moon eyes! She was giving her former student moon eyes!

“That was your student,” Lan Qiren hissed at her.

“Wasn’t my idea,” Shen Shuyi said. She sounded exasperated yet fond. Lan Qiren was outraged, “But I don’t regret it. Don’t look like that, Lan Qiren. I would think, a Lan of all people, would understand devotion to one you’re in love with.”

Visions of his brother’s conduct went through Lan Qiren’s head and his face darkened.

“Or, perhaps, I’m speaking to the wrong Lan,” Shen Shuyi said dryly. She shrugged, “Like I said, though, we’re free on the Burial Mounds.”


“Do not,” Shen Shuyi hissed, “try and degrade my marriage as if it were somehow less than anyone else’s.”

Lan Qiren stared at this person who had been so admired. Many young men of his generation had dreamed of having her for their wife. Even Lan Qiren had entertained a few fantasies. But every flirtation had gone unnoticed – when they could get past that shrewd, suspicious brother of hers anyway.

“You even took on your mother’s name…”

“And now you insult my mother,” Shen Shuyi observed, icy in her anger.

Across the way, people in black robes started using whatever was in the buckets Shen Jinjing had
“Didn’t she sell you and your brother to your father for a few gold taels?” Lan Qiren insisted.

Wen Shuyi and her twin were bastard children that their father had had legitimised when he realised his lawful wife was barren. Rumours spoke of how their father had carelessly tossed gold taels at their prostitute mother in return for his heirs.

“How little you know of the world under the clouds and without that rock you obey so faithfully,” Shen Shuyi said, every word sharp, “My mother wanted to keep us. It was someone else who was paid for us.”

Before Lan Qiren could pick that apart to understand what she was saying, Shen Shuyi changed the subject. Or, rather, reverted back to the topic Lan Qiren most wanted to get away from.

“Did you ever wonder why Jinjing and I were never heard of after my injury?” Shen Shuyi asked.

“Yes,” Lan Qiren admitted. He was sure he’d fallen into a trap of some kind.

“Wen Ruohan disliked dissenters and disobedient people. He has preferred tactics. Including going after your loved ones first,” Shen Shuyi said, “That’s why I say how much freer it is in the Burial Mounds. None of us have to pretend we don’t care so we can protect our beloved ones. I always had to behave like Jinjing was just a former student who cooked and cleaned for me in return for saving her that time. I verbally disagreed with what happened to Lotus Pier. Next thing I know, my brother was ordered on a suicide mission. Back when Wen Ruohan was convinced he would crush you all and decided to delay so he could prune the clan a bit. Back before the Yiling Patriarch appeared with his dread army and Wen Ruohan’s precious army of psychotic sycophants started dropping like flies.”

Shen Shuyi snapped her fan closed and made a motion to move. She’d decided that this conversation was over.

“Never try to undermine my marriage or my love for my wife, family or new home again,” she warned, “Also, I heard you told Wei-laozu that the world would never forgive him if he figured out how to use resentful energy. I would hope that you have learned that, even if you think something cannot be forgiven, it doesn’t someone deserves to be punished forever for it. Especially when someone did it to survive. Surviving – living – isn’t wrong. No matter who it is.”

Shen Shuyi walked off to join her wife, so they could check the lines of the array together.

Lan Qiren stood there in stunned shock.

A sickening roiling feeling had erupted in his stomach during that conversation. Now that he didn’t have a distraction anymore, it made him feel nauseous.

Ridiculous. What did he have to feel guilty about? He hadn’t known! No one had said anything.

And what was that about not deserving to be punished if you did something that could not be forgiven? Of course punishment was needed! How else would they make an example to others?

Lan Wangji looked over when he saw the woman who had been talking to his uncle walk over and join the people painting the array. Blood had apparently been donated by the residents of the Burial Mounds, including Wei WuXian to paint the giant array. Wei WuXian was eyeing it carefully, giving instructions and advice to his people.
It wasn’t the only array. There were smaller ones some distance away with blank spaces in the middle. Apparently, they were meant to be protective arrays that would prevent any backlash from harming the viewers. Another one was being painted around the tent under the careful eye of Wei Qing. The tent was an infirmary. Combined with the protective array, it made Lan Wangji uneasy.

They were expecting someone to get hurt.

They were expecting Wei Ying to get hurt.

*Unacceptable.*

Quietly, Lan Wangji made his way to Wei WuXian who was examining the entire array.

“You’re expecting a backlash,” he said.

Wei WuXian looked up in surprise.

“Oh! Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian smiled at him, then looked around, “ah, those are mostly for precaution. The Stygian Tiger Seal is very strong and it won’t let itself be destroyed easily. I should be able to divert the backlash, but just in case…”

Wei WuXian shrugged.

“Isn’t there a safer way of destroying it?” Lan Wangji asked, brow furrowing a little, “Perhaps someone could help you…”

Wei WuXian shook his head.

“If there were other demonic cultivators, they could help,” Wei WuXian acknowledged, “But there aren’t, so this is it. Honestly, Lan Zhan, best case scenario: I destroy the damn thing and just become a little loopy for a time. Worst case scenario: an array fails – either mine or one of the protection ones. You or someone gets blasted by a lot of resentful energy if your array fails which wouldn’t be good for you. I might get injured, but more likely I’ll just fail to destroy the damn seal and everyone will have come here for nothing.”

“If other demonic cultivators could help, why don’t you hire people who’d be willing to learn…” Lan Wangji was cut off.

“No,” Wei WuXian said in a firm dark tone, “Those people have no understanding of resentful energy. And those imitators are not demonic cultivators. Resentful energy is too dangerous for anyone to learn.”

*Than why did you?* Lan Wangji wanted to ask.

“What do you mean ‘loopy’?” Lan Wangji asked instead.

Wei WuXian laughed. Hearing someone as serious as Lan Wangji say ‘loopy’ was very amusing to Wei WuXian.

“Oh, that,” Wei WuXian chuckled, “When I use a lot of resentful energy at once I end up acting like I’m drunk for a while. It hasn’t happened since I escaped the Burial Mounds at the start of the Sunshot Campaign, so I’m not 100% sure what I’m like. I haven’t gotten drunk since I turned fifteen. The only people who would remember what I’d be like drunk is A-Jie and A-Cheng. You might find it interesting. You might not know thanks to GusuLan rules, but drunk people can be really entertaining!”
“You don’t believe you’ll get hurt?” Lan Wangji pushed.

“It’s only a remote chance,” Wei WuXian reassured, looking at him curiously, “and, as you can see, we’ve taken precautions against it. Honestly, the mini infirmary is more for me to have a private area I can sleep in after I come down from the drunk feeling. And it makes Qing-jie happy.”

Lan Wangji wasn’t happy with that answer, but it was better than his assumptions.

“If you acknowledge resentful energy is dangerous, why do you practice demonic cultivation?” Lan Wangji asked.

“This again?” Wei WuXian asked becoming irritable at the repeated assumption, “When I said ‘resentful energy is too dangerous for anyone to learn’ I meant it’s dangerous for everybody around them. You’ve seen only a small portion of the things I can do with demonic cultivation; can you really trust just anybody with those kinds of abilities? The things I can do – it’s too easy to abuse such power. It’s so easy to be able to hurt or kill people with what I can do, I can’t trust that others will have the same level of restraint. And, even I only know a fraction of what’s possible with demonic cultivation. I’m learning more every day.”

Lan Wangji was silent as he turned this over in his head.

“I thought you’d finally stopped assuming I don’t know what I’m doing,” Wei WuXian muttered, hoping the hurt he was feeling didn’t come out in his voice. Lan Wangji hadn’t mentioned this matter since the last time they were in Yunmeng together.

“You just said you don’t know everything you can do with demonic cultivation,” Lan Wangji pointed out. He hadn’t meant to come across that way, except that he did think Wei WuXian was in over his head. The other man was too reckless.

“I am cautious,” Wei WuXian retorted, “I’m not reckless with it. When I try new things I take precautions. It’s even easier now, with Qing-jie’s help. I don’t… Lan Zhan, I can’t take risks with my life anymore. I have people I’m responsible for. If something happens to me, what happens to them?”

Wei WuXian gestured to the people painting an array with blood in the middle of their conquered and abandoned former city. It was true. Wei WuXian hadn’t been reckless with demonic cultivation since those three months in the Burial Mounds, mindless except for the constant mantra of ‘I have to get out. I have to find Jiang Cheng and shijie.’

“Not expendable, Wei-laozu,” a man called out, still focussed on painting a symbol.

“Are you eavesdropping?” Wei WuXian demanded.

“No,” the man lied, “I didn’t hear anything.”

“But it’s still risky,” Lan Wangji insisted, worried. He could still remember all the books speaking about how resentful energy affected the bodies and hearts of those infected by it. How the more powerful ghosts were twisted from how they were in life thanks to their high amount of resentful energy.

“Of course it’s risky,” Wei WuXian said, unconcerned, “Everything in life is risky. Even normal cultivation with a golden core has its risks. The only reason resentful energy has more risks is because I’m the first to try and utilise it. That’s all.”

That… was a completely different matter.
Wasn’t it?

Wei WuXian had a way of saying such things that made them seem entirely reasonable. Lan Wangji was very confused and he didn’t like it.

“I’ve already survived the most risky part of becoming a demonic cultivator. Which is: becoming a demonic cultivator. Everything else I can analyse, hypothesise and have A-Ning and Qing-jie as back-up, both as sounding-boards and medics,” Wei WuXian explained. He glanced at Lan Wangji curiously, because it sounded like…

“Are you… worried about me?” Wei WuXian wondered. That couldn’t be it, could it? Lan Wangji had made it clear despite their repeated meetings that he didn’t care that much about Wei WuXian beyond him doing something that Lan Wangji considered wrong somehow.

“Of course,” Lan Wangji replied.

“O-Oh,” Wei WuXian said, startled. He felt a little flustered that Lan Wangji was worried about him. He even used the more firm words ‘of course’ instead of his customary ‘en’!

“And its effects on your heart?” Lan Wangji persisted.

“What effects?” Wei WuXian asked, hidden hurt returning under irritation, the hurt increased due to Lan Wangji’s admittance of his worry, “It’s been many years. Do you really think I’m so changed? I’m not a teenager anymore. What changes to my heart does another person see that can be attributed to resentful energy?”

Another person.

Lan Wangji’s heart hurt to hear the words he’d once called Wei WuXian to his face being flung back at him.

The truth was that, two years ago, Lan Wangji would have said yes. Digging up graves, reanimating corpses and killing so many people with a single-minded focus in such horrific ways were never things he could have associated with the kind, mischievous youth he had known. Even that time at Yunmeng, seeing Wei WuXian with those female corpses had sent shivers of disgust up his spine. Using his abilities to tease Lan Wangji was certainly something Wei WuXian would do, but why use the corpses when he should help lay them at rest?

But now…

Now Wei WuXian was still kind, still mischievous and still so bright. He kept trying to help people no one else had the guts to. He was more serious, more weighed down with responsibility. He was… still very much the person Lan Wangji had fallen in love with.

Wei WuXian stared at him, waiting. When no answer came, Wei WuXian nodded as if that was an answer in and of itself.

He wasn’t wrong.

“I have to check the arrays,” Wei WuXian said. He turned and walked away.

Lan Wangji could only watch. He wanted to follow, to insist on going with Wei Ying wherever he went.

Lan Wangji stayed where he was.
After a moment or two he also turned and walked in the opposite direction back to his brother and uncle.

Lan XiChen was worried. He had a lot to be worried about.

As much as Lan XiChen understood why Wei WuXian asked him and Nie Mingjue to keep the location and date of the Seal’s destruction a secret from Jin GuangYao until they could pick him up and travel together, it still saddened him. Did Jin GuangYao even realise the distrust he had garnered following his father’s orders?

Hopefully, taking a new brother under his wing might gain Jin GuangYao some perspective. Lan XiChen hadn’t met this Mo XuanYu yet, but A-Yao said he was a very sweet child.

There was also his uncle who had gone to talk to an elegant woman near his own age and come back looking alternatively pale and dark-faced.

The woman must be a cultivator. She appeared to normal people as young woman with an ageless face, but cultivators could pick up a sense of age about such people. She felt around the age his father and uncle had.

Then, there was the investigation his uncle and brother would be taking part in. It was being led by Nie Mingjue’s cousin, Nie Minsheng. Nie Minsheng was a man with a friendly demeanour that belied a shrewd and perceptive man underneath, according to Nie Mingjue. He certainly seemed friendly and laid-back, but when Lan XiChen observed him he noticed sharp eyes taking in everything about the people Wei WuXian brought with him. Nie Huaisang would also be helping the investigations to Lan XiChen’s surprise. In addition, Jin ZiXuan, while he would not be a part of the investigations, would be a liaison from LanlingJin. As heir, he should be able to gain them access to anything the investigation asks for.

Finally, there was the purpose of today’s outing to the eerily abandoned Nightless City. The amount of blood used to paint the arrays would make a man with a weaker stomach queasy. One large one for the destruction itself, one around the infirmary tent and a few smaller ones for the spectators. The former Wen’s had been separated into their own special group, Lan XiChen noticed.

Also, shortly before, Lan XiChen accidently overheard Jin ZiXuan talking to a woman who’d briefly approached his uncle and his conversation partner before running off to shoo away one of the undead horses. He hadn’t really noticed her, too interested in the strange arrays. They used some odd symbols Lan XiChen had never seen before.

“Excuse me, ma’am? I… would like to apologise for what my clan did to your face,” Lan XiChen heard Jin ZiXuan awkwardly say to someone.

“Why? You weren’t the one who burned me,” a woman’s voice replied.

“I am the heir to LanlingJin. Your scar is in the shape of a peony,” Jin ZiXuan said flatly.

Lan XiChen looked up and wanted to recoil. The woman was facing Jin ZiXuan with her right side facing Lan XiChen. This meant that Lan XiChen got a full view of the burn. It was circular and, indeed, in the shape of a flower. It wasn’t immediately identifiable as a peony, but only due to the uneven surface of a person’s face. Even from this far away, Ln XiChen could see the warped right ear and how her hair had been burned off with only some growing back in patches.

With a muted and distant horror, Lan XiChen remembered his little brother telling him about XuanWu cave and how Wei WuXian had taken a sun brand because he claimed that a woman
wouldn’t recover socially from scars like a man could.

The woman shifted uncomfortably. It was clear she wasn’t used to apologies. She seemed to be an older woman, Lan XiChen felt, not much younger than Lan Qiren.

“May I ask how it happened?” Nie Minsheng asked. He’d come up quietly and looked at the woman with much sympathy.

“I… refused one of the LanlingJin people in charge of Qiongqi Path. So, he decided I had no use for my beauty. That’s what he said,” the woman shifted in agitation, “I did have use for it. Shizun always liked my face. I wasn’t going to let anyone other than shizun touch me like that.”

“Who’s your shizun?” the woman who had been talking to his uncle came over and asked exasperatedly, “Besides, Jinjing is still the most beautiful.”

The burned woman turned to the newcomer with tears in her long eyelashes. Lan XiChen could see in the other half of her face that she probably was once a great beauty.


“Who?” the other woman scolded.

“Wife!” Jinjing corrected, hooking her arms around one of the elegant woman’s and looking at her adoringly.

Jin ZiXuan made a slight strangled sound. Nie Minsheng’s eyes went wide and a blush seemed to come over his face. Lan XiChen was also startled. He’s heard of cutsleeves of course, but he’d never met one. Also, he’d never heard of female cutsleeves either.

“I don’t care about the scar, but I would have preferred it if Jinjing didn’t get hurt,” the woman said, “You have no idea how I felt when I saw them dragging you to that hut. No one came out of that hut alive. If Wei-laozu hadn’t come when he did, I would have done something reckless.”

The scarred woman shook her head, “I’m not worth your life.”

“That’s up to me to decide,” The woman said firmly, she turned to the red-faced Jin ZiXuan and Nie Minsheng, “Also, this ridiculous creature neglected to mention that she kicked that… person in between the legs when he tried to force the issue. That was when he decided to burn her.”

“If a man doesn’t want to get kicked there then he shouldn’t be putting his dick where it isn’t wanted,” the burned woman declared.

“True,” her wife conceded.

“Agreed,” Jin ZiXuan said. He seemed very unhappy, “I’m sorry you were put in that situation at all. My kinsmen’s conduct wasn’t right. Do you know who it was?”

“He was one of the one’s killed by the corpses Wei-laozu summoned. A female corpse. I knew her. Her name was Wen Wan. She wasn’t a good cultivator, preferred the idea of being a housewife, but she was also very pretty,” the elegant woman said, “I mean no offense to you, but I was… not happy… satisfied perhaps, in his death.”

Jin ZiXuan paled, but nodded woodenly. He saluted the two woman and walked back to where his wife was talking with her brother. Lan XiChen tuned out Nie Minsheng gently asking for the married couple’s names. Tears had almost come to his eyes from their story.
What more horrible stories did these people have?

Now, Lan XiChen watched as his brother talked to Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian walked off, looking unhappy. After a minute Lan Wangji walked back over to join him. Lan XiChen looked at his brother in worry. Lan Wangji also looked upset.

“Did you have an argument?” Lan XiChen asked quietly.

Lan Wangji nodded.

“Brother,” Lan Wangji started, quiet and unsure, “Does resentful energy always affect someone negatively?”

Lan XiChen paused, trying to determine exactly why his brother was asking that now before thinking about it.

“A few years ago I would have said ‘yes, it affects both body and heart negatively’ without hesitation,” Lan XiChen admitted, “But Wei-gongzi hasn’t shown any negative health problems from it that I know of. You might want to ask Miss Wei more about that side of it. As for his heart… I don’t know.”

Lan XiChen thought about what Nie Mingjue said about the effects of a war and losing everything has on someone.

“I don’t know, Wangji,” Lan XiChen sighed, “Wei-gongzi seems so much more dangerous than before. No, he seems much more dangerous than most people I can think of. What that means for his heart: I don’t know. But, he still has kindness enough to take in people and protect them when they had nowhere else to go. Perhaps, for now, that’s enough.”

Lan Wangji considered that for a moment then nodded. Lan XiChen could still tell that his brother was troubled though.

“Come on,” Lan XiChen said gently, “It looks like it’s about to begin.”

The protective arrays meant they had to be divided into three groups. All the former Wen’s apart from Wei Qing were in the back-most ring. Wei Qing, Jiang Wanyin and the three Lan’s joined the ring closest to the infirmary tent. The Nie’s and Jin’s where in the last. Two undead horses were outside the array on either side and seemed to be prancing and snorting at each other.

“OK!” Wei WuXian clapped his hands together and went to activate the former Wen’s circle. The blood started glowing an ominous red. When he came to their circle he dug around his sleeves and pulled out half an iron-wrought tiger seal made of black metal. He handed it to Jiang Wanyin who took it gingerly with a look of deep disgust and nervous loathing.

“That’s half the Stygian Tiger Seal,” Wei WuXian informed them, “This is so I can prove I’m destroying the real one and that it’s no trick. This is the other half. Pass it to the Lan’s, A-Cheng.”

Wei WuXian held up what looked like the other half, made of the same material. When Lan XiChen received the first half, he resisted the urge to shudder. Suddenly, Lan XiChen understood Jiang Wanyin’s expression and why he was so quick to give it up. It was like holding a poisonous snake in his hand. It was cold and felt like it might poison him if he held on too long. He quickly passed on to his little brother who also hated the feeling.

“You carry this around with you all the time?” Lan XiChen asked, worried.
“The pocket I keep it in has seals,” Wei WuXian reassured, “Trust me, I don’t like it either. The only reason I kept it on me was because I was afraid of other people getting their hands on it. I wanted a useful tool to make controlling large groups of corpses less tiring. Unfortunately, while I technically succeeded – that’s exactly what it does – it wasn’t in the way I wanted. It’s a liability. Too much power. Too much killing intent. And it offers its powers to anyone who’ll want it like a cheap whore.”

“Wei WuXian!” Lan Qiren raged. He quieted and turned faintly green when Lan Wangji handed the seal to him.

“I made it and I’m the one that’s had to carry it around all the time in the last three years. I can call it what I want,” Wei WuXian said. He activated their ring after taking back the seal. He walked over to the other group. Everyone apart from Jiang Yanli held the seal with varying expressions. Wei WuXian activated their ring and stepped back to examine them briefly. He nodded and walked to the centre of the large array. As he stepped through the first ring, it activated.

Wei WuXian knelt and touched his fingertips to the bloody array. It activated, glowing that eerie red. For a moment Wei WuXian didn’t move, his eyes closed. Then he suddenly stood and held the halves up, one in each hand.

When Wei WuXian opened his eyes, they were glowing red, not unlike the bloody array beneath him. Something changed in the air, raising the hairs on the back of Lan XiChen’s neck. Wei WuXian’s hair started lifting in invisible wind like it did during the Discussion Conference. Wei WuXian’s face was sharp and focussed in his concentration. Slowly, Lan XiChen could see tendrils of black, like living, moving shadows crawling up his hands to surround the two halves.

But, Lan XiChen squinted to see better, it looked like the two halves also had a black aura fighting the tendrils. Beside him, Jiang Wanyin swore.

“He said it would fight him,” Jiang Wanyin muttered grimly.

“He said he wouldn’t get hurt,” Lan Wangji said.

“He’s taken enough precautions for that to probably be true,” Wei Qing said.

“That doesn’t mean this will be easy for him,” Jiang Wanyin said.

A great shadow seemed to fall across the sun, yet when Lan XiChen glanced up, it was still a clear day. Black mist started to come from Wei WuXian. A moment later, red lightning seemed to splinter through the now cloud-like black energy that Lan XiChen belatedly realised was resentful energy.

Dear Guanyin.

The resentful energy was visible.

That was… a lot of resentful energy.

Lan XiChen swallowed, unable to suppress his fear of the sight in front of him.

Lan XiChen tore his eyes away from the black clouds and red lighting of resentful energy to see Wei WuXian’s face through the black mist.

In hindsight, maybe he shouldn’t have been so reassuring to his brother about Wei WuXian not appearing to have any negative physical effects from resentful energy.
Through the black mist, Wei WuXian’s glowing red eyes were still clearly visible and narrowed in concentration. His eyes appeared shadowed as the skin around his eyes appeared dark from the surrounding veins which had turned black.

He looked… inhuman.

Like a demon or monster from an old tale that had sworn revenge on all of humanity.

Finally, there was a shattering, screeching sound that echoed throughout the abandoned city. It was high-pitched and loud in their ears. The metal pieces in Wei WuXian’s hands had shattered and now bits and pieces were tinkling to the ground.

The lightning ceased. The black clouds dissipated. The billowing robes and gravity-defying hair stopped to rest. Warmth and sunlight seemed to return to everyone’s senses. Wei WuXian let his hands fall to his sides. Lan XiChen could still see shards of metal and, concerningly, blood drip from them. The blackened veins around Wei WuXian’s eyes slowly drained away, returning to a more normal colour. For a moment, the only thing that betrayed the image of a normal mortal man was the red glowing eyes and after blinking a few times, they too, faded away.

Silence deafened them.

Wei WuXian swayed in place.

Immediately, his people leapt into action.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons:
Lan Wangji’s perspective: LWJ, unfortunately, is the kind of person who takes what’s written in books to be the truth. Not unlike Hermione from HP, though he is better at critical thinking for himself. But when all books agree that resentful energy twists someone’s heart to anger and vengeance and he saw what Wifi did to Wen Chao?

Plus, it’s proven that resentful energy harms the body. He doesn’t quite grasp the fact that Wifi has a way around that. That Wifi has resentful energy in his body and it isn’t harming him isn’t a realisation he’s come to yet. That not even cultivators know everything about ghosts and what happens after death also isn’t something that’s crossed his mind.

Unfortunately, LWJ hasn’t quite come to the same perspective as his book self who had to live with Wifi being dead for 13 years with accepting and trusting things Wifi says. LWJ doesn’t like taking risks and that’s what he feels trusting Wifi on this issue is: a risk. For book!LWJ the risk is worth taking if it means he can stay by Wifi’s side. C!LWJ hasn’t come to that realisation yet. Although, the assassination attempt on Wifi has kick-started that realisation.

LWJ might remember everything Wifi says, but he’s still not quite listening. It wasn’t that long ago that he finally acknowledged to himself on Phoenix Mountain that he can’t ignore Wifi or his feelings for him like he’s tried to do for so long.

Destruction scene: This is actually a scene I initially came up with for Wifi’s death in
canon from JC’s POV. Only, instead of the energy fully fading away, the scene changes.

Wei WuXian is smiling a spiteful, humourless and satisfied smile and his still glowing eyes slide to something behind Jiang Cheng. Everyone is still stunned and terrified of the scene of power they had just witnessed. Jiang Cheng’s hand fists on that damn flute as he decides to look behind him.

Before he can move, corpses run past him, through the group that had come to personally confront the Yiling Patriarch. From the shouts of confusion behind him, all of the previous undead army had abandoned their fight to head to their master.

For a moment, Jiang Cheng doesn’t understand. He cannot comprehend what he is seeing. All the corpses have converged on Wei WuXian. Quickly, Wei WuXian is out of view, covered by corpses. There’s a strangled sound soon covered up by the horrible sounds of the crude chewing and tearing of uncooked meat. Those sounds are, themselves, nearly covered by the shouts and screams of the cultivators who are now witnessing the Yiling Patriarch’s death by his own undead army.

No.

Jian Cheng didn’t realise he was among the people shouting or that he was moving until his subordinates restrained him. His first instinct was to retrieve Wei WuXian from the corpses.

The man partially responsible for every bad thing that happened to Jiang Cheng. The destruction of his sect. The death of his parents. His orphaned nephew. His sister.

Jiang Cheng watched, numb, as the corpses tore apart and ate the second last member of his family he had left.

Wei WuXian was gone.
Hi everyone!

I'm surprised no-one's asked about some of the tags. I update them as I think of what tags are relevant to this story. Or, due to potential spoilers, when they become relevant.

I hope you like Nie Minsheng. He's only a minor character for the investigation, but I thought giving you an insight into his thinking at the end might be a good idea.

I'm happy so many picked up on Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing being based on Shen QingQiu and Luo Binghe from Scum Villain.

I hope Wei WuXian's power-high antics amuse you, but I couldn't really make them LWJ level amusing. Partially because fatigue hit Wifi fairly quickly.

Also, more information on my theories of resentful energy and an idea for YilingWei!

The former Wen's moved quickly. Wei Qing somehow deactivated the protective array and rushed to Wei WuXian, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji close behind. The other's deactivated the other array after deactivating their own and Jiang Yanli also quickly made her way to her younger brother. One of the horses reached him first and Wei WuXian leaned on the normally rowdy horse.

"I did it!" Wei WuXian called loudly, a wide grin on his face, waving a bleeding arm back and forth.

"Yes, yes, very good," Wei Qing said impatiently, "You're bleeding, give me your arms."

The grin stretched wide on Wei WuXian's face and he seemed almost giddy. At times he leaned on his horse, at others he was bouncing up and down on his feet. He held out his arms amiably enough, but he also kept looking around Wei Qing.

"Auntie Jinjing! Come take the pieces. What's the biggest one?" Wei WuXian asked, trying to keep on task, even as he seemed anxious to get up and move around.

"What's Wei Ying usually like intoxicated?" Lan Wangji asked before they reached him.

"Suggestible and stubborn in equal measure. Once he gets an idea in his head, he's hard to sway. And his ideas when he was like this were more ludicrously impossible than usual. He also runs around everywhere, especially if he wants to chase something," Jiang Cheng said, sounding exhausted at the thought.

Jiang Yanli giggles, "It was funny."

For the first time anybody could remember seeing, Jiang Cheng gave a (small and weak) glare to his sister.

"You convinced him I needed a hug and he decided to chase me all over Lotus Pier until we both
ended up in the river,” Jiang Cheng complained.

Jiang Yanli giggled again, “He probably would have left you alone if you had just let him give you a hug.”

“You kept telling him where I was hiding all the time too,” Jiang Cheng continued, still stuck in old memories.

“Do you need a hug?” Wei WuXian asked him seriously.

“No, I don’t!”

“Can I have a hug?” Jiang Yanli asked brightly.

“Wait!” Wei Qing tried to say before growling in annoyance. As soon as Jiang Yanli said that, Wei WuXian pulled his arms out from where Wei Qing was examining his cuts for any shards stuck inside and put them around Jiang Yanli instead who squeaked in surprise.

“I’m sorry, Qing-jie,” Jiang Yanli attempted to say over her taller younger brother’s shoulder, “I forgot he’d do that immediately.”

“My little big sister,” Wei WuXian mused, unashamedly cuddling his sister’s smaller frame.

In the background Lan Qiren looked scandalized.

“Better you than me,” Jiang Cheng said, deciding to stand behind Wei Qing just in case Wei WuXian got any ideas.

“Wei-laozu,” Shen Jinjing interrupted, “This is…”

In Shen Jinjing’s gloved hands was a twisted, warped metal thing. Despite the warping, one could still see some of the original designs. It was roughly half the seal that was supposed to have been destroyed. Everyone examined the ground where a few people were carefully sweeping up the shards that must have been the other shattered half of the seal.

Wei WuXian made a sound halfway between mournful and upset. He reluctantly let go of his A-Jie to take the half from Shen Jinjing. He wrapped his left hand around it and his fingers fit perfectly into the warped metal.

“I’m sorry,” Wei WuXian said, sounding miserable and bowing slightly to a wide-eyed Shen Jinjing who immediately tried to stop him, “My left hand isn’t as strong as my right.”

“Its fine,” Shen Jinjing tried to reassure.

“We can deal with it later,” Shen Shuyi said, “The important thing is that the Stygian Tiger Seal can’t be used, right?”

Wei WuXian nodded. Behind the group that had come over to examine the shards was Jin GuangYao who was examining the arrays. Former Wen’s came with buckets of water and washed away the arrays.

Ah! His people were so smart. They had split into two groups. One to obliterate the larger array before Jin GuangYao could memorise any more of it. One to passive-aggressively remove the protective arrays Jin GuangYao was currently examining before moving on to the others.

“Come on,” Wei Qing said, “Let’s head into the tent.”
“I don’t wanna go in the tent,” Wei WuXian whined.

The great warhorse snorted and stamped his foot. Wei WuXian blinked. What Khan wanted came through the giddy power-high easily. It simply took a moment for Wei WuXian’s brain to devote energy to comprehend it instead of dealing with the power-rush.

“Ok!” Wei WuXian said, baffling the people around him who thought this was a change from what he’s just said. But instead of heading toward Wei Qing or the tent, Wei WuXian pocketed the mangled seal, twisted around and started braiding parts of the horse’s mane.

“What are you doing?” Jin ZiXuan asked.

“Khan wanted his mane braided,” Wei WuXian explained, not looking up from his work.

Wei Qing slapped a hand against her face. Behind her was her horse, Shang, who snorted and stamped his feet in disapproval. Khan ignored him.

“Your hands need to cleaned and bandaged,” Wei Qing said, “Khan, he can do this later.”

“I’m fine, jie, I’ve had worse,” Wei WuXian reassured in an unreassuringly way.

“That’s not the point! And I know you’ve had worse! That doesn’t mean you have to go around with open wounds!”

“They’re just scratches.”

“I don’t care! Bleeding means open wound no matter how small it might be,” Wei Qing snapped, “Look, you’re getting blood on Khan.”

“Oh,” Wei WuXian said, blinking at the blood on the braid he was working on. He patted Khan’s neck in apology, getting more blood on the horse, “Sorry Khan.”

Khan snorted.

Wei WuXian hummed a melody, but continued to braid. He couldn’t stop halfway through! He’d just do this one. Despite the fact that Wei WuXian was a bit out of it, the melody he hummed was put together very well.

“What are you humming?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Song I’m composing,” Wei WuXian said, “I’m not sure where it’s taking me yet. I finished the other one so I needed a new music project to work on.”

Wei WuXian finished the braid. Before anyone could realise what he was going to do, or attempt to stop him, he launched himself towards Lan Wangji. He grabbed on to Lan Wangji’s arm and wrapped his own injured one around it.

Even those who didn’t know Lan Wangji knew he was surprised. Shocked was closer. His eyes were wide and his ears were red. He had frozen in shock, staring at Wei WuXian who was smiling sunnily at him.

“Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan! You promised to teach me your song. You can’t back out. It’s probably against the rules. No, wait, breaking your word is definitely breaking the rules so you have to teach me,” Wei WuXian insisted.

Lan Wangji nodded jerkily. He was completely unsure of what to do.
“Stop clinging to people,” Jiang Cheng snapped, “He’s not going to run away. If he says he’ll teach you a song, he’ll teach you.”

He’d better.

Jiang Cheng didn’t trust Lan Wangji with Wei WuXian. Jiang Cheng knew Wei WuXian was fond of Lan Wangji. How fond, Jiang Cheng could only suspect, and Wei WuXian himself didn’t seem to know how deeply fondness and admiration ran for Lan Wangji. But that just made the whole situation worse. Singling Wei WuXian out for punishments at Cloud Recesses. Fighting him at every chance about demonic cultivation in the middle of a small war. For all that Wei WuXian brushed it off, Jiang Cheng knew that Lan Wangji kept hurting him. Physically, like that time with the discipline ruler and emotionally, by accusing him of – becoming an immoral, evil person basically.

Visiting the Burial Mounds that time didn’t make up for everything else Lan Wangji had done in Jiang Cheng’s opinion. Wei WuXian was too forgiving when the only one who was hurt was himself. So, Jiang Cheng would be unforgiving on his behalf.

If Lan Wangji didn’t keep this promise to teach his brother a song… Well, Jiang Cheng would do something to make Lan Wangji miserable.

Luckily for Lan Wangji, he nodded in agreement. Wei WuXian started humming another, sweeter tune.

“Well, he can teach you when your hands are better,” Wei Qing snapped, “Get in the tent!”

Wei WuXian pouted at her, but by now it was clear that he was flagging. He was blinking more than usual and he seemed to be using his hold on Lan Wangji to keep himself from swaying.

“What about that fragment of the Stygian Tiger Seal?” Nie Mingjue demanded.

“We can deal with that later,” Wei Qing said, glaring at the man keeping her patient and brother from getting rest, “When he’s not out of it and ready to sleep. Learn some patience.”

Nie Mingjue looked outraged that he’d been scolded. But he stayed quiet, glowering at the medic who simply ignored him.

Brave girl, many thought.

Shen Jinjing picked up as many shards as she could, others coming to help her. Shen Shuyi, smiling in that unreadable way directed the observing crowd to elsewhere while Wei Qing instructed Lan Wangji to help Wei WuXian into the tent. Wei WuXian had quickly started becoming less enthusiastic and more quiet, staring into space.

Wei WuXian let go of Lan Wangji to start frowning at his hands, clenching them and unclenching them. His humming had changed tunes again, this one a more ominous melody.

“Golden light and blackened shadow,” he muttered to himself, “That which is opposite yet of the same. If one could put the two in harmony… Harmony… No, it can’t be that simple.”

“A-Ying?” Wei Qing prodded.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Wei WuXian said, distracted, “Where’s my brush? I need to write down my theories!”

Before anyone could respond, Wei WuXian ran to the tent. Wei Qing swore in a way that was
probably inappropriate for a lady and ran after him.

“Well, that was,” Jin GuangYao broke the silence that had descended on the group since Wei WuXian ran into the tent, “illuminating.”

“Is that what you want to call it?” Nie Mingjue said grumpily.

The dozen people were running around now. Some running back and forth with pails of water to wash away the various arrays. Some were carefully sweeping up bits of Stygian Tiger Seal from the ground with a ratty, half-gone straw broom.

“Is that… what demonic cultivation is like? I saw him at the discussion conference, but that seems to be something else entirely,” Jin GuangYao said. He sounded a bit stunned from the sight.

“The more he uses at a time the more visible changes occur. Afterwards, he returns to normal. I’ve never seen him like that though. Destroying the Seal was definitely not easy; he used a lot of energy to do it,” Jiang Cheng said.

“I hope he’s ok,” Jiang Yanli said, looking worriedly at the tent.

“He’ll be fine, A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng reassured, “He’s just tired.”

“What was he talking about at the end?” Jin ZiXuan asked.

“Some theory probably,” Jiang Cheng said, shrugging. That was normal behaviour, as far as Jiang Cheng was concerned.

“I’m going to ask if there’s an intact kitchen nearby that I can use,” Jiang Yanli said.

“Young Madam Jiang doesn’t have any ingredients,” Jin GuangYao pointed out.

“Of course I do,” Jiang Yanli said smiling, “That’s what was in the basket I brought. Please excuse me.”

With that, Jiang Yanli saluted and walked off, quickly gaining a visibly older man in black to accompany her to retrieve her basket and show her to a suitable kitchen.

“You’re just going to let her go off like that?” Lan Qiren asked.

Jin ZiXuan gave him a weird look, “I don’t control her. She can do as she likes. We’re going to be here for a while until Wei WuXian is ready to leave so we have time.”

“I think the point was that it might be dangerous,” Nie Minsheng said, “This is the Nightless City.”

“No one will hurt her,” Jin ZiXuan said, “Everyone knows how much my brothers-in-law adore her. And there’s nothing else here. Wei WuXian wouldn’t have risked something interrupting him.”

“I’m thinking more along the lines of something becoming drawn here from… that,” Nie Minsheng gave a vague wave in the direction of where Wei WuXian had been standing.


“That was… a lot of resentful energy,” Lan XiChen said. He looked worried, but he kept glancing more towards the tent instead of around them.

“Either Wei WuXian put in precautions for that or he doesn’t consider it a worry,” Jiang Cheng said.
“You’re very trusting,” Nie Mingjue said.

“I know my brother,” Jian Cheng said coldly.

Not wanting an argument – or worse, a fight – to break out between the two fiercest cultivators he knows, Nie Huaisang interrupted.

“Are you going to accompany us to the Burial Mounds, Jiang-xiong?”

“Yes, but I won’t stay for long.”

“What are we going to do about that large piece of the Seal?” Nie Mingjue asked. Beside him, Nie Huaisang resisted the urge to face-palm.

_There is a time to push things big brother, but that time is not now!_

“That’ll be up to Wei WuXian,” Jin ZiXuan said, “It’s his artefact.”

“But he mustn’t have it,” Jin GuangYao pointed out gently, “That’s what we are here for, are we not? To ensure that Wei-gongzi kept his word to destroy the Stygian Tiger Seal.”

“He never had to,” Jin ZiXuan said bluntly, “This is a concession. He never _had_ to destroy the Seal, the same way he never had to give it up. It’s his artefact; he can do with it what he likes. He could have kept it and no one would have been able to do or say anything about it. Don’t go around telling people that anyone outside of Wei WuXian had anything to do with today. Wei WuXian decided to destroy it without input from anyone else, or did you forget that Father wanted the Seal ‘confiscated’ not destroyed? It’s a concession – a gift – that Wei WuXian asked us if we wanted to come and see for ourselves. What we wanted – our opinions on what to do with the seal – never mattered.”

Unspoken went that Wei WuXian wanted to ensure that no rumours arise about him pretending to destroy it and actually keeping it. Rumours would still happen, but in the face of these witnesses, they would have no traction and quickly die.

“That is true for today,” Jin GuangYao allowed, “But do you really think the cultivation world would have continued to allow Wei WuXian to continue possessing it?”

“Why not? He’s only ever used it once,” Jiang Cheng said, annoyed, “Do you think anyone else would have such restraint? Why shouldn’t it be allowed to stay with its creator?”

“Because he’s _too_ powerful,” Jin GuangYao said, “People are terrified of the power he possesses. You saw what just happened. The resentful energy is… No one else has been able to do the things he does. Some people have been able to figure out how to use a flute to control weaker corpses and a few other things, but compared to Wei-gongzi, there’s no contest. Then there’s the Ghost General and, now, the horses. Add the Stygian Tiger Seal on top of that? People are afraid. He’s already proven that he doesn’t adhere to decisions made by the Great Sects if he doesn’t want to. And he did it violently. _Four lives_ he took. All of whom were simply doing their jobs.”

Those that heard what Shen Jinjing and her wife said were uncomfortable and frowning. The ones facing Jin GuangYao noticed dirty and uncomfortable looks shot his way and all the people in black started giving the group a wide berth.

“And how many lives did those four take?” Lan XiChen asked quietly.

“Er-ge?” Jin GuangYao asked in surprise.
“Prisoners of war are either executed or not. They are executed quickly and efficiently with the least amount of pain possible. Not cruelly, like Wen Ruohan. Not worked or abused to death. Putting them to work was fine. Making them work in conditions where they’d be in pain or starving or inevitably injured, even killed, is *not* fine. *Taking* the Wen’s who weren’t even prisoners of war is even worse,” Lan XiChen sounded upset, “They were innocents. Children. What happened to them?”

“I…” Jin GuangYao looked off-guard, “I don’t know.”

“Hopefully that will be something we’ll find out in this investigation,” Nie Minsheng said firmly.

*Within the tent*

“No, you can dictate,” Wei Qing said firmly, “Aunt Shu, help.”

“You know I have good calligraphy, Wei-laozu,” Shen Shuyi said, sitting down primly and readying a brush over the paper Wei WuXian had been scribbling on.

“I thought that was because you think it’s funny to write insults in beautiful calligraphy,” Wei WuXian said, relinquishing his arms for Wei Qing’s examination.

“That was my brother,” Shen Shuyi said primly, “I preferred writing swears. I never let anyone see those though.”

“What’s wrong?” Wei WuXian asked. He was still getting to know everyone, but Shen Shuyi tended to stand out even when she didn’t mean to. The entire Jiang family tended to hide their emotions through the mask of one single emotion. Anger or calm smiles usually. Shen Shuyi was not that different. He could tell she was tense about something.

Besides, Shen Jinjing kept frowning at her wife in worry which meant something was wrong and Aunt Jinjing didn’t know what it was.

“I spoke to Lan Qiren. I think he’s become even more intolerant of things as he’s aged,” Shen Shuyi said, “Aren’t I supposed to be transcribing your notes?”

Wei WuXian ignored the last part, “What did he say?”

Shen Shuyi sighed, “It was more what he didn’t say. I expected all the rest of what he went on about: calling me Wen instead of Shen, my marriage to my student who’s also a woman, etc. etc. But… I offered him condolences for his brother. He offered none in return for mine.”

Oh. Wei WuXian didn’t know much about Shen Shuyi’s brother. The man hadn’t been particularly close to anybody except his sister. She mourned him however. That was enough.

“And for someone like Lan Qiren… I know what that implies,” Shen Shuyi continued.

“That he didn’t respect you enough?” Wei WuXian guessed.

Shen Shuyi laughed bitterly, “That I could have coped with. No. I know the things people say about my brother. Too underhanded, too unsociable, too suspicious and untrusting. A very pretty man with a very venomous tongue. No one someone like the righteous Lan Qiren considered worth much of
anything. We hated people like that. No, what Lan Qiren implied, intended to or not, was that my brother wasn’t worth condolences.”

Wei WuXian cringed. Wei Qing’s mouth tightened in anger.

“You love him. You mourn him. That says that he is worth condolences and sympathies,” Wei WuXian told her.

Shen Shuyi sighed, nodding in thanks.

“Your notes?” she asked.

“Resentful energy and spiritual energy,” Wei WuXian started, “Put them as the headings in two different columns.”

Shen Shuyi did so.

“Resentful energy is cold while spiritual energy is hot. Darkness and light. Light and heavy. Black and white. Death and life. Negative and positive. Ying… and yang.”

The two women immediately picked up what Wei WuXian was getting at.

“The ying-yang philosophy?” Shen Shuyi asked, intrigued.

“Both are energy,” Wei WuXian said, lost in thought, “but of opposing natures. Resentful energy is produced by the dead. Spiritual energy is produced by the living. Both are produced by humans, just in differing stages of life. Formed of the same yet are opposites.”

“Ying-yang philosophy also describes ying energy as being feminine and evil,” Shen Shuyi pointed out dryly.

“Nothing in nature is evil,” Wei WuXian reasoned, “and what’s considered feminine seems to change with the times. ‘Evil’ and ‘feminine’ are human constructs. They don’t occur in nature so they can’t be considered part of resentful energy. Or perhaps ying energy might be more accurate?”

“Don’t jump ahead,” Wei Qing cautioned, looking thoughtful as she cleaned Wei WuXian’s cuts, “In the medical field we considered certain organs part of ying or yang. When they worked together they made a healthy body.”

“Yeah?” Wei WuXian looked interested.

“What were the organs?” Shen Shuyi asked, ready to write them down.

“Yang was the external: skin, hair etc.” Wei Qing said, “Ying was the interior. Like blood and bones. Yang was excess of something and heat while Ying was deficiency of something and cold. It was thought that your ying and yang levels were fluctuating and trying to level out when you have hot and cold flushes.”

“Resentful energy feels cold,” Wei WuXian mused, “And spiritual energy felt warm.”

“Zang organs are ying. They’re for storage of vital substances and qi. The Fu organs are yang. They control the transport and transformation of food into energy.”

“Spiritual energy flows through the body like veins with the golden core as a heart and the meridians are central points within a body,” Wei WuXIan mused, “It’s constantly moving and that can fit the idea of transport. Storage is basically what resentful energy does. Resentful energy can hold
emotions and even memories of the original source. Plus, after demonic cultivating it essentially acts like a stored form of energy. It doesn’t circulate. It just settles.”

“Rest and motion,” Shen Shuyi murmured to herself as she wrote it all down, “Night and day. Absorbing and penetrating.”

“Well, there’s where the female-male idea came from,” Wei Wuxian noted, “But it’s true. Spiritual energy is constantly circulating while resentful energy doesn’t move until it’s used. The absorbing part is also accurate though I’m not sure about normal cultivation being referred to as ‘penetrating’.”

“When you think about how it makes its own paths through your body you can,” Wei Qing said, “It’s like digging or burrowing. That’s a form of penetration, right?”

“Ying and yang are opposites, but are interdependent,” Shen Shuyi said thoughtfully, writing on a new page.

“What would cultivators do if resentful energy didn’t exist in the world?” Wei Wuxian said.

“I think that’s a stretch,” Wei Qing told him.

“Ying and Yang consume and support each other. They can transform into the one another,” Shen Shuyi said.

“Spiritual energy can purify resentful energy. The more powerful a cultivator is, the more likely they can turn into a powerful ghost or fierce corpse. That’s why everyone does those soul-calming rituals so much growing up,” Wei Wuxian said.

“Mind and body,” Shen Shuyi said, “Ghosts don’t have a body and subsist on willpower and spiritual energy strengthens the body.”

“Instinct and… reason, I think,” Wei Qing said.

“Fair,” Wei Wuxian conceded.

“Curled and straight,” Shen Shuyi mused, she shrugged at their looks, “I’ve noticed when Wei-laozu uses resentful energy in the visible spectrum that it curls in like smoke or clouds. Spiritual energy goes straighter than an arrow.”

“Huh.”

“Passive and active,” Wei Qing said, starting to bandage Wei Wuxian’s hands, “Evasive and head-on.”

That gave Wei Wuxian an idea to be pursued at a later date. Right now, he felt like he could sleep sitting upright.

Shen Shuyi carefully drew the ying-yang symbol at the top of the page, daintily colouring the ying side and its corresponding black spot.

“If we…” Wei Wuxian paused to yawn, “really make a sect, that can be our symbol. In red.”

“Yeah?” Wei Qing said, checking his forearms for more injuries. Some nicks were more prevalent on his right arm and she set to cleaning those.

“Not everyone will probably want to become demonic cultivators. This is… harmony. Demonic and traditional cultivators working together to better the world,” Wei Wuxian explained with his eyes
closed. He could feel parts of his brain fall asleep ahead of the looming sleep ahead of him.

“Is that the theme? Harmony?” Shen Shuyi asked, voice low.

Wei WuXian wrinkled his nose and shook his head. Such a thing was too hard to follow.
YunmengJiang had ‘do the impossible’. QishanWen had ‘family’. GusuLan had ‘righteousness’ and
QingheNie had… Wei WuXian drew a blank. Determination? Don’t give up? Don’t hesitate?
Something like that.

YunmengJiang’s was nice but not something easy to follow. Same with GusuLan for differing
reasons. Righteousness was too pretentious anyway. Lan Wangji was probably the only person who
tried to follow it with the gravitas and thoughtfulness it required. QishanWen and QingheNie had
good ones, but it wasn’t the kind of thing Wei WuXian wanted.

Wei WuXian wanted something that couldn’t be twisted. Something that was valued. Something
meaningful and treasured that the world needed more of.

Something murky and faded rose from distant memory. A woman’s words whispering gentle advice.

“Kindness,” Wei WuXian said sleepily. Wei Qing and Shen Shuyi helped him into the infirmary
tent’s bed, “I want YilingWei to be ‘kindness’.”

“I think ‘kindness’ is the most suitable,” Shen Shuyi said gently.

“It will be kindness,” Wei Qing whispered, “You’ll teach them well.”

Wei WuXian rolled over and went to sleep.

Meanwhile, someone felt this situation deserved a hard drink…

Nie Minsheng was conflicted.

He’d fought in the Sunshot Campaign, killing Wen’s when the opportunity presented itself. He’d
cheered when his cousin, Sect Leader Nie Mingjue, ran around with Wen Xu’s head impaled on his
dao. He’d dismissed the cowering remnants in the shadows that weren’t worth the sword polish to
kill.

He’d spent the campaign half worrying about the next battle, half worrying about his wife and small
children at home. He wanted his children to be proud of their heritage, to learn freely the ways of
cultivation their ancestor had developed. QishanWen would not have allowed that.

He’d been happy when the Campaign ended in their victory. He’d gone home to his three sons and
spent enough time with his wife that she became pregnant with their, now two years-old, daughter.

LanlingJin took responsibility with watching over and guarding the remains of QishanWen. Nie
Minsheng was relieved from the duty of making sure they knew he hated them and would not
forgive them.

And now this.

Nie Minsheng wasn’t someone who hated anything much. He didn’t think he was cruel. Brutal in
battle, yes, that was a staple of QingheNie’s fighting style, but he wasn’t a sadist.
Except, by putting something out of his mind and ignoring something’s existence, he had become an unknowing bystander to what seemed to be amounting to slow genocide.

As a bystander, of course, Nie Minsheng couldn’t be blamed. He hadn’t known or had any evidence about it and he had his own priorities with his family and sect. A family man was commendable!

But, now he knew. He had a choice in what to do. In a situation like this, he refused to be someone who only spoke meaningless words. Nie Minsheng wanted to do something right and worthwhile. Attempted genocide and missing children was not a situation that should be left alone. And, thanks to his cousin, Mingjue, he could do something.

Nie Minsheng knew why he was chosen. He’d been incensed at the Wen Sect for their conduct, carelessness, outright lies, their habit of endangering others and, most obviously, the death of his Uncle. Former Sect Leader Nie was well loved and respected. He was often stern on the training grounds, yet would also often slip his younger family members sweets.

But, unlike many, Nie Minsheng had been able to sit on his anger and think rationally. When the horror of what happened to the Lotus Pier had been related to him, he’d been able to sit back and think about what to do next. During the campaign, Nie Mingjue had relied on him to provide a second opinion into various strategies.

That was the quality Nie Mingjue was relying on him for: the ability to think even while consumed with emotion.

Well, that and the fact that Nie Minsheng was as friendly and inoffensive as an intelligent person could get.

Nie Minsheng had a feeling this investigation won’t end well.

LanlingJin was either oblivious or acting oblivious. Wei WuXian was suspicious to almost the point of paranoia about letting people onto his mountain. Not that Nie Minsheng could blame him on being paranoid. He’d been there at that disastrous Discussion Conference. There were names flying around now, but so far most people just seemed to be referring to it as ‘That Discussion Conference’. Then there was the fact that he had to enter the Burial Mounds which was something he’d was only just managed to hold down the jabbering horror about.

And all that was without the topic of the investigation itself. Attempted genocide. Abuse of prisoners. Murder of prisoners. Slavery, because kidnapping people to replace your prisoners of war at labour camps in horrific working conditions was practically the definition. Missing children.

Even so, Nie Minsheng was determined to go in with an open mind. He put aside past grievances with QishanWen without forgetting them. He decided to ignore how Wei WuXian’s demonstrations of power almost made him wet himself. He would brush off LanlingJin’s slimy arrogance.

It hadn’t prepared him for actually meeting the refugees Wei WuXian was protecting. He had a copy of the population list from That Discussion Conference tucked in a pocket to refer to. But first seeing them was still something of a surprise. They were running around trying to prepare for whatever the Yiling Patriarch was going to do.

Nie Minsheng ignored the horses and the implications of their existence for his own sanity.

The black clothes surprised him. They were dressed like Wei WuXian. No sun or flames of any kind. Most looked like cultivators with below average skill from a smaller sect. Dressing like that made it clear that they were declaring their loyalty to the Yiling Patriarch.
That was interesting.

On one hand, they were rejecting QishanWen. On the other, Nie Minsheng could already see the cultivation world uneasy because the feared Yiling Patriarch had followers.

They didn’t look like an army. They looked more like people you’d find in either a library or a farm.

“Why are they all dressed like you?” Jiang Wanyin had asked Wei WuXian, right at the beginning.

Nie Minsheng had wanted to choke him. That was way too blunt!

Wei WuXian had simply laughed and gestured to his own clothes, “Fabric’s cheaper to buy in bulk you know! Besides, I think Chang Ting was on a roll.”

Jin GuangYao had nodded in understanding. Everyone else, apart from the Jiangs, had looked a bit blank. What did the price of fabric have to do with anything?

Then there was Shen Jinjing and her… ahem… wife. Nie Minsheng had been curiously watching the Wen Remnants – or former Wen’s, he guessed he should call them. Overhearing the conversation with the heir to LanlingJin wasn’t something he could have missed. The first thing he noticed was the lack of hostility from the former Wen. The second was the weary caution and the way the older woman kept making sure others could see them. She seemed ready to bolt if something went wrong.

Her story was terrible. Nie Minsheng mentally added attempted rape and possible rape to the Qiongqi Path section of his investigations.

The burn and its shape spoke for itself.

How many times had Nie Minsheng and others muttered darkly about the servants of QishanWen carrying those brands? How many times had some cultivator gotten on the wrong end of some arrogant Wen and been branded? How could LanlingJin descend to the Wen Sect’s level to do the same in return?

Nie Minsheng valiantly decided to ignore the cutsleeve part of everything.

It was hard.

The idea was very distracting.

Nie Minsheng reminded himself to interrogate Lan Qiren later. He seemed to know this Shen Shuyi. Background on some of these people could be useful.

But, overall, these people were quiet and unobtrusive. They didn’t voluntarily talk to anyone outside each other and Wei WuXian. They kept their head down and did their work efficiently.

Then there was the destruction of the seal itself.

Um…

Nie Minsheng wondered if there was somewhere he could discretely check to see if he needed new underthings or if that was just sweat from sheer terror.

Now, as everyone, including Nie Minsheng, listened to the conversation taking place between the notable cultivators – Jin GuangYao had some interesting points – Nie Minsheng continued to watch the former Wen’s. Still efficient. Still quiet, like they were trying to go unnoticed. They were keeping an eye on his group, wary and untrusting. Jiang Yanli had been treated very courteously and was
even smiled at, so they weren’t worried about her.

Skittish was the word to describe them. Like an animal who’d been abused and still couldn’t trust any hand held out. Not quite at the biting stage or the hopeless stage, but leaning in that direction.

Great. Now he had to travel with an overly suspicious crowd all the way to Yiling to enter a mountain that caused nightmares in experienced cultivators led by the Yiling Patriarch who held the potential to be a nightmare in his own right.

Nie Minsheng eyed a few people in black as they braided the horses’ manes, completely unafraid and trusting of the dead creature.

Accompanied by dead horses.

Nie Minsheng would volunteered for this even if Nie Mingjue hadn’t asked. But, as far as Nie Minsheng was concerned?

Nie Mingjue owed him for this.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons:

Jiang Cheng’s perspective of Lan Wangji: Younger brothers can be just as protective as older brother’s when they realise their older sibling is hurt by somebody. JC knows his brother. He knows Wifi admires and respects LWJ and is very fond of him. And as far as JC knows, all LWJ did was brush him off and ignore him then condemn him. As JC is well aware of, rejection in any form is hurtful. So, whenever Wifi would want to go and talk to LWJ, JC would dissuade him because he just saw the interaction going the same way as before: Wifi would talk then tease, LWJ would ignore or condemn, Wifi would essentially be rejected and a little hurt that someone he cared about thought so little of him. JC was just trying to protect Wifi in his own way. JC doesn’t know LWJ. As far as JC is concerned, LWJ does not deserve Wifi’s good regard or his attention. LWJ has to redeem himself in JC’s eyes the same as JZX had to for similar reasons.

In canon, the weird flipped relationship was another thing that screwed with his head. He used to be the one helping to protect Wifi before Wifi went insane. Now the man who always condemned Wifi is on his side and JC was the one who helped kill him.

Jin GuanYao and the Stygian Tiger Seal: he does have a point about people not wanting Wifi to have so much power. The ordinary people or ordinary cultivators are afraid. He’s their boogeyman. The monster in the shadows. And, here, he’s managed to cow the Great Sects into doing what he wants. Or, at least, that’s what the rumours going around are. Not everyone thinks so, but it is still a common thought.

But JGY is holding the lives Wifi took above his head. He hypocritically is going to point out that there were other options other than straight up killing people. This way he can prove to others that Wifi is too dangerous to live which is a thought both JGY and JGS both have. Wifi has proven to not follow the authority of the Great Sects and that is the most dangerous thing. He’s unpredictable and out of anyone’s control. That makes him the ultimate wildcard. For someone as manipulative as JGY? That makes him the
ultimate danger. Too powerful to outright go against and no way to reliably manipulate him. As the failed assassination attempt and the Conference after proved, Wifi can change the tide easily in ways JGY cannot predict.

Someone has a bit of a control issue… must be inherited.
Return Home (we are never travelling together again)

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

I only just finished the chapter before posting so if you see any typos or confusing sentences then that's why. But at least I got it out to you on time!

Enjoy!

Wei WuXian was clearly still tired even after he woke up and ate his A-Jie’s cooking. Since everyone was anxious to get home, he ordered that everyone be prepared to walk back to Yiling. It wasn’t going to be a short trip.

Lan XiChen, Nie Mingjue and Jin GuangYao all left for their own sects after a few words to the people they were leaving behind to travel with the Burial Mounds people residents. Lan Qiren and Nie Minsheng hadn’t seemed to like having to walk instead of flying on their swords. Lan Wangji hadn’t seemed to mind and Nie Huaisang was perfectly happy walking. Nie Huaisang had found a fellow fan-lover in Shen Shuyi and was talking to her and her wife animatedly with the other three trailing behind him.

Wei WuXian had somehow figured out how to lie across Khan’s back and had fallen asleep while Khan walked. Khan, careful of his rider, kept his pace as even as possible, neglecting his usual lively prancing. They got a lot of stares. Most couldn’t figure out how he was able to sleep in such a position. Those not used to the idea of undead horses couldn’t figure out how Wei WuXian was controlling the horse and its direction while asleep as Khan was leading the entire procession. Shang was hooked up to the wagon full of both the provisions they had brought and the further things they had looted from the Nightless City.

Next to Shang walked Wei Qing and Jiang Yanli arm-in-arm. Jiang Yanli had shooed away her brother and husband so she could have ‘girl talk’ with Wei Qing. Jiang Yanli didn’t know if the strange look her brother had given was because Jiang Yanli had never before expressed an interest in ‘girl talk’ or because Wei Qing did not remotely appear to be someone who enjoyed such things. Despite whatever some people’s expectations the first things they had talked about had been their younger brothers and the children.

Jiang Yanli had asked after Wei Ning and A-Yuan. Wei Qing had asked after Jin Ling. They both wondered how Wei WuXian was able to sleep in such a position, with Jiang Yanli telling Wei Qing all of the weird places Wei WuXian had been caught napping in at Lotus Pier. Wei Qing didn’t giggle like Jiang Yanli, but she did have a wide smile on her face.

“He is alright, isn’t he?” Jiang Yanli asked after her giggles died down.

“He’s just tired,” Wei Qing said, “But he is sleeping for an unusually long time. I think he’s avoiding having to explain what he’s going to do with that damaged bit of the seal.”

When Wei WuXian walked out of the tent after his nap, he’d been immediately set upon by Nie
Mingjue who’s patience, not great to begin with, had disappeared entirely by that point. Nie Mingjue had demanded to know about the remains of the seal. Most of it was in fragments the former Wen’s were keeping strict eyes on occasionally aided by Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Wanyin. But the status of the largest part, most of the bottom half of the seal, was in question.

Nie Mingjue’s face had turned very red when Wei WuXian had immediately been distracted by his sister’s soup.

In the end, Wei WuXian, irritated by the constant nagging and interruptions had tossed the thing at Nie Mingjue and told him to try and use it. There were plenty of corpses in the Nightless City to use.

Nie Mingjue had not been able to, not even when Wei WuXian had summoned one of those corpses himself.

The reactions of Nie Minsheng and Lan Qiren, who had never seen Wei WuXian working close up, along with Nie Huaisang who had never seen demonic cultivation in person, to the ominous flute-playing and casual way the Yiling Patriarch had summoned a corpse then let go of his control, with his eyes turned red was mixed. Both Nie’s thought it interesting in a macabre way. Like a horror they couldn’t look away from. Nie Minsheng was on the more ‘macabre horror’ part of the scale while Nie Huaisang was on the more ‘fascinated’ end. Lan Qiren had been pale and disgusted in turns.

In the end Wei WuXian had demanded the piece back. Nie Mingjue demanded to know why.

“Because it’s mine and I don’t trust you or anyone else with a piece of metal so filled with resentful energy. I took it from the cave after Lan Zhan defeated the XuanWu. The only person who could claim it, other than me, would be Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said, irritated.

“Lan Wangji said you defeated it,” Nie Minsheng said curiously.

“He defeated it,” Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji said in unison, although in different tones. They looked at each other. No one, but Lan XiChen could notice the annoyance in Lan Wangji’s demeanour was the same as Wei WuXian’s.

“A joint effort then,” Nie Mingjue said sardonically.

Wei WuXian ignored him.

“Do you want it?” he asked Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji shook his head.

“It’s yours,” he said.

“See? So give it back. Besides, as the only expert in resentful energy, I’m the best person to keep it anyway,” Wei WuXian said, hand out.

In the end Nie Mingjue grudgingly gave it back. He didn’t really want it. He just thought that Jin GuangYao had a point about the power Wei WuXian kept accumulating.

“And what are you going to do with it? Make something else?” Nie Mingjue demanded.

Wei WuXian sneered, “I’m not stupid enough to make the same mistake twice,” he snapped, “Anything I make with the resentful energy in that metal will just end up the same way. No, I’ll either seal it away or try and disperse the resentful energy so it isn’t so potent.”

Nie Mingjue hadn’t been happy with such a flimsy answer, but Wei WuXian ignored him. He’d made sure his people and siblings were alright then set off.
Originally, it was planned for Jiang Yanli and Jin ZiXuan to go back to Koi Tower with Jin GuangYao. But seeing how fatigued Wei WuXian was, Jiang Yanli hadn’t wanted to leave yet. So, she’d convinced everyone that they could go back later.

It wasn’t an easy decision. This was the longest and furthest she’d been away from her son since he’d been born. It made her feel antsy and worried, wishing to go back to see him. This warred within her with her worry for her brother. In the end she compromised with herself. Madam Jin would be fine taking care of Jin Ling for the rest of the day. She’d go a little further with her brothers before she left them to go home. Hopefully Wei WuXian would be feeling better by then. Wei Qing was sure he would be.

“I’ve been meaning to ask something,” Jiang Yanli said thoughtfully, glancing at the slumped figure of her adopted brother, “You and your brother might be the only ones outside of myself and A-Cheng who know A-Xian well enough to be able to answer.”

“What is it?”

“Well…” Jiang Yanli trailed off not sure how to put it, “First: how do you know Lan Wangji? Last time, at the Burial Mounds, A-Xian was talking about dinner…?”

“Oh, that,” Wei Qing said, raising her eyebrows slightly in surprise, “The night A-Ning regained his consciousness, Lan Wangji had been visiting Yiling. A-Ying had taken A-Yuan down the mountain to the town and when he returned it was with Lan Wangji. Apparently Lan Wangji had bought a lot of toys for A-Yuan and they had eaten together before we called A-Ying back to help deal with A-Ning.”

“They had dinner together? A-Xian, Second Master Lan and A-Yuan?” Jiang Yanli asked, intrigued. She tried to imagine it and came up with a scene that had A-Xian talking Lan Wangji’s ears off with A-Yuan playing with his new toys in the background. The question was: would Lan Wangji be listening to her brother or ignoring him?

She didn’t know him enough and he had such an impassive face it was hard to tell anything about him.

“Yes, it was strange. Only your other brother had visited us before. After everything was over, we tried serving tea, but A-Ying was a lot more critical than usual of the state of the teacups and the tea. Even though he didn’t seem to mind Lan Wangji’s presence, he also didn’t… he didn’t think we had anything worth Lan Wangji’s time or something. He got over it and we were all laughing at something when Lan Wangji abruptly decided to leave. Lan Wangji hadn’t objected to anything at all before then though. I figured he couldn’t stand the Burial Mounds aura or something, but I’m not sure,” Wei Qing explained. The entire encounter had been strange, but that seemed to be normal with her brother.

“Oh,” Jiang Yanli seemed lost in thought for a bit, “What were your impressions of their relationship? I heard different things from both my brothers along with generic rumours. It’s all different.”

That was an interesting question Wei Qing wasn’t sure how to answer. Yet, she suspected she knew why she was asked. Wei WuXian did seem to treat Lan Wangji differently than he did with everyone else.

“A-Ying seems to like and esteem him. He also doesn’t mind Lan Wangji being around us or on his own in the mountain. That shows trust. A-Ying entrusted A-Yuan to him. That, itself, says a lot. He also seems to appreciate Lan Wangji’s company, but took his leaving like it was inevitable. What’s
strange is that he considers himself and Lan Wangji not to be close, but everyone thought they had been quite close. I don’t really understand it. Maybe A-Ying wanted to be close, but not since making the Burial Mounds into home?” Wei Qing speculated.

“A-Xian wanted to be close friends with Lan Wangji, but A-Cheng told me that Lan Wangji would always say that they’re not close. I don’t think it has anything to do with the Burial Mounds. I think A-Xian just accepted that Lan Wangji might never think they’re close after everything the world has said about him,” Jiang Yanli said.

“But then why would Lan Wangji come to the Burial Mounds? Before and after A-Ying was injured?”

“I have no idea,” Jiang Yanli admitted, “He’s hard to read. Maybe he is fond of A-Xian, but doesn’t want to admit it? Perhaps he thinks its inappropriate to associate with him.”

“How is it inappropriate?” Wei Qing hissed in anger. She kept her voice down so no one would overhear them gossiping. Only Shang was in range and her horse would not tattle to Wei WuXian about her, “Because of demonic cultivation? Giving us refuge?”

Jiang Yanli shook her head, “It started before then. Back when they were teenagers. Perhaps it’s because A-Xian’s so mischievous.”

“That’s a stupid reason,” Wei Qing said flatly.

“Some people can be really silly sometimes,” Jiang Yanli said.

Wei Qing, as a medic who’d been exposed to the myriad of ways dumb people injured themselves in the most ridiculous ways, could not disagree.

“It’s just,” here Jiang Yanli took a look around to double-check no one was eavesdropping and lowered her voice causing Wei Qing to lean in to hear her, “A-Cheng wonders if A-Xian likes Lan Wangji the way I do for A-Xuan, for example.”

Wei Qing blinked at that.

Hmmm.

“I mean,” Jiang Yanli said blushing slightly, “A-Xian has said Second Young Master Lan is the best-looking man around and extolled his virtues and even makes A-Xian laugh just at the thought of how he might react to something. Do you… think it could be possible?”

“I’m not the best at noticing such things,” Wei Qing admitted, “But even I thought something was different between them. I just couldn’t think of what it is. A-Ying believes he’s not attracted to men though.”

“That confuses me,” Jiang Yanli said, “He is attracted to women. He always stared at them and he enjoys flirting especially when he was a teenager even if he never did anything more than flirt and insinuate. And he never made too much of a secret of his porn stash even though he was gentlemanly enough not to expose anything to me. A-Cheng was a lot more secretive about such things.”

“Perhaps A-Ying could be attracted to both men and women?” Wei Qing suggested.

“Is that possible?” Jiang Yanli said in surprise.

“Shen Shuyi is attracted to both,” Wei Qing said, “She used to just ignore her attraction to girls
because it wasn’t considered appropriate. Then Aunt Jinjing happened.”

“Oh,” Jiang Yanli considered this, “I guess I don’t know much about this kind of thing. I’ve only ever loved A-Xuan.”

“I only know about this kind of thing due to being a healer,” Wei Qing said, “I never cared for… any of that.”

“I don’t think A-Xian knows it’s possible either,” Jiang Yanli said in worry.

“Don’t worry, Aunt Shu and I can talk to him about it. Then we can find out if he is attracted to certain expressionless Lans,” Wei Qing assured, already mentally planning how to get her more conservative Aunt to actually talk about something like this.

“Thank you. A-Cheng did say he doesn’t think A-Xian knows how deep his feelings to Lan Wangji might run. A-Xian tends to have a blind spot in things like this,” Jiang Yanli said, “I’m glad for you, your brother, Granny and A-Yuan. A-Xian deserved to know he’s loved and valued. Especially these days with everyone saying such terrible things about him. It took him a while to get him to figure that out with us.”

And then her mother tore down that hard work. Jiang Yanli brushed away that old hurt and betrayal. They’d fixed that, even if it took too many years. Her mother was misguided and that wasn’t entirely her fault.

“Oh,” Wei Qing was caught flat-footed, “I’m glad?”

Jiang Yanli giggled.

“So, what’s it like having an undead horse?” Jiang Yanli asked, “Mulan is such a sweet-heart even though she does keep stealing A-Xuan’s food.”

Wei Qing smiled and proceeded to brag about her horse.

**A week later**

*I never want to travel with them again.*

This was the prevailing thought among the people who had just arrived at Yiling. The ‘them’ referred to was different depending on whether you were coming home or simply arriving at a destination.

Possibly the only one not thinking such a thought was Lan Wangji. For the past few days he had been content to walk alongside Wei WuXian and listen to him prattle on about everything and nothing.

There had been a mournful air when everyone had to say goodbye to Jiang Yanli and Jin ZiXuan. Jiang Yanli’s brothers were sad to see their sister go. Wei Qing was also sad. She had been getting along with her fellow ‘older sister’. Wei Qing hadn’t had many friends before, but Jiang Yanli certainly had become one. The refugees were also sad. Jiang Yanli was a bright light of kindness and even her husband was appreciated for treating them with every courtesy. Awkward courtesy, but it was genuine. Plus, without the husband and wife duo the non-refugees that could be gotten along
Admittedly, Jiang Cheng was awkward with them, but he was also trying, in his own way to see beyond their origins. All things considered, they appreciated it. No one had a problem with Lan Wangji who seemed to entertain their Patriarch and treated all of them how he would treat anyone else. Nie Huaisang was cautiously liked, but still distrusted. Nie Minsheng, they were simply cautious of. They knew he was in charge of the investigation and weren’t sure how to deal with him. They didn’t dislike him, but they didn’t trust him either. They were too scared of potential bias against them.

That Nie Minsheng was also cautious when dealing with one of the refugees didn’t help. Nie Huaisang wasn’t cautious. Or rather, he wasn’t any more cautious of them then he seemed to be of anybody he didn’t know well. Nie Huaisang got along with Shen Shuyi well, discussed ways to make fans with Shen Jinjing and was clearly good friends with both Jiang Wanyin and Wei WuXian.

Plus, the stress of not being able to talk completely freely was getting to the refugees who had not experienced such a thing since they realised that Wei WuXian could be trusted. This stress affected Wei WuXian as well who didn’t like it and occasionally became agitated.

The person with the worst time of things was Lan Qiren. He had never before been in a situation where he was not respected. The refugees were polite; they didn’t disrespect him, but they certainly didn’t respect him either and they didn’t like him. It was subtle, but everyone picked up on it. In fact, a lot of people frowned at him like they were disappointed or angry with him. Shen Shuyi had ignored him or treated him with icy distance in turns. Her wife had outright scowled at Lan Qiren.

Frustrated, Lan Qiren immediately blamed Wei WuXian for the unwelcome air. One night he had finally decided to confront his former student about it. That Lan Wangji had been sitting with him a little way away from camp may or may not have had something to do with this decision.

Wei WuXian had relaxed. He had cajoled Lan Wangji into playing that song for him again.

“What’s the name anyway?” Wei WuXian had asked.

“Secret,” Lan Wangji had responded, bringing out his guqin.

“The song’s called ‘Secret’?”

“No, the name is a secret.”

“Eh? Lan Zhan, why won’t you tell me?”

“Do you want to hear?”

“I do! I do!”

Lan Wangji had gotten about halfway through the song when he had noticed his uncle making his way agitatedly towards them. Unwilling to answer questions about this song and embarrassed at being caught playing it for Wei WuXian, Lan Wangji immediately stopped playing to Wei WuXian’s dismay.

“Wei WuXian, what did you tell them about me?” Lan Qiren demanded after greeting his nephew.

“Tell who what?” Wei WuXian was very confused.

“Those people! The… former Wen’s. What did you tell them to act so coldly towards me?” Lan
Qiren was very frustrated and so his normally correct way of speaking faltered.

Ah. Wei WuXian nearly curled his lips into a sneer. But awareness of Lan Wangji’s presence by his side stopped him. Wei WuXian knew Lan Qiren had helped raise Lan Wangji and his brother and that the man was very important to his nephew. Since Wei WuXian had no wish to make Lan Wangji think less of him than he already did, he attempted to restrain himself.

“I didn’t say anything. I don’t think most of them are aware I was sent to the Cloud Recesses for study, however brief it was. It was your own words and disrespect that have made them dislike you,” Wei WuXian said, smiling coldly.

“I have not said anything against you,” Lan Qiren said, equally cold.

Yet, Wei WuXian couldn’t help but add inside his head.

“Your offense was not against me,” Wei WuXian said, “I, too, am greatly displeased by the offense you gave to one of my people.”

“I have barely spoken to ‘one of your people’,” Lan Qiren protested. He had trouble believing that his trouble didn’t have anything to do with this troublemaker.

“So, if you wish to correct your wrong, perhaps you should start thinking of who you spoke to and then determine how you offended that person.”

Lan Qiren bristled. He had not committed a wrong since he was a teenager! To have such a heretic troublemaker claim he had done wrong was highly offensive. For the life of him though, Lan Qiren couldn’t think of what he had done to earn such enmity. Perhaps it was his visible discontent with Shen Shuyi’s marriage? But he hadn’t said anything since the first time!

Lan Wangji had listened to all this in discontent.

“Wei Ying,” he said lowly. Wei WuXian turned his attention to an uneasy Lan Wangji, “Perhaps you could give Uncle a clue as to his wrong?”

Lan Qiren nearly paled. His nephew also thought he had done wrong?! Potentially disappointing his nephews was not a good feeling so Lan Qiren swallowed his pride and gritted out a “Please?”

Wei WuXian sighed.

“You were given a courtesy and you did not return it, thereby saying the people involved were not worth it,” he explained.

Lan Wangji nearly frowned. That was not good. Lan Qiren was stumped. What courtesy had he not returned?

“I have no idea about what you are referring to,” Lan Qiren admitted tightly, “Please, enlighten me.”

“You are old enough to not require hand-holding about other people’s feelings and what is considered both right and polite,” Wei WuXian said impatiently, “If you do not recall then you really consider them to be so low. They deserve more than an apology made more for the sake of your own reputation and peace of mind than that. You hurt someone and now everyone, including me, is mad at you for it.”

Lan Qiren was offended. How could Wei WuXian assume he would correct a wrong only for Lan
Qiren’s own reputation?

“I would correct whatever wrong I made because it is the right thing to do,” Lan Qiren snapped.

“Then you should have done it the first time. One sentence. That’s all it would have taken. One sentence in return to the one offered to you. Instead you started talking about something else entirely,” Wei WuXian said. He stood up and saluted Lan Wangji.

“I’m sorry, Lan Zhan. I find I’m not in the mood anymore to learn such wonderful music. Please allow me to postpone the lesson to another time,” Wei WuXian requested politely as if to spite the peeved Lan Qiren.

Lan Wangji looked unhappy but he nodded.

“Another time,” he said.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian said smiling genuinely. He walked away toward the fire.

Lan Qiren was thinking hard. For the life of him, he couldn’t think of what he had done. The only person he could think of having had a conversation with was Wen Shuyi. That woman had called him out on pretty much everything she believed he had done wrong. Could it really have been her?

Lan Wangji had gotten up and walked to his tent.

“Wangji?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Nine soon,” Lan Wangji said, “Preparing for bed.”

In the end, none of them had been happy with that confrontation.

So, yes. Everyone was happy to reach their destination. Contrasting most people’s reactions, there was a great sigh of relief like a gust of wind at the sight of the corpse line. Khan, impatient, sped up a little with the cart wobbling a little behind him at the sudden increase in speed. Shang, ridden by Wei Qing, cantered up the incline to jump over the corpses. The walking corpses had been ordered not to bother anyone riding an undead horse and so didn’t react.

Wei WuXian was tired and a bit cranky at the more uncomfortable journey. He merely gave a shrill whistle to make a gap in his defences for Khan, the attached cart, the residents and the investigation team to head through.

Wei WuXian let out a sigh, briefly forgetting who was around when the Burial Mounds energy momentarily swamped him in affectionate welcome, joyously content in his return. The welcome relaxed Wei WuXian a bit. It was nice to be home.

It hadn’t taken A-Yuan long to learn that his parent had returned. It also didn’t take A-Yuan long to let everyone else know it.

“You’re back! You’re back!” he shrieked, running straight for Wei WuXian.

The appearance of a toddler startled Nie Minsheng and Lan Qiren as they had forgotten about Wei WuXian adopting a child. They watched in surprise as the now four-year old child ran on his short legs to the Yiling Laozu who didn’t hesitate to scoop him up and smile.

“Noisy,” Lan Wangji muttered beside Wei WuXian, who heard him and promptly burst out laughing.
“Brother Rich!” A-Yuan greeted, twisting around in his mother’s grip, arms looking like they were trying to choke the feared patriarch, “You came back!”

“En.”

“Uncle said we found something that you’d want to see,” A-Yuan reported to Wei WuXian, “It’s really pretty.”

“Did he?” Wei WuXian asked, looking around for Wei Ning. Instead he saw a riderless Mingna, who immediately whinnied in greeting and pranced around Shang playfully.

The remaining refugees came out to greet everyone and help with the unloading. Noise volume quickly rose as everyone inquired about the journey, the seal’s destruction and everything else. The travellers relaxed now they were at their home and among trusted family. The two Nie’s and Lan Qiren quickly got out of the way and stared around in astonishment. There was much to see. The small farming fields, the gardens and potted plants, the mismatched houses only united in their use of the Burial Mounds black wood and the people, tired, but in good humour.

Jiang Wanyin appeared to have wandered off somewhere and Lan Wangji had come over to stand with the three outsiders. Wei WuXian had let his son down and they were both working to undo the harness on Khan.

“Never thought I’d see Wei-xiong as a father,” Nie Huaisang said in amusement, “I mean, he’s always been good with kids; I just expected him to be more of the ‘fun uncle’ type than ‘parent’.”

Lan Qiren hadn’t even thought of him as that.

Nie Minsheng just stared in fascination. The Yiling Patriarch as a fond father was not something he’d ever thought of, but Nie Minsheng, as a father himself, knew it was genuine. If you asked him, if he hadn’t already known about the recent adoption, he would have thought that the child was Wei WuXian’s own.

“A-Yuan,” they overheard Wei WuXian scold, “I’ve told you to keep your hand on Khan when you’re going behind him.”

“But it’s weird,” A-Yuan complained even as he obeyed and put his hand on the horse corpse’s hindleg.

“It’s polite,” Wei WuXian said patiently, “A horse can’t see you there and it’s better to let Khan know it’s you behind him, isn’t it? How would you like it if someone just stayed close behind you where you can’t see or feel them?”

For a moment A-Yuan was confused. Everyone was a lot bigger than A-Yuan so how could he not see them? But then A-Yuan remembered A-Ling who was smaller than A-Yuan. Thinking about someone that tiny always behind his back where he couldn’t see them was creepy. A hand on his back made the imaginary scene much less creepy.

“Oh,” A-Yuan told Mum.

Wei WuXian smiled and continued to unbuckle the harness. Khan snorted at him.

“Yes, I know you won’t kick him,” Wei WuXian told the horse in a voice that A-Yuan wouldn’t be able to hear. “But he’s going to be around living horses one day and it’s best not to teach him bad habits. Besides, isn’t it rude?”
A mental image of a colt stumbling around into things on wobbly legs came to him with tolerant amusement.

“He’s not going to be young forever even if he grows a lot slower than a baby horse. He’s already four.”

A-Yuan’s birthday had been celebrated only a week or two (maybe three, Wei WuXian forgot) after Wei WuXian had woken from the injuries incurred at Qiongqi Path. It had been the first birthday they celebrated as father, well, parent and child.

*Definitely a father,* Nie Minsheng thought after that interaction.

Nie Minsheng and the other guests were promptly weirded out when Jiang Wanyin returned with partially rotted meat which Wei WuXian bled over before offering it to the horses.

Horses were meant to be *herbivores.*

Then they’d been introduced to Wei Ning.

Nie Minsheng rated talking to a fierce corpse like a normal person to be the most surreal experience he’d had yet.

Said fierce corpse had been very polite and hospitable while he led them to a house further away than the others that he claimed was recently built and, indeed, looked very solid compared to some of the others in that ‘square’ in the ‘town’. Food had been provided for their dinner. Noise continued from the centre including some music at some point before it too faded away when night fell. Understandable. They were all exhausted.

Separating into rooms by clan they all fell asleep.

On the roof a crow ruffled her feathers. None of them would be able to sneak about while she was around.

*The next day*

Wei WuXian yawned as he trudged after A-Yuan who was full of energy as he ran ahead. How did he have so much energy so early in the morning?

“It’s not early,” Uncle Fourth told him.

Lies.

“What are we looking for?” Wei WuXian asked. Wei Qing got to sleep. Ok, so she was in her hut checking on her potted herbs. But, *still.*

Wei Ning was ahead which was the only reason Wei WuXian thought it was ok to take his eyes off A-Yuan. They were heading into the more untamed part of the mountain where the occasional corpse might wander.

“Well, we were looking for more resources. Building supplies and such. Gu Liang had a good idea about this type of clay… anyway, we found something interesting.”
“…Clay?”

“No, we didn’t find any of that. You’ll see. Kang Xin hasn’t been able to talk about anything else since we found it and we’ve had to herd him away from here since we thought it wasn’t a good idea to be out here alone, especially at night.”

Wei WuXian nodded. It was better to be cautious about such things.

Which one was Kang Xin again?

“It’s really pretty, A-Niang!” A-Yuan said earnestly, “Uncle Second says it’ll be really good and valooble.”

“Valuable,” Uncle Fourth corrected.

A-Yuan nodded seriously and repeated, “Valooble.”

Wei WuXian chuckled and mussed A-Yuan’s hair. A-Yuan scrunched up his face in protest but didn’t move away. He didn’t like Wei WuXian leaving so often. He also hadn’t been happy about being told by Wei Ning to call Wei WuXian ‘father’ around the newcomers. He didn’t understand why those other people were here. Brother Rich was alright. He should come more often! But why those other people?

Up ahead, Wei WuXian could see Wei Ning and a man Wei WuXian mostly remembered as being a bit of a perfectionist who must be Second Uncle Kang Xin. Kang Xin was on the ground by some big stones peering into a small hole.

“Alright, what’ve we got?”

“Ah! Wei-laozu, look! Look at this!” Kang Xin sprang to his feet, looking younger than Wei WuXian could recall ever seeing him and pressing a stone into his hands before he could react.

Ooooookaaaaaay.

Wei WuXian blinked at the older man. Kang Xin couldn’t seem to withhold his excitement, wringing his hands and shifting from foot to foot. He made a flapping gesture with his hands.

Wei WuXian acquiesced and looked at the rock which didn’t seem all that pretty or valuable or useful to Wei WuXian. While trying to figure out what as so exciting, Wei WuXian noticed that someone had cut a piece off. The cut had been made surprisingly smooth. Wei WuXian looked at the cut section and felt his eyes widen. He held it up to the sunlight. The cut section shined on its black surface with a lustre that was familiar.

“Is this jade? Black jade?” Wei WuXian asked in slight disbelief.

Kang Xin nodded eagerly.

“Wei-laozu might not know this, but I was a jewel carver before. I know jade. I’ve never seen jade like this before, but I’m sure no-one’s seen black bamboo or black plum trees with red blossoms before either,” Kang Xin said.

“Jade filled with resentful energy,” Wei WuXian said slowly. He tried to poke at it with his own energy. Because, his ying energy and the Burial Mounds were of the same, sometimes Wei WuXian missed things when it came to his mountain. Like jade storing ying energy.
Kang Xin nodded rapidly, “I know the resentful energy might be an issue that will limit what we can do with it. That might be for the best considering the issues that might come up with mining. Especially mass-mining and I don’t think anyone wants some strange workers coming in here and wrecking the area. But even if we don’t sell it, it might come in useful for… YilingWei,” Kang Xin whispered the last word, “Or something. What do you think?”

“I’ll have to do some experimenting,” Wei WuXian said slowly, ideas for potential uses already coming to mind, “before any mining will be done or thought about. No, if there will be mining, it’ll be done by us or by those corpses. We don’t want to hurt the mountain. I’m guessing you’ve tried cutting it; it behaves like jade?”

“Exactly like regular jade,” Kang Xin reassured, “If it weren’t for the colour and that slight feeling you get, I wouldn’t think it any different.”

“Good,” Wei WuXian smiled at them, “You’ve done a good job. I’ll have a look at this and see what we can use it for.”

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Dear Sect Leader Nie,

We’ve arrived safely at the Burial Mounds. I can’t believe I just wrote ‘safe’ and ‘Burial Mounds’ in the same sentence without a ‘from’ in between. Also, I can’t believe I’ve entered the Burial Mounds. I can’t believe there are people living here; that like living here.

My first impression is that they really do act like refugees. Scared, over-cautious and skittish around people they can’t trust. Lan Qiren has had a bad time. Apparently, he offended one of them on the way here and now all of them give him the cold shoulder. They really band together like they expect everyone else to attack them. Which isn’t a good implication.

On the other hand, I’ve figured out why you were so insistent on getting Cousin Huaisang to come along. His previous friendship with the Yiling Patriarch combined with his persistent harmlessness has garnered him more headway into easing the Wen Remnants out of their skittishness bar anyone save Jiang Wanyin (who doesn’t actually try to set anyone at ease and spends most of his time bickering with Wei WuXian and glaring at the rest of us) and, bizarrely, Lan Wangji.

It’s weird. I thought those Lan Wangji and the Yiling Patriarch were like fire and water? But they seem to get along quite well? They seem to talk to each other a lot. Or, well, Wei WuXian talks and laughs a lot and Lan Wangji just seems to listen.

Also, I met (well, encountered) the child the Yiling Patriarch adopted. He’s the only child here and from what I saw, the affection between them is real. The Yiling Patriarch considers that boy his son and that child clearly adores him in return.

Their settlement seems to be mostly farms, gardens and half-decent, half-shoddy huts. Everyone who lives here is wearing peasant clothes. A normal person could be forgiven for thinking they are ordinary, non-cultivating farmers. There isn’t any weapons but bows and arrows.

I have a feeling my report on everything here is going to be very comprehensive.

And that’s without getting into the location. The Burial Mounds, cousin!
*Or the corpse horses!*

*Or the fierce corpse! That talks and apologises! What is the world coming to when a fierce corpse apologises to you?*

You *owe me,*

Nie Minsheng

*P.S. Tell my lovely wife and children that I love and miss them!*

Chapter End Notes

Wonder what he's going to use the jade for? ;)

Also, Wei Yuan's birthday is January 12 according to Wiki. Jin Ling's is November 21. The Qiongqi Path ambush happened on December 21 (or thereabouts) so now A-Yuan is four. This also means he was four when the siege happened in the book.

Headcanons:

Lan Qiren: I actually don’t hate him. I know it might seem that way. But, to me, he represents the most conservative, traditional values of both ancient China and the cultivation world. He’s not a bad person, but its buried under all the rules and internal bias. This is in direct opposition to Wifi who’s always been more progressive about things (seen in his inventiveness) and the slowly developing YilingWei which goes directly against most conservative values. He’s an interesting character to write because of this. To me, he’s an avatar of the stagnant, staid traditional cultivation world where nothing ever changes and to be righteous is the highest thing you can strive for. Also, since he was present at the second Siege of the Burial Mounds and he considers Wifi to be the worst mistake of LWJ’s life, I consider it likely that he participated in the first Siege that wiped out the Wen Remnants and killed Wifi. LQR does love his nephews though and will change for them. You’ll have to wait a while though.

Wangxian: This is slow burn for a reason. They took forever to get together in the novel and while misunderstandings are part of it, I think that they simply just weren’t ready for one for most of the book. Right now in Cradle, neither LWJ or Wifi are ready to enter a relationship with each other, feelings or not. After 13 years in the novel LWJ was ready, but Wifi still took a while to grow enough to be ready for one in return. Things are progressing though!
Investigation Interviews

Chapter Notes

This did not go the way I planned?

I honestly wasn't sure if I should scrap half the chapter or not...

In other news from Real Life: I have a very important exam coming up. One I've paid money to take. At this point, I'm going to fail it. As such, I may put up a chapter next weekend (if I complete it) but then I'm taking hiatus until near the end of July. The weekend after my test is the weekend I'm going on holiday (San Diego Comic-Con!!!!!!!!) so I won't be back for a while.

Hope that's ok!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All right,” Nie Minsheng said to himself after lunch the day after they had arrived. He had spent the morning unpacking and discussing how they would proceed with the other three. Now he needed to get started. Which meant finding Wei WuXian.

Nie Minsheng wasn’t sure about how things worked on the Burial Mounds (a part of him was still disbelieving that he was on the Burial Mounds), but it seemed like Wei WuXian and/or his older sister Wei Qing were in charge. The inhabitants consistently called them ‘Wei-laozu’ and ‘Office Leader’ respectively.

Considering the inhabitants’ skittishness, it was best to do this as respectively as possible to ease them into talking frankly to the investigators. Lan Qiren’s reception worked against them here, but the rest of them were accepted and possibly even well-liked so Nie Minsheng had hope this would still go well. But to start them off, he’d need to talk to Wei WuXian.

Nie Minsheng chose Wei WuXian to talk to over Wei Qing for one simple reason. He was already established, not only as a leader here, but as their protector. If their protector allowed Nie Minsheng to talk to them then the inhabitants should be more accepting that this investigation was genuine. At least, that was the theory Nie Minsheng was going with.

Nie Minsheng reminded himself of all these facts as he walked up an incline to where he could see the Yiling Patriarch sitting.

Most of the inhabitants built their houses and gardens on a flatter area two-thirds of the ways up the mountain. They were oriented in a rough circle or on either side of a main ‘road’ (Read: well-used dirt track). The house given to the guests to use was a bit further away, under some trees. It was not the only house (hut) placed a bit further away. Nie Minsheng spotted one or two more in the trees on their side and a few more among the black bamboo on the other side. Upon asking, Nie Minsheng found out they were for the married couples among the people along with others who wanted a bit of space to themselves.

After the houses was another incline which led to a cave where Wei WuXian apparently slept. It was also where he did several experiments so he’d been warned from going inside or startling him or
something could blow up.

Like that was supposed to make him feel better.

Thankfully, Wei WuXian was outside the cave in the sun today. He was sitting in lotus position in the dirt mumbling to himself and fiddling with something in his hands.

For a moment Nie Minsheng didn’t know what to say. He wanted to call out but was stymied by what to call him. Wei-laozu? Too weird. Yiling Patriarch? Considering what the name was connected to, probably not a good idea. Wei-gongzi? Accurate due to their respective ages and respectful, but seemed odd to call a man who could very obviously kill him easily something so normal. But that… did seem like the best choice?

“Wei-gongzi,” Nie Minsheng called out, inwardly cringing. They stopped a little in front of him, giving him space. Considering his seated position, Nie Minsheng didn’t want to seem like they were looming.

Wei WuXian’s mumbling stopped. He opened his eyes and looked at them. Nie Minsheng twitched at the red, glowing eyes that met his. Wei WuXian blinked and the red faded to normal black.

“Hello,” he said bemusedly. In the distance, Nie Minsheng could he a crow cawing. Wei WuXian’s hand closed over whatever he was fiddling with, but he didn’t try to hide it so it mustn’t be terribly important, “What can I do for you?”

“You’re the leader here, aren’t you?” Nie Minsheng said politely.

Wei WuXian opened his mouth to answer then paused looking a bit baffled.

“I guess. Right, yes, I am. Jie handles most of the actual running of things though,” Wei WuXian said awkwardly.

That was interesting.

Not used to being considered a leader. He was a subordinate all his life and the son of a servant even if the Jiang’s treated him as if he were their own. But he didn’t leap to be called the leader either. He’s not eager for the position. Yet he accepts it out of… what? Responsibility? Because there’s no one else?

Could it be that he’s met a man with significant power enough to cow the Great Sects and yet has no ambition?

Truly, the Burial Mounds contains many things Nie Minsheng previously thought impossible or nigh impossible.

“We were planning on interviewing everyone here on events from the end of the Sunshot Campaign to now,” Nie Minsheng told Wei WuXian. He brought out the List of names, “We were hoping that that is all right? We noticed how everyone seemed to be busy. We were planning to go from oldest to youngest, if that helps.”

Wei WuXian nodded in understanding, “They know you plan to talk to them. An order does help. I doubt anyone likes being pulled away while in the middle of something. Were you planning to interview them in a specific location or do you mind going to where they are?”

“Whichever is more convenient,” Nie Minsheng replied.
“Do you plan on asking my son anything? And does it need to be done privately? Or can they bring in someone for support. You’ll be bringing up some very emotional things for some of them,” Wei WuXian said.

That brought them up short. None of them had thought of that.

“They can ask someone to be there if they think they need support,” Nie Minsheng said after thinking a bit, “As for your son: he was very young at the time wasn’t he? Can he even remember anything?”

“You’d be surprised at what memories trauma embeds into your mind,” Wei WuXian said dryly, “You won’t be talking to him without me or his grandmother anyway.”

Nie Minsheng nods affably, mind working quickly.

“Well,” Nie Minsheng said, trying to get started, “The first person we’d like to speak to is Wei Ju. Your grandmother?”

Adopting a grandmother was something Nie Minsheng had never heard of before, but that was the least strange thing Nie Minsheng had heard lately.

“Yeah,” Wei WuXian said, a fond smile flickering over his face. He stood up, pocketed whatever had been in his hand and wiped the dust off, “Granny is the grandmother of Jie, A-Ning and A-Yuan’s biological father. A-Yuan is her great-grandson and she was his primary caretaker before I adopted him. She still is his caretaker really. We’ll get Jie and head on to Granny’s house. Granny has a bit of a problem seeing and hearing things clearly, so you’ll have to speak up when talking to her.”

On the way down, Wei WuXian spotted Wei Qing and waved her over, explaining what the investigation team was going to do. Granny’s house was one of the ones closest to the cave so they didn’t go far. Apparently, she lived with Wei Qing, Wei Ning and Wei Yuan. It didn’t look big enough for that many people, but Wei Ning didn’t sleep there as he didn’t actually need to sleep.

Near the entranceway was the small child who brightened up when he saw Wei WuXian, dropping a grass butterfly he was attempting to make so he could leap up and hug the man.

Wei WuXian chuckled, “You just saw me.”

Wei Yuan shrugged. Wei WuXian bent down and picked him up.

“Granny!” Wei Qing called out.

“Want to go see if there’s fish in the stream?” Wei WuXian asked the child.

“There wasn’t any last time,” Wei Yuan said. Behind them was shuffling as a crone tottered out.

“You never know. That could change. Hi, Granny,” Wei WuXian greeted.

“A-Ying,” said the old woman, smiling, “Are you taking A-Yuan out for a walk?”

“Yes. These ones are going to ask you some things. Tell me if they bother you and I’ll beat them up,” Wei WuXian told her. The old lady chuckled. Wei Qing rolled her eyes.

Nie Minsheng almost asked if he was serious. Lan Qiren bristled in indignation. Nie Huaisang just smiled nervously and Lan Wangji didn’t react at all.
“Will you play Chenqing?” Wei Yuan asked.

“If you like,” Wei WuXian said, “But you have to clean up first or someone will step on your things.”

Wei Yuan squirmed to get down and obediently ran around picking up his toys and dumping them in a wooden box in the corner except for one of the butterflies which he pocketed.

Nie Minsheng was impressed. To be fair though, he lived in a house with four children. Anything regarding toys eventually dissolved into screaming and crying as they fought over whose toy was whose. Lan Qiren pursed his lips at the way the child just dropped them messily into the toy box, but he didn’t say anything.

“I want the song you made. The lantern one,” Wei Yuan told his parent, clinging to his leg. He reached up and grabbed the flute holding it close with one hand and his other hand a tight fist in Wei WuXian’s robes.

“Eh? Why that one? Why don’t I play you a lullaby instead?”

“It’s too early for a nap! You can play that at naptime!”

“What am I? Your own personal musician? I’ll play a dancing song at naptime and we’ll see how you sleep then.” Wei WuXian said, walking out of the house with the child who was now swinging the feared flute and watching the red tassel sway as he walked.

“If he doesn’t have his nap, you’re dealing with the aftermath!” Wei Qing called out. Wei WuXian just waved a hand at her in acknowledgment.

The feared ghost flute, once leading corpse armies into slaughtering hundreds now played for the amusement of a child.

A flute that slaughtered Wen’s now used for the comfort of a Wen child. Nie Minsheng thought there was something strangely twisted about that.

Right. Back to work.

Nie Minsheng turned around to see the old lady being settled into a chair by her granddaughter. Wei Qing was wearing a tense, suspicious expression as she knelt by her grandmother’s chair and held her hand. The old woman looked frail and shrunken somehow. He gnarled hand was clutching tight to Wei Qing’s.

She’s afraid.

Nie Minsheng sunk down on one of the seats that had been placed while they had been distracted by the parent-child duo. The others followed, solemn and respectful. They got out their writing supplies.

Nie Minsheng took a deep breath before smiling, “Perhaps we could start with where you were and what you were doing when you heard the Sunshot Campaign was over?”

Wei Ju nodded slowly and creakily began to tell her story.
Lan Wangji had many mixed feelings about the investigation. For one thing, the subject matter was very sad and disheartening in a very heavy way. Nie Minsheng organised the interviews to go down by age, from eldest to youngest and intended to talk to every single person living there. The man rallied admirably and managed to do his job with both efficiency and compassion in the face of what was told to him by the inhabitants of the Burial Mounds. Many of their stories were heartbreaking and the notes taken were occasionally wobbly no matter who was writing.

The people were slow and hesitant to open up at first, as if afraid someone would yell that they were lying. But they couldn’t be. At times some of them broke down crying at the remembrance of people they lost or people who simply disappeared. Repeatedly there were entreaties about finding out what happened to the rest. They didn’t care about justice so much as they cared about their missing loved ones and ensuring that it didn’t happen again.

Some were clearly afraid, some were suspicious, and some drew on their diminished dignity and talked to them with their head held high even when holding back tears or helpless anger.

Lan Wangji and the investigative team walked among the amateurish fields, talked in gardens, sat in areas while listening to a hardened old man talk while he whittled at black wood. It was enlightening in a way. Not only to the stories they were told, but to the way of life these refugees had made for themselves here in place that creates nightmares. They refused to lay down and die and instead worked on a life for themselves.

A great patch of land was being cleared among the trees near their guest house for a great communal eating hall. Almost anyone who wasn’t farming was working on it.

Lan Wangji made sure to eat the blackened food he was given. If that helped him acclimatise to Wei Ying’s home than he would eat it. The taste wasn’t any different that Lan Wangji could tell, but the colour did throw him off a bit. Not that anyone could notice. The other three also ate the food with obvious trepidation that faded as time went on, not unlike how their sleep became easier and more restful. All but Lan Wangji had had nightmares the second night which had been strange and accurately attributed to the resentful energy in the mountain.

“It’s because you’re not welcome here,” Shen Shuyi had said, when she saw them appearing tired on the day they interviewed her, “Don’t worry. Wei-laozu is keeping the mischief down. It’d be worse if he hadn’t allowed you in here.”

Lan Wangji understood that the austere woman was telling them that Wei Ying was manipulating the resentful energy to keep it from affecting them, but didn’t understand why she said it in such a strange way.

But that brought Lan Wangji to the only good parts of his stay in the Burial Mounds. First was the obvious: the way he could see Wei WuXian every day. Wei WuXian seemed a bit surprised, but pleased when Lan Wangji made a point to come and see him every day even if it was just sitting by him as they worked on their respective notes. It reminded the both of them of the time when they were teenagers in Cloud Recesses’ Library Pavilion. Only, as Wei WuXian teasingly told Lan Wangji, this time Wei WuXian was working on much more interesting things than copying rules.

It was different this time. Now, Wei WuXian was free to fidget and mutter incomprehensible things to himself. Sometimes he stared into space, occasionally with red eyes. The first time that happened Lan Wangji had been tense, wondering if he should try and call Wei WuXian out of whatever trance he was in. However, while he was debating the matter, Wei WuXian blinked the red out of his eyes and started scribbling furiously.

Occasionally, Wei WuXian would turn to him and ask strange questions about cultivation. No one
had ever asked about how it felt when he made the energy into a blast before.

Sometimes, A-Yuan would be there. Wei WuXian would look up at those times, absently checking that the child was still there before returning to whatever he was doing. Sometimes, he would stop his scribbling or strange carving with a bit of black rock to join in on the child’s games. After the first few times, Lan Wangji, who desperately needed a break from consolidating his investigation notes would hesitantly try and play with the child instead.

A-Yuan was pleased to have a new playmate and would babble his made up games to Lan Wangji happily, unfazed by the man’s expressionless face. At one point, Lan Wangji ended up holding a straw doll and a grass butterfly, wondering how he ended up catering to the child’s whims when he looked up and saw Wei WuXian watching them with a fond, gentle smile. Lan Wangji had nearly flung the toys away in embarrassment, only the thought of what A-Yuan would think stopped him.

Other times, A-Yuan was fascinated by Lan Wangji’s guqin. He stared wide-eyed as Lan Wangji drew out such different music with his elegant fingers than the flute he was used to. At one time, Lan Wangji and Wei WuXian played a duet for the child with his eyes shining. Afterwards, A-Yuan declared that he was going to learn both the guqin and the flute.

Laughing, Wei WuXian said that he’d have to practise twice as much to play both instruments. In the end they both allowed the four-year-old to try their instruments. A-Yuan’s hands were too small to reach all the holes on Chenqing, but he was delighted to produce sounds on Lan Wangji’s guqin.

He was very confused at Brother Rich having the same name as his guqin though. That had made Wei WuXian laugh long and loud.

All in all, Lan Wangji was enjoying himself whenever he could put aside the investigation and its revelations.

The Burial Mounds, despite their reputation and the resentful energy did not seem to be a bad place to live. Sometimes, Lan Wangji still wistfully thought of home, but Cloud Recesses did not have Wei WuXian. But even without his beloved in the picture, as time went on, Lan Wangji could appreciate the beauty in the black bamboo or the red lanterns in the trees in the evenings. The people were lively outside of their shy skittishness and kind. Hardworking and set on improving their home. They were positively enthusiastic about the communal eating hall and kept revising plans when someone came up with a new idea.

It made Lan Wangji very sad to realise that their business at the Burial Mounds was close to conclusion. There were only four people left to interview, purposely left for last.

A-Yuan blinked up at them from where he had partially hidden himself behind Wei WuXian. Wei Ju had left the house to go help someone with cooking. Deciding to talk to A-Yuan had been a very hesitant decision. A child that young had no concept of lying except to get out of trouble, but they weren’t sure how much he would remember and were worried about what he would remember after rereading his great-grandmother’s testimony in preparation. In the end, they had run the questions past Wei WuXian and Wei Qing before they decided to question the child. Afterwards, they would question Wei Qing, Wei Ning and Wei WuXian separately.

Lan Wangji sat down with the others and could already tell that, like him, they were already regretting this decision. Unlike the rest, Lan Wangji could still remember A-Yuan’s reaction to Jin ZiXuan and, in addition, had gotten rather attached to the child.

“A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian said gently, kneeling behind the child, “These people want to ask you a few things. If you want to stop, you can say so at any time, ok? Just tell them what you can.”
Understanding that this was serious, A-Yuan looked up at his mother uncertainly and nodded. He crawled into Wei WuXian’s lap and pulled Chenqing from his mother’s belt, holding it close, before staring at them.

Nie Minsheng took a moment to collect himself. Wei Yuan was around the same age as his only daughter so this was very hard for him.

“A-Yuan,” he said matching Wei WuXian’s gentle tone, “Do you remember when you first met Wei WuXian?”

A-Yuan blinked and nodded, “Scary.”

Everyone’s hearts ached in sympathy.

“What was scary?”

“Xian-gege,” Wei Yuan said, clutching Chenqing and surprising everyone except Wei WuXian, “He came out of the dark and scared the bad men and took us away from the bad place. So, A-N – Father must be the scariest because he scared the bad men. He can scare even monsters. That’s why he’s safe, because he likes us and won’t hurt us and he’ll scare away the monsters who do want to hurt us. Everyone thought he was gonna hurt us like the bad people except worser, but he didn’t. He played a lullaby for me and took us away from the bad place and now everyone’s happy and not getting hurt no more.”

For a moment, no one knew what to say. All the other residents had admitted to being terrified of Wei WuXian when they had first followed him. But he helped them and he came with Wen Qing so they all made an impulse decision to trust that he couldn’t be any worse than their situation at Qiongqi Path. At least he would probably put them out of their misery quicker than LanlingJin.

Nie Minsheng swallowed and tried to summarise what the child had told them on his notes.

“What do you remember before meeting Wei WuXian?” he asked in the same gentle voice.

A-Yuan screwed up his face in concentration.

“Different scary. Hungry but not hungry like I want to eat soup. Just hungry like soup is too big and too little all at the same time,” A-Yuan’s face seemed confused like he wasn’t sure if that was the best way to describe it, “Sleepy, but couldn’t sleep. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like being away from Granny neither. ‘Fraid and sleepy and hungry, but I didn’t really feel like nothing neither. I didn’t like it. It was a bad place and the bad men hurt everyone and put them in the ground so everyone could forget them. I hate it and no-one’s going back!”

Wei Yuan became upset and teary as he approached the end of his small tirade. Wei WuXian cuddled him and his son buried his face in the man’s neck, gripping tight, Chenqing still in one fist.

“I think that’s all we need,” Nie Minsheng said shakily. Wei WuXian nodded sharply and stood holding his child.

“I’ll tell Qing-jie to come here,” he said before sweeping out.

Nie Minsheng dropped what remained of his work mask and buried his face in his fists.

“Fuck.”

For once, neither Lan objected to the crude profanity. Instead Nie Minsheng heard a snapping sound
and looked up to see that Lan Qiren had broken his brush, a stormy expression on his face. Lan Wangji closed his eyes and seemed to be meditating, but Nie Minsheng could see his white knuckles. Nie Huaisang wordlessly offered Lan Qiren a new brush.

It took a while for Wei Qing to enter her hut, but that allowed them time to compose themselves and finish those heartrending notes.

Wei Qing was unique in their investigations because, to their surprise, she had never been a prisoner at Qiongqi Path. Instead she had arrived with Wei WuXian.

They first started with her treatment after the Sunshot Campaign was officially over. When they came to when Wen Ning had been taken away, the story diverged from the other narratives.

“I knew he had to be taken somewhere by LanlingJin, but there was no way for someone like me to find that out and there was no guarantee that they’d take me to the same place as A-Ning,” Wei Qing said clinically, in the same voice learned by frank medics everywhere who were tired of hysterics over treatable things.

“So I needed help from someone who could get answers from LanlingJin. Someone who might help even after the Sunshot Campaign.”

“And you thought of Wei WuXian?” Nie Minsheng said in slight disbelief, “After everything that happened in the Sunshot Campaign? Everything he did?”

“I kept an ear out for him after I previously treated him. I knew Wen Chao would never be satisfied until he was dead. I know what he did. I also know that when people surrendered to him, he only restrained them and didn’t harm them further. He also avoided other cruelties taken by men during wartime. He was also the only person I felt would help due to our previous meetings,” Wei Qing said.

“What previous meetings?” Nie Minsheng asked.

“The first I knew of him personally was when my brother told me about his encounter with him. Then just after news of Lotus Pier’s destruction came, I walked into my brother’s room to find him, Wei WuXian and an unconscious Jiang Wanyin.”

“You did not tell anyone?” Lan Qiren asked.

“Of course not!” Wei Qing retorted, “Can you imagine what Wen Ruohan or his sons would have done to A-Ning? I love my brother too much to subject him to whatever they would come up with. Besides, my brother rarely does things on his own initiative like that. I wasn’t going to interfere with something he felt so strongly about, even if it was a huge risk to us. Jiang Wanyin was in hysterics when he woke up so I knocked him unconscious for the three days they stayed. I healed them both as well as I could. I organised Jiang Fengmian and Yu ZiYuan’s pyres to give them the ashes in secret. After three days, they left with what supplies we could give them. Jiang Wanyin was still unconscious and carried on A-Ying’s back. I told him that from that day on there were no debts between us. I hadn’t wanted to get attached or make them think I’d help them again. I hadn’t thought they’d live for very long.”

“And that was the last you saw them?”

Wei Qing nodded grimly.

“In the end it was me that needed A-Ying’s help,” Wei Qing said bitterly, “After A-Ning was taken I dodged the guards and made my way to Yunmeng as fast as possible. I didn’t stop to eat or sleep. I
was not in the best state of mind."

They waited patiently while Wei Qing collected herself.

“Luckily Wei WuXian was in Yunmeng’s marketplace. I had been sitting there trying to figure out how to get inside Lotus Pier when I heard his voice. I immediately clutched at his hems and begged him to help me. He made me eat something and took off for Koi Tower as soon as he heard my story. He left me in an alley in Lanling while he entered Koi Tower to find out where they had taken A-Ning.”


“I didn’t know or particularly care about any of that,” Wei Qing said, “I just know that he knew where A-Ning was when he came out. He offered to go alone and promised to bring my brother back, but I had to go myself. So we went to Qiongqi Path. It was night time and raining by the time we arrived.”

Wei Qing proceeded to describe how she found her grandmother and A-Yuan who had previously disappeared with her cousin and his wife while picking herbs. She clinically described their condition and the condition of the other prisoners she’d noticed. She described how she’d run around frantically trying to find her brother.

“What was Wei WuXian doing while this was happening?” Nie Minsheng asked.

“Doing his best shadow act,” Wei Qing said, “He was silent and just followed me around looking at everything. No one bothered him and no one bothered me because of him. One of the inspectors had grabbed something and was waving it around threateningly before he noticed A-Ying. Everyone could tell that A-Ying was… not happy. I realised later that he was brandishing one of the iron brands. They all let me run around freely calling for A-Ning after that.”

“Did Wei WuXian say anything to them?”

“Not at that time. He didn’t say a word, just looked at them, and they let me pass. They all recognised him I think and most of the inspectors had dismounted and were staring at him at that point. I came back over when I couldn’t find A-Ning and asked them where he was. It seemed to take a long time for them to answer, but maybe that was just my anxiety. Finally one said, in a very friendly tone, that new prisoners came every day and they could not expect to recognise one among many.”

“New prisoners every day?” Nie Minsheng asked with a now familiar sinking feeling.

“That is what he said and that all there were QishanWen. I described my brother, but they still could not recall him. That inspector said that other Sect’s came every day to take prisoners and that someone might have taken him. He also said that people may have run away. I shouted that A-Ning couldn’t have run since Granny and everyone else were all here. My brother wouldn’t have left them there. That was when Wei WuXian first spoke up.”

“Before we get to what Wei WuXian said, can you tell us what you know about the inspector saying that other sects had come to take prisoners?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” Wei Qing said shaking her head, “That’s what he said. I only remember because I was afraid that maybe my brother had been taken away to be abused by somebody else and that I was too late.”

Wei Qing paused to drink some water out of mismatched tea cups.
“I see,” Nie Minsheng said quietly, “Please tell us what Wei WuXian said.”

“He wanted to clarify that all of the prisoners were there. All the inspectors seemed afraid of him even though he hadn’t done anything yet and they said that all the prisoners were there. So, A-Ying said, ‘I take it that all the living prisoners are here. What about the rest?’”

Wei Qing stopped, taking a deep breath.

“He knew that there had been murders recently taken place there where the victims couldn’t fight back,” Wei Qing said shakily.

“How could he have known that?” Nie Minsheng asked, alarmed.

“Demonic Cultivation. Such murders produce resentful energy and he could sense it. You’ll have to ask him for specifics. At the time I knew nothing about demonic cultivation. I was just devastated at his meaning. The inspector tried to scold him for his way of talking, declaring that ‘even though’ it was Wen’s there they’d never do anything fatal. That’s when A-Ying drew Chenqing. Immediately there was a commotion.”

“The inspectors?”

Wei Qing snorted, “No. Until then, none of the prisoners had recognised him. None who got near enough to see his face during the Sunshot Campaign lived, but the description of Chenqing wielded by a man in black stayed with us. He was a living nightmare to anyone with the name Wen. None of them cared for the inspectors’ threats anymore. Everyone nearby threw away their burdens to run. A large space was cleared with just me, A-Ying and the inspectors inside. A-Ying only played a single note that echoed through the pass before putting away the flute again.”

“Just a single note?” Nie Huaisang asked, fascinated despite himself.

“He told me later that there was enough resentful energy in that place to call them easily. Only the numerous soul-supressing rituals kept anyone from turning into a malicious ghost or fierce corpse. That one note was the final tip of the scales into breaking through the rituals and allowing them to rise as fierce corpses. Including my brother.”

For a moment Wei Qing closed her eyes, remembering that moment, seeing her little brother’s dead stare. The investigators waited for her.

“There were around a dozen men and women who were brought back. I didn’t look to see who the others were. A-Ning was at the front and I was focused on him. His ribcage had been obviously caved in. They hadn’t even closed his eyes. At that time, he was only a normal fierce corpse, not the way he is now, so he didn’t react to me. That was the final straw I guess. I’d pushed my body so far and nearly lost my mind in fear. Seeing A-Ning; realising I was too late… I fainted. When I woke up, we were here with everybody. A-Ning had to be restrained with talismans. A-Ying promised me that he could get A-Ning back. Looking back on it now, he probably wasn’t even sure if he could, but he tried. After a lot of experiments, it worked. He brought me back my brother.”

Silence, broken only by the sounds of brushes against paper and ink-pots.

“Thank you, Maiden Wei,” Nie Minsheng said quietly, “Do you mind calling your brother, Wei Ning, over? He’s second to last.”

Wei Qing nodded and swept out of the door.

“Can you not interrupt with irrelevant questions about Demonic Cultivation?” Lan Qiren told Nie
Huaisang irritably.

“I think it was necessary. That amount of resentful energy produced by those corpses mean that their deaths were truly not good,” Nie Huaisang said meekly, ruining it by adding: “I think that’s how it works anyway.”

Nie Minsheng merely sighed.

Wei Ning did not blink and now that they were interviewing him they noticed it took a lot more effort for him to speak. Since corpses naturally didn’t need to breathe it had to be a conscious decision and breathing was required to make sounds like speaking. It made him talk slow which was good for note-taking at least.

They asked how he met Wei WuXian and Wei Ning told them about the archery competition.

“I was very grateful to him and I wanted to do something in return for his kindness,” Wei Ning confessed. So when Wei Ning had heard about Lotus Pier he went there to see if any of the YunmengJiang disciples could be saved.

“I was too late and they were too thorough,” Wei Ning said. He seemed almost sad, “In the end I tried to be grateful that Ying-ge and Sect Leader Jiang had escaped, but it didn’t really work. Especially when Sect Leader Jiang was brought back.”

“He’d been captured?” Nie Minsheng said in surprise, “What about Wei WuXian?”

“He wasn’t there yet. I heard Wen Chao gloat to Sect Leader Jiang about… horrible things,” the corpse sounded upset, “and he asked where Wei WuXian was and Sect Leader Jiang refused to answer. I think they hurt him then because I heard him scream, but I knew that Wei WuXian would try to help Sect Leader Jiang so I went to the perimeter.”

From there he explained how Wei WuXian hadn’t really remembered him until they were on the boats and had been suspicious of him. How he had walked into the broken occupied Lotus Pier and walked out with an injured Jiang Wanyin, Zidian and the corpses of Jiang Fengmian and Yu ZiYuan. After, he had taken them to his sister.

The listeners were very impressed with his bravery. That was no small thing he did.

It was still very uncomfortable for them to interview a corpse. Nie Minsheng admirably ignored that fact as he questioned it – him – until they came up to the man’s death. Asking how a ghost died was one thing, asking a fierce corpse was another!

Was it rude? Or traumatising? Or something? Help!

At least in asking ghosts it was to help them move on or bury their corpse or bring their murderer to justice or something. They couldn’t exactly do that in this kind of situation!

From reports from the other cultivators who had been trapped in the hut, they knew Wen Ning had been beaten to death. It was quite another thing to hear the corpse talk about it.

“What’s the next thing you remember after your…?” Nie Minsheng trailed off awkwardly here. Obviously the word was ‘death’, but it sounded so insensitive!

“I heard a note, loud and clear, like a bell. My memories then are fuzzy,” Wei Ning admitted, “But I remember going after my murderer. I just felt all the horrible things I’d pushed away previously so I could be positive for my family’s sake. All the emotions I felt at my death and how everyone was
hurt. I didn’t recognise my sister or even Ying-ge. Or, I recognised Ying-ge as the person who brought me back and helped me achieve my vengeance, but not as the man I had met when I was alive. I remember going after my murderer so he couldn’t hurt anyone else and so he could feel what it was like to die the way I did. Everything else is just flashes of things until I woke up as a conscious fierce corpse."

That was… illuminating.

Often a fierce corpse had three ways of trying to kill their murderer. First was fighting the way the fierce corpse had fought while still alive. This usually happened to soldiers, warriors, bandits and hitmen. People who were used to fighting and killing while still alive. This was explained as muscle memory. The next was incoherent flailing. Just trying to hit something any way they could. The last was a section of fierce corpses who attempted to mimic the way they were murdered to their murderer. Held down and drowned, pinned down and beaten or even thrown off a tall building. Nie Minsheng had seen them all. The theory was that the corpses were naturally fixated on their own death. Now they had an explanation from an actual fierce corpse to explain such behaviour.

They asked about the next time he went to Qiongqi Path where Wei WuXian became injured. Afterwards, they took a break and had a very light lunch.

The last person was Wei WuXian.

Unlike the rest, Wei WuXian led them into the bamboo forest and a place where there were several flat stones. The investigators set up their paper and ink and proceeded to ask them questions. His story corroborated with Wei Qing’s, though it included more of her wretched state, and Wei Ning’s. His frequent explanation for his blunt statements and using Chenqing to summon the Qiongqi Path corpses was: “I was angry.”

“Well, I caught her for one thing. Then I asked who killed A-Ning. The inspector claimed that he died falling off the walls and that it was his own fault. Funny how they knew who he was now and not before. I asked for clarification. I asked: ‘nobody would dare kill a single living person? Is that true?’ They said ‘of course’. That’s when I told them that I understood what they meant. That those people were only Wen-dogs and Wen-dogs weren’t people so even if the inspectors killed them it didn’t count as having killed people.”

“Have you always had a bad temper?” Lan Wangji asked, “I never saw it before.”

Wei WuXian laughed, “Of course not! You’ve never made me angry. It takes certain things to make me angry and Lan Zhan isn’t capable of any of them. And, to be fair, this was a different situation. Before I always got angry at the same kind of things, like someone insulting my siblings. But I also got angry when someone hurts someone else for no good reason. But, before, everyone was on my side that, whoever it was, didn’t deserve to be hurt. This time, it seemed like I was the only one who saw what was in Qiongqi Path and thought that what was happening wasn’t right. So many people were hurt in such a horrible and systematic way. Plus, it wasn’t to complete strangers either. Wen Qing and Wen Ning had done so much for me and were so kind. They didn’t deserve this. They needed help and I could offer it.”

Wei WuXian made it sound so simple.

“What happened after Wei Qing fainted?”

“That was a bold assertion, wasn’t it?” Nie Minsheng asked carefully. His stomach dropped. He remembered the war and the way everyone joked and claimed that the Wen’s were just dogs and not even people. He could see it, what Wei WuXian said. That was probably the worst part.
“If you could’ve seen the way they paled and their faces’ expressions said guiltily ‘you’ve read my thoughts’ you wouldn’t think so,” Wei WuXian said dryly, “Even if they didn’t I wouldn’t have needed to. Resentful energy carries the emotions and memories of what produced it. That close? I could get an impression of all their deaths and pretty much all of them had been restrained and beaten. Plus, the way they all yearned to go after their murderers was another clue.”

Oh.

“I knew how they died and I became angrier. But I tried to restrain myself and asked the one who killed A-Ning to step forward. I told them that if they didn’t, I’d just kill them all so that I could be sure that person wouldn’t get off. Someone tried to protest, talking about how YunmengJiang and LanlingJin have been getting along and that pissed me off further. Trying to use politics to cover up what they did? So I let Wen Ning take his revenge. I picked up Wen Qing and found one of the horses. I was going to take her away somewhere safe when one of the Wen’s approached me. Actually, I think that was Kang Xin. Huh. He told me that there was a hut where they took people, locked them inside and beat them. Those people only came out when it was time to bury them. I went there and saw a bunch of cultivators who looked beaten and told them to come out. Everyone was running around, but a group who knew and trusted Qing-jie had organised horses and fetched Granny and A-Yuan. There weren’t that many horses so there were two to three people per horse. I took A-Yuan from Granny. I could tell she was afraid of what I’d do, but I didn’t have time to comfort her. A-Yuan didn’t react. That was alarming. I could definitely tell he was starving then.”

“How could you tell?” Nie Minsheng asked.

“He didn’t react to a strange man, someone I knew he was frightened of, taking him away from his Granny. He was under a year-old and he didn’t cry. That’s not normal.”

No, Nie Minsheng admitted to himself. It’s not.

“He didn’t have enough energy to spare for crying. That spoke of starvation to me more than anything. That he was so light also pointed to that conclusion. He also didn’t have that healthy fat layer babies ought to have, but I didn’t know much about that part.”

“How do you know so much about the effects of starvation?” Nie Minsheng asked.

“Uhh, cousin?” Nie Huaisang tried to stop him. Wei WuXian merely gave a dry look.

“I remember being in that state myself of course. I was about six or seven though. Probably seven. I had it better than A-Yuan though. I could steal and scavenge food, but he was too young, plus those inspectors wouldn’t have condoned anything like that. Is that all?”

They asked a few more questions about why he didn’t take other methods to deal with the situation at Qiongqi Path. They confirmed Wei Qing’s assertions about resentful energy. They also asked about Jin ZiXun and what happened at Qiongqi Path the second time before thanking him.

As they walked back, Lan Wangji at the back of the group, Nie Minsheng thought about all he had learned. One phrase kept coming back to him though.

They needed help and I could offer it.
Trying to render things in small child speak was interesting.

A-Yuan’s perspective of his mother being scary is inspired by Yesterday Upon The Stair by PitViperOfDoom from the Boku no Hero Academia fandom.

So, I had a plan for this chapter, but then I ended up doing the interviews. What do you think? Were they ok? Or, would you have preferred something else that was not a rehash of some of the book’s events?

Next chapter will take place at the same time as this chapter but from Wei WuXian’s perspective. And without the interviews. Prepare for a sexuality crisis.

Headcanon:

Nie Huaisang: Thought I’d rant about NHS today. NHS is very clever, but clever people are often brought into the spotlight like what happened to Wifi. And everyone knows what being in the public spotlight does. Creates rumours. All the rumours. Not exactly what NHS wants. Plus, I see him as having a high sense of self-preservation which comes across as cowardice to most people in this era. I think NHS just wants a quiet life where he can enjoy his art without bother.

Unfortunately, his brother doesn’t accept that. NMJ doesn’t understand not wanting to learn how to fight to defend yourself and has a higher sense of responsibility due to being the heir then Sect Leader. NHS was coddled in comparison, partially due to the age gap, partially due to how their father died when he was young. NMJ is also the one who had to take over raising NHS after their father died because their mother had already passed on by then. Older siblings who have to take parental roles for their younger siblings tend to have a higher sense of responsibility among other issues.

Then there was how their father died which I see as somewhat traumatising for young NHS who would have witnessed his only parent becoming erratic. Knowing and seeing what their way of cultivation and the dao does to a person has made NHS determined not to end up like that, so he avoids using his dao as much as possible. The complete opposite to NMJ who simply sees it as normal and an acceptable price to pay.

I actually see NHS being the best at administrative type work. Actually now that I think of it, he’s probably similar to Shang Qinghua (just without the frequent panic attacks and general shamelessness). The guy in the background who makes sure everything is running smoothly. Unfortunately, Nie Sect is known for their fighting prowess so NMJ isn’t satisfied with that. Plus, in the book, I believe NHS didn’t focus on any of that kind of thing because he was looking for his brother’s body. Then when he realised he had to take down JGY he let the image of incompetence continue so he could cry to JGY and LXC and keep an eye on them.

Nie Minsheng hasn’t quite realised how clever and perceptive NHS is. The only person who fully realises it is NMJ. Wifi and JC know a bit thanks to their friendship and their own perceptiveness. LXC and JGY have been given hints by NMJ (neither of whom have picked up on them).
While The Investigators Investigate...

Chapter Notes

Thank you every one for your encouragement! My exam is next weekend so I'm cracking down on studying this week. I'll be unavailable to write for the next three-four weeks so this will be your last chapter for a while. I've left you on a more light-hearted chapter at least!

Plus: some WangXian!

Good wishes and see you soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good morning Wei-laozu,” Shen Jinjing greeted, sitting next to him. Her wife sat elegantly in front of them and Wei Qing completed the circle.

Immediately, Wei WuXian was wary.

“Alright. What’s going on?”

“Can’t we just speak to you?” Shen Shuyi asked, tilting her head and smiling a smile that probably belonged on a painting. Wei WuXian could see why so many had pursued her when she was younger.

“Not so suspiciously,” he said.

The wife duo both smiled. Shen Jinjing’s was significantly more impish than her wife’s. Wei Qing didn’t bother with such pretence and was eyeing him in the way that she does when she’s preparing to debate or convince him of something. Now Wei WuXian was suspicious of the way Qionglin* had insisted on taking A-Yuan with him this morning after the jade viewing. But what did the Shen couple have to do with anything?

Was it about the Sect preparations? He’d already agreed that a Library should be built after the Communal Eating Hall…

Wei WuXian eyed them and put away the chunk of black jade he had been testing.

“Well?”

They looked at each other.

“Wei-laozu, did you know that I consider men just as attractive as women?” Shen Shuyi asked. She hid her face behind her fan, the only sign of her unease in admitting such private things.

Wei WuXian blinked and wondered why she was telling him this. She was obviously still very much in love with Shen Jinjing. Was it something from her past?

“I did not,” he admitted.
“Did you know that someone can consider both genders attractive? Not just the opposite gender, or the same gender for cutsleeves, but both?”

Wei WuXian paused to think about that, “No. Wouldn’t that be rather confusing?”

“Yes,” Shen Shuiy sighed.

“I’ve only ever thought of women as attractive,” Shen Jinjing said, “For me, it was realizing that the feelings other girls talked about feeling for men, I felt for women. The features I heard men talk so crassly about in women; I realized that I liked them too. The men that tried to pursue me just made me uncomfortable and the heavier the flirting, the more they repulsed me. But that was never the same for my wife.”

“I considered a man’s attractiveness and I saw a woman’s attractiveness in a similar way. To be honest, I would never have noticed myself if it weren’t for my brother,” Shen Shuyi said, “Women are meant to be beautiful and pleasing to the eye. I thought it was normal to appreciate their looks as much as a girl sighed over a man’s attractiveness.”

“Your brother?” Wei WuXian asked. He knew little of him, but he knew that Shen Shuyi considered her twin to be the most important person to her along with her wife.

Shen Shuyi nodded, “We were always far more frank to each other than anyone else in the world. He picked up that the way I thought about such things wasn’t what I thought. He talked me through several scenarios and we figured out that I liked both. Naturally, we concluded that nothing could be said about it. I continued to appreciate a girl’s looks, but never did anything more. If I were to get married, it would be to a man and no one would ever need to know that I was different. We knew first-hand the kind of stigma cutsleeves faced. There was a cutsleeve man in the brothel we were born at. He was very nice and we called him Uncle. My brother always said he was foolish because he was a bit of a romantic. The other workers liked him, but he wasn’t treated well by the owner or… others.”

Wei WuXian frowned. He never knew how cutsleeves were treated, partially because he’d never much thought of them. They existed more in stories than in real life. He supposed he could have met them and never known because they hid it. He never would have known about the Shen’s if they didn’t show that they were obviously in love with each other.

“You know I’ll never allow anyone to be treated badly here because of such things, right?”

They all smiled at him.

“Of course,” Shen Jinjing told him. Her eyes were shining as she smiled, “This is the safest and most open we’ve ever been. And we are so happy for it. You have no idea. No idea how much that means to us.”

Wei WuXian felt embarrassed at how earnest and raw her voice was.

Wei Qing shifted.

“You… already know about me,” Wei Qing said quietly, almost embarrassed, “None of that interests me at all. Sex sounds disturbing. I’ve seen porn and it just bores me. Men flirting with me… it’s like how it is with Aunt Jinjing; it just makes me uncomfortable. I mean, I like being told I’m pretty, but kissing is weird and other stuff just repulses me. I don’t feel anything like that. I did wonder if I was a cutsleeve, but women didn’t do anything for me either. I’m just not interested in any of it. My medical teacher told me that people have varying interest in sex. Sometimes it depends on their
experiences or their emotional connection or attractiveness and gender, of course. I’m just… not interested. In any of it. So, I planned to never get married so I never have to do my ‘marital obligations’.”

Wei WuXian nodded slowly. He had known that Wei Qing didn’t feel those kind of things, but it was more because of how often she had implied it to him. This was the first time she’d ever talked about it so openly.

“If you don’t want to get married, you don’t have to,” he told her, “But I am actually curious about something: do you ever want children?”

Wei Qing thought about it. She shrugged.

“Maybe? I never really thought about it. I just thought that was something I couldn’t have because the thought of going through… that is still not something I’d be willing to do, even for a child. Plus, I’m the one who practically raised A-Ning. It’s not like our parents did much. I figured that would be enough. That, and any nieces and nephews I might have.”

“You could always adopt,” Wei WuXian pointed out.

“An option I’m only now starting to think on. But, right now, I don’t want any. Whether that changes in the future, well, we’ll see,” Wei Qing said.

Wei WuXian nodded in understanding.

“So… not that this isn’t interesting, but why are you telling me these things?” Wei WuXian asked curiously.

“A-Ying… have you ever thought you might be like Aunt Shu?” Wei Qing asked.

“What?” Wei WuXian asked in surprise, “What do you mean?”

“That you might be attracted to both men and women,” Shen Shuyi explained, “And don’t say you would have known if you were. Sometimes it’s hard to tell, even in yourself, especially if you do follow society’s expectations of ‘normal’ for the most part.”

Wei WuXian frowned. He had been going to say that he would have noticed if he was attracted to other men.

“A-Ying, it’s not just us,” Wei Qing said, “Jiang Yanli mentioned that she and her other brother were wondering if you were attracted to certain men.”

“Wait, really? Why wouldn’t they ask me themselves?” Wei WuXian asked, hurt.

“Jiang Yanli hadn’t seen much personally and is Jiang Wanyin really the kind of person who would talk to you about this? Jiang Yanli asked my opinion and I told her we’d talk to you about it. It doesn’t sound like they condemn you for it or anything. They were just curious and concerned that you might not know,” Wei Qing said.

Wei WuXian shifted uncomfortably. Either he’d shown emotions he hadn’t really felt by accident… or he hadn’t even realised an aspect about himself that should be rather obvious. Both options made Wei WuXian unhappy.

“If you think I don’t know about my own self, how do you expect to confirm such things?” Wei WuXian asked.
“I told you about how I realised, didn’t I? We’ll do for you what my brother did for me,” Shen Shuyi said. Despite her words, she looked at the path longingly, like she wanted to do anything, but have this conversation. She still remained seated though her fan, one made by Wei WuXian like the one he made Wei Qing, covered her unreadable face like she was hiding.

“What did he do?” Wei WuXian asked, having already forgotten.

“Scenarios,” Shen Shuyi said briskly, “We need you to think on them genuinely and think about how they make you feel. We need you to keep an open mind that what we say might be possible. Don’t force anything, but don’t brush off anything you might be feeling either. We just need you to know what you feel about something.”

Wei WuXian looked uncertainly from woman to woman.

“Well… ok,” he agreed. He didn’t think Shen Shuyi had the face for it. If the older woman had to describe anything, she might bolt until she was back in Qishan.

“Excellent!” Shen Jinjing said brightly, reaching behind her she brought out a book.

Wei WuXian bemusedly took it and noticed that it was a Buddhist sutra book.

“This is porn, isn’t it?” he deadpanned.

“Yes!”

Shen Shuyi’s entire face was now covered by her fan in reaction to her wife’s shameless behaviour.

“Where did you get porn?” Wei Qing asked, staring at Shen Jinjing.

“Oh, it was in one of the personal libraries in the Nightless City. It looked like it had been tossed in a corner for some reason,” Shen Jinjing explained.

Wei WuXian had a vision of some poor Lan disciple picking up the book, thumbing through it and tossing it away in embarrassment with a red face. The image made him laugh. It reminded him of getting Lan Wangji to do the same thing. Actually, that one had also been disguised as a sutra book.

More at ease after his laughing bout, Wei WuXian opened the book. He wondered how they were going to use a porn book to check. Maybe they’d ask him to focus on the men in the picture instead of the women. Joke’s on them. Most pornography had the art focus on the women anyway.

For the first time since he’d first looked at porn, Wei WuXian felt a flush rise to his cheeks.

Ah.

So, that’s how.

It was a cutsleeve pornography book.

Huh.

That was actually quite good detail on the muscles…

Where were they putting…?

Wei WuXian coughed and closed the book.
“Ok, I take your point,” he said.

“That was fast,” Shen Jinjing said, “I thought it would take longer.”

“So, you know that most heterosexual men would be disturbed or weirded out, not interested in that, right?” Wei Qing said suspiciously, wanting to make sure Wei WuXian had gotten the point.

Wei WuXian nodded. It felt like he’d discovered porn all over again. He wanted the girls to leave so he could look through it properly.

“‘Weirded out’?” Shen Shuyi asked Wei Qing.

“It’s weird,” Wei Qing insisted, “All porn is just weird. Most bodies don’t look like that.”

“I think the one we gave Wei-laozu is weird too,” Shen Jinjing said.

“Porn is an artist’s fantasy, not based on reality,” Wei WuXian pointed out. He skimmed the book again, “I think this artist has a size kink though. Why are all the men doing the,” not the women’s role, he needed another term, “receiving, so much more slender and smaller than the other?”

They all shrugged.

“So, are you as interested in a man’s body as a woman’s?” Shen Shuyi asked, looking like the words were forced out.

Wei WuXian thought about kissing a woman with her featureless soft body against his own. Yes, definitely interested. He thought about kissing a man. That was harder to imagine, as he’d never really thought about it before. Closer to his height with harder muscle and broad shoulders and… ok, still interested.

“Yes,” Wei WuXian shook his head in disbelief, “Both. I never thought you could like both unless you were really perverted. Maybe I’m just really perverted.”

“I like both,” Shen Shuyi said offended, “Can you call me perverted?”

“I dunno,” Wei WuXian drawled looking at her with a spark of mischief, “They do say that the quiet ones are really – Ow!”

Shen Shuyi had thrown her fan at his head.

Shen Jinjing giggled, “Actually, it takes her a while to let go and really enjoy it…”

“Jinjing!” Shen Shuyi nearly shrieked. Wei WuXian gave a whistle.

After a moment of laughing, something struck Wei WuXian.

“Hey! You said you wondered about this because of something. What was it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“First,” Shen Jinjing cut in before anyone else could answer. She leaned in impishly, “Which man do you think is the most attractive one you’ve ever seen?”

That only took a second’s worth of thought.

“Oh, Lan Zhan definitely,” Wei WuXian nodded smiling mischievously in memory, “plus, it’s fun when you ruin his composure.”
The other three stared at him, waiting for the penny to drop.

Wei WuXian blinked at them in confusion, “What?”

They gave him meaningful looks.

“What?” Wei WuXian felt defensive now.

“You l-i-i-i-ike him~” Shen Jinjing said in sing-song.

“What?” Wei WuXian gave a bit of a laugh. He stopped when no one joined in.

“What?”

Wei WuXian thought about Lan Zhan. He thought some more.

Oh, shit.

“What?” he got out in a daze.

“And our work here is done,” Shen Shuyi got off the ground and brushed off imaginary dirt, “This never happened and you are never to talk to me about it again.”

She retrieved her fan and set off down the hill at a brisk pace that could fool the unobservant into thinking she wasn’t running away.

“She doesn’t mean that,” Shen Jinjing reassured, patting a dazed Wei WuXian, “If you need someone to vent to, you can always come to our hut. Just knock first.”

Getting up, Shen Jinjing followed her wife at a much more pleasant pace.

“What?” This one was in a much higher pitched voice. He turned to Wei Qing and looked at her with beseeching eyes.

“Help me! They said.

Wei Qing rolled her eyes.

“You were fine before when we were just talking about general attractiveness and now we’re talking about a specific person, you become all flustered,” she said.

“No,” Wei WuXian got out, still sounding dazed, “This can’t be right.”

“Why not?” Wei Qing asked like it was a vaguely interesting research query.

“Because Lan Zhan’s…” Wei WuXian waved his hands around, “Lan Zhan. Who wouldn’t admire him? He’s way too good for…”

“Having romantic feelings for?” Wei Qing input.

“Yes!” Wei WuXian nodded, “Wait – no! Yes? I don’t know…”

Wei WuXian buried his face in his hands. His cheeks felt heated and his heart was beating fast.

“You enjoy being around him,” Wei Qing said, “I noticed on the way back. Even though it was tense and you were steadily becoming irritable because of it, you still laughed and smiled around him more often than anyone else.”
“Well, yeah,” Wei WuXian said through his hands, “His reactions are always amusing.”

“He barely reacts to anything.” Wei Qing said flatly.

“You just didn’t notice,” Wei WuXian said petulantly, “I realised recently that his ears become red instead of his face, so when he’s embarrassed…”

Wei WuXian wants to curl up defensively at Wei Qing’s pointed stare. He wanted to hiss and claw at her to go away like a pathetic alley cat trying to defend its squishy soft bits.

“He’s become more guarded against my teasing, so it’s more of a challenge now to get him flustered,” he attempted to excuse himself.

“Uh-huh,” Wei Qing deadpanned.

“I once got him so flustered he actually raised his voice.”

“Congratulations.”

“Plus, he’s actually listening to me now,” Wei WuXian continued to dig his hole like a dog with a behavioural disorder, “Before, he would always try to ignore me no matter what I did.”

“Have you ever heard of pulling on a girl’s pigtails?”

“Huh?”

“Boys, usually young, immature boys, pull on a girl’s hair and dip it into inkpots because they like the girl and want her to notice them. Even in a bad way. At least the girl’s paying attention,” Wei Qing explained clinically, “Sound anything like what you’ve been doing?”

“That is…” Wei WuXian almost felt panicked now. It was one thing to realise that you could be attracted to somebody in theory. It was another to realise you were attracted to a specific somebody in reality.

“I can’t like Lan Zhan!” he finally burst out. He looked around frantically for anyone who might have overheard him.

“Why not?” Wei Qing said, gentling her voice at his panic.

“Because I don’t want to care for someone like that, I don’t understand it or why people like it. And Lan Zhan can’t like me like that, so what’s the point!” Wei WuXian blurted out.

“You can’t control feelings,” Wei Qing said, “You either feel them or you don’t. You don’t control whether or not you develop them or how strong they are. All you can do, is decide what to do with them. You can’t control Lan Wangji either, or what he feels. He can’t control what he feels. You need to decide what to do with this realisation, A-Ying.”

Wei Qing softened even more at the signs of her adoptive brother about to hyperventilate, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think this will be easy. It’s ok. You don’t have to do anything about them. Not now. Not ever, if you think you’ll be happier that way. Ok? You’ll always have the rest of us.”

Drawing on years of raising her littlest brother in lieu of their absentee parents, she settled next to Wei WuXian and drew him into a hug. After a bit, he relaxed and stopped breathing so hard. Eventually he sat up a bit so they were leaning against each other.

“What makes you think he can’t like you like that? You think he’s not interested in other men?” Wei
Qing asked quietly, playing with his hair, which she had learnt from Jiang Yanli, calms him down best.

“Heh,” Wei WuXian smiled weakly, “I don’t think he’s interested in anyone. He always acted like that sort of thing was inappropriate and avoided anything to do with it. Not just porn and stuff. He got irritated just by a bit of flirting.”

“Were you flirting? Were you meant to be doing a job instead of flirting?”

“It was after the job, thank you. I asked a group of women if they thought Lan Zhan was handsome. They said yes, of course. ‘Even more than you’ is what they said. Which is true: he’s one of the few people who is better-looking than me. He’s way prettier. But he looked so irritated at me! He was the one who got the compliments! Why was he irritated?”

Wei Qing shrugged. It sounded tame to her. She wouldn’t have minded such things herself, if someone had declared her prettier than an already pretty woman.

“Some people are incomprehensible,” Wei Qing said sagely.

An example of an incomprehensible person sitting beside her agreed.

Later, Lan Wangji came over with the rest of the investigation team. Wei WuXian, who had decided to ignore weird feelings, noticed that his eyes instinctively fixated on the impossibly beautiful white figure first before the man actually talking to him.

Mulan laughing at him did not help. At all.

Wei WuXian left Granny’s hut with A-Yuan, hoping that the elderly woman would be ok. Mulan was taking a break from spying. One of the horses promised to watch the investigators when they came out.

So, Wei WuXian and his son decided to find her. Following a vague sense of ‘over here’ Wei WuXian walked up to a group of older men around a table in front of Gu Liang’s place. Gu Liang himself looked oddly satisfied.

Wei WuXian took one look at what was on the table and could only think of one thing to say.

“Why?”

“So cool!” Wei Yuan squealed.

Mulan looked very smug for a dead crow. One foot each was perched on miniature carts. Four tiny wheels on each small cart. She demonstrated her ability to use them to ‘skate’ around the table in a parody of walking.

“Because we can, Wei-laozu,” Unle Fourth said solemnly, “Because. We. Can.”
“You can fly,” Wei WuXian told Mulan.

“We can walk,” someone else said, “Doesn’t mean we can’t go skating or ride someone else’s wagon.”

The person next to him clapped a hand on his back in agreement. Mulan cawed.


Mulan sent him multiple images of Jiang Cheng giving her bits of meat and petting her.

“Of course he does,” Wei WuXian muttered, “and he says I spoil her. Rotten animal-lover.”

There was laughter. Mulan’s imagery with anyone who wasn’t Wei WuXian was fuzzy at best, but enough got through to tell what she had communicated.

Silly Bird.

Ok. This was ridiculous.

In the past, when Wei WuXian wanted to become friends with Lan Wangji, the man avoided him and only watched him from afar with narrow, suspicious looks. During the Sunshot Campaign, whenever Wei WuXian wanted to explain that he knew what he was doing, thank-you-very-much, an argument would quickly start instead leading, on several occasions, to physical altercations.

Now, when Wei WuXian had decided to avoid Lan Wangji and whatever those weird feelings were, Lan Wangji decided the best place to work was wherever Wei WuXian was working.

It was frustrating.

And kinda nice.

But mostly frustrating.

_Do you have a contrary nature?_ He wanted to demand at that unflappable handsome face.

Wei WuXian couldn’t exactly do anything about Lan Wangji delicately sitting down nearby and otherwise being quiet and unobtrusive. Lan Wangji wasn’t doing anything wrong. He wasn’t trying to look at Wei WuXian’s notes or anything. He was just… nearby. Everyday.

And he started responding to Wei WuXian when the man let his mouth run away from him in nervousness. Nothing much; hmm’s and en’s but…

It was really nice.

Wei WuXian knew he was going to miss Lan Wangji’s presence when he was gone.

The days when A-Yuan would play by them were simultaneously the best and worst.

Lan Wangji had looked so clueless holding A-Yuan’s toys and listening to him babble. Wei WuXian was torn between laughing and cooing at the sight. Especially when Lan Wangji noticed Wei
WuXian was watching; his ears turned so red and he became as stiff as a board.

When the three of them were together, it felt like a family.

“A-Niang,” Wei Yuan said, tugging at his sleeve one day, “Will Brother Rich stay?”

“No, he has important tasks to do outside of the mountain.”

“Oh. Will he come back?”

“If he wants.”

“A-Niang… what’s a ‘father’ like?”

Wei WuXian had paused at that. He couldn’t really remember Wei ChangZe at all. Jiang Fengmian had been a father figure, but a father figure wasn’t quite a father. Plus, as much as Wei WuXian was pleased by Jiang Fengmian’s fatherly gestures, he’d always be wondering about Jiang Cheng in the back of his head which had always slightly soured such encounters.

“I don’t remember,” Wei WuXian admitted, “Someone you look up to; who looks out for you and guides you when you need it.”

“A-Niang said that fathers are the ones with gold.”

“Oy…” Wei WuXian almost felt a vein twitch, “You better not have eliminated me from the father category because of money.”

Wei Yuan blinked up at him in confusion. Deciding that it was one of the nonsense things his mother sometimes said, he continued: “A-Niang also said that fathers are the strict ones. They make the rules.”

“Well… not always,” Wei WuXian said, thinking of Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu.

“Like Brother Rich telling A-Yuan to sit properly while eating?” Wei Yuan’s voice was small. He was clearly uncertain about asking such things.

Wei WuXian looked down at his hesitant son.

“It can be. Do you think he’s like a father?”

“I don’t know.”

Wei WuXian sat down properly and pulled A-Yuan into his lap.

“Parents are partners,” Wei WuXian said slowly, drawing on fuzzy memories, “Raising a child isn’t easy. Even with children as good as you. Mothers and fathers cover and balance each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Providing advice, examples… strict boundaries and nurturing support. Doing that all on one’s own is exhausting, stressful and hard.”

“A-Niang’s on his own,” Wei Yuan said, looking very worried.

“No, I’m not,” Wei WuXian reassured, “I may not have someone to ‘father’ you with me, but I’m not alone. I have your Aunt, Uncle, Granny and everyone else here. You have such a big family, A-Yuan. You won’t ever be alone or without support while all of us are around. Father or not.”

“Uncle said that you might bring more kids here,” A-Yuan said, muffled by Wei WuXian’s robes,
“Will you be their parent too?”

“I doubt it, I’ll just be a teacher. Maybe an Uncle-type figure,” Wei WuXian said, “There are plenty of other people in the Burial Mounds who would be interested in fostering some children.”

The conversation made Wei WuXian fantasize impossible things. Lan Zhan staying at the Burial Mounds, helping out, playing with A-Yuan and trying to impose some of the strict rules he’d grown up with. But even if a miracle happened, could Lan Wangji be happy staying in such a place?

“Aunt Shu said you might be having trouble acclimatising to the Mountain,” he brought up one day. A-Yuan was helping with the laundry under the eye of Granny.

Lan Wangji paused and looked up.

“The others had some nightmares and restless sleep,” Lan Wangji allowed.

“‘Others’? Not you?”

“I have had no nightmares,” Lan Wangji said, shaking his head, “My sleep has been somewhat restless, but that has died down. I have been eating the food grown here. I was told that would help.”

“It does,” Wei WuXian agreed. But not so quickly. Wei WuXian would have to investigate that.

“This place,” Lan Wangji said slowly, picking through his words with care, “Your home is… surprisingly beautiful. Given its history.”

Wei WuXian was taken aback by that. His heart warmed. He had no idea how much he had needed to hear that until now. How much he needed to hear it from those he cared about and valued.

“It’s no Cloud Recesses,” he murmured.

“No,” Lan Wangji agreed, “But that does not make it any less.”

The Burial Mounds wasn’t advanced enough yet to pay attention to the nuances of those living on it, not even Wei WuXian. It drifted in a state of dream-like meditation, feeling the emotions produced and only becoming agitated into more attentive wakefulness with Wei WuXian’s prodding or something significant happened. What the Burial Mounds considered significant mostly boiled down to Wei WuXian’s comings and goings and the intrusion of any strangers.

Despite this, Wei WuXian knew how happy and pleased it would be to hear this and reminded himself to show the mountain this memory later.

The mountain wasn’t the only one who was made happy by such an interaction though.

Oh, Lan Zhan, do you even know what you are doing to me?

It was approaching the end of the investigation groups stay when Wei Qing came to him looking stressed and worried. Wei WuXian had a small tool in hand and was carving into some black jade.

“What’s wrong?” Wei WuXian asked as soon as he noticed. Small things did not make the experienced medic look like that.
“Where’s the investigation team?” Wei Qing asked.

Wei WuXian briefly checked in with Mulan.

“In the fields. Jie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Wei Qing insisted, sounding like she was saying ‘everything’s wrong!’ instead, “When are they leaving?”

“About a week?” Wei WuXian said, looking at her in worry.

Wei Qing let out a breath. She quickly examined who was around her before turning back to him and blurting out: “Chang Ting is pregnant.”

Who? Was Wei WuXian’s first impulse.

“Pregnant?” Wei WuXian said in surprise, “Wait, is that that tiny seamstress? Married to Chang Jian…”

“Chang Jianhong, yes. You’d think you’d remember the name of one of the people who makes you food,” Wei Qing was well enough to roll her eyes at him at least, “Yes, that Chang Ting.”

“Ok,” Wei WuXian said cautiously, “I suppose that requires some preparation if we’re going to have a baby on the Mountain. But, why do you look so panicked?”

Wei Qing grabbed his collar and shook him a little.

“Do you know what pregnancy does to women? How dangerous it is? To the mother and that fragile new life?”

As a man who’s only been around pregnant women for about five minutes at the most, Wei WuXian could confidently say that, no, he had no clue about anything to do with pregnancy, newborns or anything associated with that.

Wasn’t it just papapa, the woman grows bigger, gives birth and then you have a red, wrinkled thing that cries all the time?

“Jie, have you helped a woman give birth before?” Wei WuXian asked cautiously.

“Once,” Wei Qing said with a haunted expression, “The pelvis, A-Ying, and the…”

Wei Qing shuddered.

Wei WuXian was confused. What did the pelvis have to do with…? Actually, now that Wei WuXian was thinking about it, how did the baby come out through there?

“Lai Ai is a midwife, thank fucking Goddess of Mercy, she’s talking to Chang Ting now. We’ll need some herbs and equipment. Preferably another midwife on call, just in case. Yiling should have one. They’re worried about several things already. Chang Ting’s had a miscarriage before due to stress. And they’re worried about how the resentful energy will affect the foetus.”

Wei Qing continued to have a haunted expression on her face, yet she still managed to look at him expectantly.

Right, he had to… organise this.
“After the investigators leave, you can go down and talk to Yiling’s midwife and pick up whatever you need. We’ll make sure Chang Ting is as stress-free as possible. As for the resentful energy, is it really that much of a concern? Everyone’s fine, including A-Yuan. I thought it didn’t have any negative affects?”

“That’s on normal grown human beings and a child past the first major developments. A foetus’ development is a lot more delicate. A spiritually rich environment like a Sect Clan’s lodgings tend to increase the chance that the baby will become someone with a strong golden core. What will resentful energy do? Make someone a natural demonic cultivator?”

Wei WuXian almost asked what was wrong with that before remembering some of his difficulties. Then thought about how that would translate to a child. Worse, a toddler.

Erk.

“I’ll talk to the Burial Mounds and examine the energy seeping into the… foetus,” Wei WuXian said, “Chang Ting can talk to other women here who’ve gone through this right? I’m sure A-Jie wouldn’t mind giving out advice.”

“There are other mothers… former mothers here. I’ll tell Aunt Chang about your offer. A-Ying, do you realise how much can go wrong with pregnancy?”

“No, but I’m sure we’ll do fine,” Wei WuXian reassured, “Everyone will help them out. Lai Ai has experience, we can consult Yiling’s midwife for a second opinion and you’ll be fine. OK? You’ve done experimental surgery with higher risks before, right? This is something people know about and have experience with.”

Wei WuXian tapped his heart, referencing his own time under her knife.

“Everyone will be fine and in nine months we’ll have a squalling babe waking everyone on the mountain up at all hours.”

“Eight months,” Wei Qing said petulantly, “She’s about one month pregnant.”

Wei WuXian patted her back and she let him give her a hug.

“She’ll be fine.”

A woman walked up the streets of Yunmeng to the thick wooden gates leading to Lotus Pier. A sword was worn at her side, signalling that she was a cultivator. Her clothes were worn and with no defining characteristic which, itself, indicated that she was a rogue cultivator. Despite this, she walked with her head held high. She was no fragile flower to be concerned about travelling on her own, no matter how pretty she looked.

She was a woman on a mission.

Those with more observant eyes, noticed that she looked a bit nervous, a bit anxious as she approached the open and unguarded gates. This did not make her steps falter however.

She entered the gates slowly. The lack of guards conversely making her more cautious.
“Welcome guest, how may we help you?” someone spoke. A YunmengJiang cultivator, young but assessing the woman professionally, had stopped to inquire politely.

The rogue cultivator bowed respectfully.

“I am here to request a viewing of the list of people currently living with Wei WuXian in the Burial Mounds,” the woman said politely.

Chu Ping was surprised. That was not a normal request. That didn’t mean he didn’t know what to do however.

He bowed at his guest and directed her to a room to wait. On the way to the room storing the documents such as the list he directed a friend to tell the Sect Leader. At the document room, he requested the document in question, waited patiently while the grouchy record-keeper grumbled and finally produced the paper.

The woman looked like she was forcing herself to remain calm. Her fingers had kept twisting themselves in her robes or fiddling with a prettily embroidered perfume pouch. As soon as he returned, she stood, eyes fixed on the list.

Before he could hand it over, Sect Leader Jiang walked in. The woman unwillingly tore her eyes from the list to respectfully greet him.

“It’s you,” Jiang Wanyin said in surprise. Chu Ping blinked. He knew her?

“You remember me?” the woman asked, also looking surprised.

“You spoke up for my brother,” Jiang Wanyin looked her over clinically, “You spoke more sense than many others in that room. Most of them were more interested in scandal and gossip. I never thanked you for it.”

Jiang Wanyin gave an unpractised salute to this rogue cultivator. She shook her head.

“It was… an unfortunate situation all around, Sect Leader Jiang,” she said respectfully.

“You have been well since leaving your former sect?” Jiang Wanyin asked.

“Night-hunting by myself has been risky, but more rewarding than I would have expected,” the woman said, “Forgive me Sect Leader Jiang. Yunmeng was relatively close by and I thought I’d have a look to see if…”

She swallowed, unease entering her expression.

“The former Wen’s? Those living on the Burial Mounds?” Jiang Wanyin glanced at Chu Ping and held out his hand for the list.

“It’s a long shot,” the woman said, eyeing the list again nervously. “a very long shot. My cousin married a Wen you see. While we were at that… discipline camp. I never found any indication of her during the Sunshot Campaign. Afterwards, I was blocked from visiting Qishan by both my former sect and LanlingJin. So, I don’t know if, maybe… And now I’m hearing all these things about the people Wei WuXian was helping at Qiongqi Path and that there was a list. So, I thought, maybe…. I should check. Just in case.”

Jiang Wanyin nodded. He handed her the list.
“I hope you find her,” he said. He turned to Chu Ping, “Please take care of her.”

Chu Ping nodded and saluted. Jiang Wanyin nodded briskly and left.

The woman sank down to sit, staring at the scroll without opening it.

She was scared, Chu Ping realised. Scared of hope. Scared of hope crushed. The only known ones left from that doomed Sect were safe in the Burial Mounds. If her cousin wasn’t there…

Finally, the rogue cultivator steeled herself and opened the scroll. With one fine finger she looked down the list of names.

There was a tense moment. Chu Ping hoped and silently prayed that she found what she was looking for on her behalf.

Finally, the woman let out a shaky breath and rubbed her eyes. When she put down her hand, Chu Ping could see that she was smiling. Smiling in disbelief at the page.


She stared for a moment more in teary joy. She buried her face in her hands.

“So, he saved you, too, huh? Yaling?” he heard her murmur to herself.

She stood up and rolled the scroll. She saluted Chu Ping and handed him back the scroll.

“She saved you, too, huh? Yaling?”

“Thank you,” she said. Startled at the sudden brisk movement, Chu Ping fumbled with the scroll, “And thank Sect Leader Jiang for me. Forgive me, but I should make my way to Yiling as soon as I can.”

“Of course,” Chu Ping said, long practice continuing the niceties without specific input from his brain, “Miss!”

The woman looked back from where she had already made it to the door. She looked like she was itching to go through, but stayed out of social duty.

“Good luck,” Chu Ping said. She smiled at him and swept through the door.

Chapter End Notes

*Qionglin: Reminder: this is Wei Ning's Courtesy name. It means Beautiful Forest. No one uses it anymore because they either knew him growing up or because he's dead. Wifi is experimenting with what to call WN. Before, he called him, A-Ning which is what WQ calls him. What do you think? Which is better?

Something a bit more light-hearted than last chapter.

So, I hope I’m portraying the LGBTQ+ parts of my characters correctly. I am a heterosexual woman in her twenties who has never had a relationship in her life. Whether that’s because I’m on the low end on the demisexuality spectrum or because I’m very shy in this area, I don’t know. Probably the latter. What doesn’t change is my inability to know, personally, the kinds of challenges that people in this community go
through. Whether those challenges are how people and/or society treat them, deciding to ‘come out’ or even just trying to discover why they are different from everybody else in this area. I have friends, but I’m not going to interrogate them about these things just to try and put them into characters who probably wouldn’t have the same experience anyway. This is Ancient China.

Of course, because it’s Ancient China, you’ll unfortunately have to eventually read some homophobic thoughts and comments. Sorry in advance. Apparently cutsleeve is derogatory? I thought it was just the slang for homosexual like gay (which is old-timey for happy!). Although, even that is used negatively in stupid comments like ‘that’s so gay’ 😔. Since this is a story where the main character falls for another man in an era where such things are not known or accepted, these kinds of things will crop up even in characters you might like. That doesn’t mean they’re bad people, they’re just uneducated. I hope to portray such things both realistically and sympathetically at the same time.

Wifi has gone through a lot more than most people and tends to take the view of ‘if it’s not hurting anybody then I don’t see the problem’. This was the thinking he had about WQ (trust me, he acted scandalised when WQ claimed porn was boring. She just rolled her eyes) and when SSY and SJJ brought up marriage. Seeing how happy SSY and SJJ made each other, his thinking went to ‘this is the opposite of wrong. How can anyone think this is wrong?’

I see Wifi as being more panicked over the idea of a crush than over being bisexual. In the book we see him slowly coming to this realisation that travelling and spending time with LWJ is something he always wants to do, that this person makes him happy. You can kinda see him push it to the back of his mind only to ruminate on it (and fantasize) when he can’t help it. It takes him a long time, and reassurance from LWJ that he’ll follow, help and trust Wifi that he gathers up the courage to tell him. And even then, he does it while LWJ is drunk, causes a misunderstanding and immediately retreats in embarrassment. It’s only when he’s told that LWJ feels the same that he has the courage to say everything. You know, in a hostage situation while Big Brother and Nephew are watching.

Also, is anyone else interested in the fact that when it comes to their relationship, Wifi is the one who wants more romance and non-sexual intimacy which LWJ provides intentionally and unintentionally and LWJ is the one who has more sexual fantasies which Wifi is perfectly open-minded and enthusiastic about?

And we see Wifi asking JYL why people want to get married like he genuinely doesn’t understand. It makes me wonder what other examples he’s had apart from his parents (who he doesn’t really remember) and JFM and YZY.

Thanks to WisteriaNyx and Morphious who finally made me stop hemming and hawing over what to do with Mianmian. Inspiration comes from every part of the world!
I’m baaaaaaaaaaack!

Sorry for the long wait. I had a whole saga to get back to my town from my holiday and I was sick coming back as well. So, in return, you get a bit of a longer chapter. We get a look in on MXY and WWX’s feelings crisis plus someone new.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Someone slumped into the chair opposite Mo Xuanyu at his table in a quiet corner of the Koi Tower library. He jumped, instinctively pulling his notes and calligraphy protectively toward himself before realising who it was and relaxing.

Jin ZiXuan looked exhausted even without Mo Xuanyu needing to see his face. Mo Xuanyu learned that his brother, like most of the Jim Clan, was prideful and took care in his appearance. Normally, Jin ZiXuan would never allow anyone to see him slumped over on a table with his head buried in his arms. Well, except his wife. But Mo Xuanyu learned that Jiang Yanli was generally an exception to most things. She was smiling and polite, mild and non-confrontational, yet somehow managed to baffle most people she talked to.

Mo Xuanyu thought she was right up there with his mother as the nicest people in the world.

“Never,” Jin ZiXuan groaned, “Get into politics.”

He raised his head and blinked wearily at the boy. Mo Xuanyu grimaced in sympathy. The man’s eyes were bloodshot, he clearly hadn’t slept lately, and his hair was messy like he’d put it up in its customary ponytail days ago and hadn’t redone it since.

“Not my interest,” Mo Xuanyu said. He did want to help though. His brother’s state didn’t look healthy.

“Or have kids,” Jin ZiXuan added like he didn’t hear a response.

I don’t think I would, Mo Xuanyu wanted to say, but he managed to hold his tongue. Mo Xuanyu’s mother always said not to be ashamed of anything about who he was. But Mo Xuanyu wanted to have Jin ZiXuan’s approval along with his wife’s and Jin GuangYao’s. He wasn’t sure how Jin ZiXuan would react to the ensuing revelations from such a comment.

“What’s wrong?” Mo Xuanyu asked instead.

“A-Ling won’t stop crying,” Jin ZiXuan said, sounding ready to pull his hair out. Or cry in frustration and exhaustion, “We checked him and everything’s fine, he’s healthy, he just keeps crying. I asked Mum,” Mo Xuanyu raised his eyebrows at the less formal term, his brother really was exhausted, “and do you know what she said?”

Jin ZiXuan sounded a bit hysterical. Mo Xuanyu shook his head, trying to look sympathetic.
“Sometimes babies just cry,” Jin ZiXuan said with a damning tone it was a prophecy ending the world with no one able to stop it, “Sometimes babies just cry! For no reason! For an entire week!”

Ouch. No wonder Jin ZiXuan was exhausted and Mo Xuanyu hasn’t seen him.

“And the elders are muttering about asking those rogue cultivators who imitate Wei WuXian’s demonic cultivation to join LanlingJin as guest cultivators. Father’s in who-knows-what brothel and is barely paying attention to anything here. Jin GuangYao’s off doing something that I don’t know about. The Sect’s reputation is still in the doghouse. No one’s been able to find whoever cursed Jin ZiXun and he’s been locked in his rooms because he’s grown hysterical and he’s tried to go off on his own to the Burial Mounds. I’ve had to try and dig up records that don’t seem to exist or have disappeared for the investigation which is making everything look worse for LanlingJin…”

Jin ZiXuan trailed off, staring into the distance like he was dead inside.

“And you haven’t slept for a week,” Mo Xuanyu said sympathetically.

Jin ZiXuan nodded mechanically, “Not that anyone cares that my son is keeping me up. That’s what wet-nurses are for apparently. ‘If your son’s crying, why should you have to deal with it? That’s what a wife is for!’ Never mind that my wife has had as much sleep as I have and has had several crying fits over A-Ling’s crying. They seem to just expect me to leave her without support to take care of a two-month old. Do you know how many times I’ve had to restrain myself from punching somebody? Or strangle them?”

“Too many,” Mo Xuanyu replied. He personally thought it was commendable that Jin ZiXuan wanted to be there with his son in both the times when the baby was stressful and when it was enjoyable. Even his aunt passed off her son to the wet-nurse whenever he cried for something instead of dealing with it herself when he was a baby. She preferred spending time with him when he was quiet or wanted to play.

“Where’s A-Ling now? With Saozi*?” Mo Xuanyu asked.

“With Mum. A-Li’s taking the opportunity to sleep. I didn’t want to wake her.”

“I could take him in the future if you want,” Mo Xuanyu said with trepidation. A-Ling’s tantrums were not something to scoff at.

Jin ZiXuan grunted which was not a ‘no’.

“What are you doing?” he asked peering at Mo Xuanyu’s work. He picked up a talisman and quirked a tired eyebrow. Mo Xuanyu flushed in embarrassment.

“I’m practicing my talisman-making,” he said. His mother, as a daughter of a wealthy land-owner (if illegitimate), ensured that he knew the six arts of being a proper gentleman*. He’d particularly liked calligraphy and when Mo Xuanyu learned about talisman-making, he’d been fascinated.

As Jin ZiXuan had predicted, Mo Xuanyu was behind compared to his peers even in things like cultivation history. That at least was easier to fix than his late start to cultivating. Mo Xuanyu liked reading. Cultivation was a bit harder to wrap his head around as some things were so ingrained into the cultivation world’s culture that they were known by the children through osmosis and never fully explained by the teachers. There were times when Mo Xuanyu found himself at sea, missing some crucial piece of information that everyone else took for granted.

But Mo Xuanyu wasn’t going to give up on forming a golden core. In the meantime, he had been fascinated by the sheer potential of talisman’s and their myriad of uses. And in their ease of use. He
theorised that he didn’t need to be a strong cultivator as long as he was a well-prepared one then he could do as much as the best cultivators.

“This is good,” Jin ZiXuan said, handing it back.

“Thanks,” Mo Xuanyu said shyly, happy at the rare compliment.

“Let me just… stay a moment. Someone will be looking for me soon,” Jin ZiXuan mumbled. He put his head back down on the desk and slumped over.

Mo Xuanyu waited for a few moments, internally debating. Some sleep, even in an awkward position was better than nothing, he decided. After he was sure Jin ZiXuan drifted off, he carefully got up. He grabbed some already prepared talismans and stuck them on the walls around the little study nook. He was pleased when he managed to channel spiritual power into them to activate them and make them stick to the walls. They were privacy talismans. Mo Xuanyu had intended to put them around his room. There had been a few pranks on the illegitimate boy, but nothing too bad. He had managed to be friendly with a few people. But not everyone was happy with Mo Xuanyu’s presence or simply decided he was an acceptable target to take out their frustrations on. A large part of these frustrations were the effect of LanlingJin’s diminished reputation on the prideful disciples.

Mo Xuanyu looked around in quiet pride. No one would bother Jin ZiXuan here while he took a little break.

Mo Xuanyu settled back down at his table as quietly as he could and began to make new talismans to replace those he just used.

Wei WuXian had a conundrum.

That conundrum was named Lan Zhan.

Wei WuXian kicked a random rock sullenly. Some way behind him, Khan snorted. Wei WuXian ignored the horse and kicked another rock to hit a gnarl on a tree. He didn’t pay attention to his bullseye. He’d left the Burial Mounds that morning on the back of Khan. He hadn’t paid attention to where they were going. Khan had decided the way. Not that it mattered. No matter how far he went, he knew where the mountain was. For instance, he knew that he was some distance north-west of the Burial Mounds.

Ok.

So.

He had some kind of feelings for Lan Zhan. He had spent at least a week and a bit spending time with Lan Zhan and was forced to conclude that, yes, the man seemed to make him happy, even when he didn’t want to be. There were fluttering’s happening inside his chest which may not have been healthy.

The whole thing probably wasn’t healthy.

Wei WuXian kicked a root and didn’t notice when he made it burst in a splatter of splinters. The sight did make Khan pause a bit from where he was following his human.
These weird feelings also didn’t seem to be going away.

And Wei WuXian… didn’t know what to do about that.

Or rather, he had been thinking about it. He’d been thinking about a lot of things. Lan Zhan hadn’t helped with the… sitting and playing with A-Yuan. The duets they played together. Sitting and having meals together. The two of them or the three of them and Lan Zhan eventually relaxing his rule of no talking while eating. Lan Zhan just… living in the Burial Mounds.

It made him think of a lot of things.

Nothing that might come true. Lan Zhan was kind and good. Wei WuXian couldn’t mistake any kindness or courtesy to himself as anything more. Lan Zhan had ensured that Wei WuXian knew that they were barely friends. And that is if Wei WuXian was being optimistic about their relationship.

Besides Wei WuXian wouldn’t be surprised if, among the thousands of antiquated rules carved on that stupid stone, there was something about lust or marriage only meant to be between a man and woman. Even if there miraculously wasn’t, Wei WuXian saw Lan Qiren’s discomfort at Shen Jinjing and Shen Shuyi.

Wei WuXian couldn’t see Lan Zhan being against something that brought joy and no pain. But not being against something didn’t mean he would do something like that himself.

Wei WuXian couldn’t even see Lan Zhan having any kind of relationship at all. He always drew away and ignored anything to do with relationships or discussions on who was attractive.

Maybe Lan Zhan wouldn’t want a relationship with another man. Maybe he wouldn’t want a relationship at all.

Maybe he just wouldn’t want a relationship with Wei WuXian.

Maybe he wouldn’t mind.

Wei WuXian shook his head, feeling a traitorous leap in his chest. He pushed down the hope. Of all the options that was only one among many more likely ones.

It was scary.

Having such tender feelings for someone who was so wonderful was scary. The unknown was scary. To have someone who was so important to Wei WuXian exist in the world who probably didn’t think him as important in return was scary. Having someone be so important to Wei WuXian who might not even accept, possibly even deny, such a position in Wei WuXian’s heart was scary.

How did most people go around feeling like this? How had Jiang Yanli done it?

Wei WuXian had always respected his sister for not breaking down from her beloved’s uncaring treatment of her. But, with this new perspective, his respect shot up impossibly higher.

How had she managed to be so composed after the betrothal had been called off? How had she managed to gain the strength to do kind acts of love for him, knowing he didn’t feel the same way?

These strange feelings Wei WuXian was now forced to take note of made him feel so fragile. How had Jiang Yanli managed to remain so strong in spite of them?
Wei WuXian sighed.

He had one consolation, at least. Lan Zhan was kind. The harshest thing he had ever said to Wei WuXian were the repeated cold assertions that they weren’t close. He wouldn’t trivialise or mock his feelings. The worst Wei WuXian thought Lan Zhan would do, would be to think that Wei WuXian was joking. Even if Lan Zhan did not and could not return such feelings, Wei WuXian hoped that, at the very least, Lan Zhan could accept that these feelings Wei WuXian had for him were real.

If Lan Zhan thought that another man had such feelings for him was disgusting, he probably wouldn’t show it. Most likely, he would be disbelieving that a troublemaker who always teased him had such feelings for him.

Yeah, that was what was unbelievable. That someone like Wei WuXian had feelings for someone like Lan Zhan. As far as Wei WuXian was concerned: the more impossible thing would be someone like Lan Zhan liking someone like Wei WuXian.

No. That really was impossible.

There was a leaden feeling in Wei WuXian’s gut that seemed to come from his chest that wouldn’t go away.

But… shouldn’t he tell Lan Zhan what Wei WuXian thought of him? Surely, he deserved to know, right?

He blinked and looked up. Looked like he had wondered to the edge of a town. It was of middling size; not small, but not noticeably big either. Wei WuXian glanced at Khan who communicated that he was going to find some food.

Wei WuXian nodded and entered the town alone. He meandered, heading to the centre of town where there was a market. Deciding to save his money with an admirable restraint (and lack of appetite from his turbulent thoughts) he decided not to buy food.

Wei WuXian found a place to sit down and tried to think about something else. He was getting good at that. He watched all the people go by.

Truthfully, he’d gone off on his own for a reason. Wei Qing, Wei Ning and even Jiang Cheng had discussed together with Wei WuXian. It was a decision a long time coming. But, if Wei WuXian was going to make a Sect, then he needed disciples.

This was probably the hardest part of making a Sect, at least for Wei WuXian. Other Sect’s, new and old, didn’t really need to be picky. However, Wei WuXian was adamant on the kind of person who would learn about resentful energy (should he call it yin energy?) and so, he would be as picky as he liked, thank-you-very-much. Paranoia had served him well in the past. If anything, the times when bad things happened was because he hadn’t been paranoid enough in his opinion.

Wei WuXian had a vague idea of the kind of people he wanted in his Sect (his Sect!). It was one of the reasons he’d mentioned that the philosophy for YilingWei would be ‘kindness’. A philosophy that had somehow made its way through their settlement without the investigators knowing, with everyone who heard it agreeing whole-heartedly to it.

He wanted someone who was kind (even if it was under pretence), regardless of who or wasn’t watching. He wanted someone who cared. He wanted someone who did what they thought was right. Not because it’s what society or superiors or whatever dictated, but because it would help in some way. Because it would make the life of someone or something or a piece of nature better in
some way, big or small.

It was, sadly, a tall order. Not necessarily because those qualities didn’t exist, but because how could Wei WuXian possibly test for those qualities? And if he did find someone in an appropriate age range, how would he convince them to come to the Burial Mounds? What about their possible families?

Wei WuXian slumped in his seat. Had he done all this in preparation for something that won’t happen?

Wei WuXian gazed blankly at the people going to and fro. He blinked and sat up. He watched carefully.

That was interesting.

Wei WuXian stood, checked his money-pouch and set off.

Li Ying Yue was nine years old. She was currently hiding some trinkets in areas within her house where she knew her uncles wouldn’t look. A hairpin she remembered her father buying for her mother. She could still remember the way he bent down, winked and whispered not to tell her mother. She could remember the way her mother’s eyes had widened in delight at the gift later on. There was written music, carefully flattened so it wouldn’t get crushed, that her mother had been teaching her from. A lacquered box filled with letters from her father to her mother from before their marriage.

Carefully, she checked that her uncles wouldn’t find anything amiss and therefore find the treasure she had painstakingly hidden. Li Ying Yue listened at the door to the room for her uncles before sneaking as quietly as she could to her room. Before, Li Ying Yue didn’t have to sneak around her own house. Before, she didn’t have to hide her belongings, or her parents’ belongings, in case her uncles decided to sell or throw them out.

Before, her uncles would be in their own bigger, fancier house with her grandmother because they weren’t speaking to her mother. Before, her mother and father…

…They’d still be here with Li Ying Yue.

Li Ying Yue rubbed her eyes. The hollow feeling didn’t go away with the liquid from her eyes.

The hollow feeling hadn’t gone away since that man had interrupted their day out and…

Li Ying Yue searched for her money pouch. It was embroidered with stars and moons and was empty. Li Ying Yue frowned. Her stomach felt hollow in a different way. She needed food and she already knew from this morning that there was nothing in the kitchen. There hadn’t been anything new in the kitchen since the last time the maid had restocked before Li Ying Yue’s uncles had fired her along with the manservant and the man who helped take care of the garden. The food had dwindled faster than Li Ying Yue had expected. The little pocket money Li Ying Yue had saved from before had also disappeared faster than Li Ying Yue had expected.

Li Ying Yue took a deep breath. She knew what she had to do. She stood, tied the money pouch to her belt and slipped out of her room, still trying to be silent.
Her uncles often forgot she was there, even though it was her house and not theirs. This was to Li Ying Yue’s advantage. As long as she was quiet, they might not notice her sneaking into the rooms one of them had taken over as if they were his own.

Halfway there, Li Ying Yue paused and listened. Her uncles were usually in her mother’s office where she used to read a lot of papers and did a lot of sums. For some reason, Li Ying Yue’s uncles thought it was her father’s office. Li Ying Yue had once overheard them mention how girly her father’s writing was and wondered how they can mistake their sister’s elegant handwriting to her father’s tiny scrawl.

Sure enough, Li Ying Yue could hear them arguing in that direction downstairs. They often argued over who got what out of Li Ying Yue’s house. Li Ying Yue continued on to the guest rooms and stole some coins from both uncles. She paused on the way downstairs and heard one complaining that they could get more money by selling something now than in keeping it and bartering a price for it later. Whatever it was.

They didn’t notice their niece sneaking out of the house.

Li Ying Yue made her way to the market. She didn’t greet the townspeople the way she used to a year ago. She did her best to ignore their pitying looks and some whispers that started up. They weren’t malicious. They whispered out of concern. None of them knew, even a year later, what was going to happen to her. Li Ying Yue didn’t know either. For a long while, she hadn’t cared either.

She wanted her parents back.

She bought some kind of meat buns from a vendor and gave one word answers to his kind questions. She walked away to find somewhere to eat when she recognised a familiar face.

“Ma Jun?” she asked, shocked.

The older man looked up and blinked in surprise. Ma Jun had been Master Li’s closest friend as well as the family’s manservant. It had been understood that the Li family would take care of the man and ensure he would be comfortable for the rest of his life both for his faithful service and his steadfast friendship. Li Ying Yue would have been delighted. As far as she was concerned, the man had practically been part of the family. He was an uncle to her, in every way the two men squabbling in her house weren’t.

Her biological uncles hadn’t cared one bit. They had fired him and tossed him out of the house that had been as much Ma Jun’s home as it was Li Ying Yue’s.

“A-Yue,” he whispered. He was sitting at the mouth of a thin alley, his clothes were worn and shabby and he looked exhausted. And yet, as he realised who it was before him, his expression brightened. He gazed at her critically. Li Ying Yue knew he was taking in the sloppy clothes that hadn’t been cleaned properly and other little details that showed how the girl has been faring.

Li Ying Yue hugged him.

“I’ve missed you,” she told him. She heard a stomach rumble. It wasn’t her own. She pulled back and blinked at him. Ma Jun looked sheepish. Li Ying Yue had never heard such an undignified sound come from him before.

“Here,” Li Ying Yue said, offering the meat buns without a second thought.
“No, these are yours,” Ma Jun said trying to push them back.

“I can get more,” Li Ying Yue insisted. She’d run out of pilfered money and didn’t have any to get more, but that was her problem.

Ma Jun hesitated and took one, “How have your uncles been treating you?”

“They don’t really bother me,” Li Ying Yue said. She gave Ma Jun another meat bun. Ma Jun frowned at it, “What happened to you?”

“There isn’t an open job in town for my skills,” he said, smiling.

He was obviously hoping that Li Ying Yue wouldn’t notice the hole in that excuse, but as Li Ying Yue’s parents and Ma Jun himself had often observed: Li Ying Yue was a very intelligent child. Very few things got passed her when she was paying attention.

“Why haven’t you travelled further away to get a job? To a bigger town?” Li Ying Yue asked.

“Well…” Ma Jun said, trying to find a satisfactory answer.

“You should go,” Li Ying Yue insisted, “When you get one, we can send letters to each other.”

“What about you?” Ma Jun asked, worry taking over every feature.

“I’ll be alright,” Li Ying Yue said firmly.

Li Ying Yue missed Ma Jun, but she wanted him to have a better life than worrying about her when he couldn’t do anything. Besides she would be alright, if she had anything to say about it, if only for the sake of her only remaining family.

Ma Jun looked at her carefully.

“Your parents would be so proud of you,” he said gently, holding her hand, “I know I am. We all wanted the best things in life for you. Don’t let them take it all away. You’re capable of great things the rest of us would only be able to dream of in any direction you choose. Don’t let disaster, human greed or grief stunt yourself. You are so much stronger than to let such things take over your life, A-Yue. Stretch your wings and live your life. Promise me?”

Eyes wide and teary for the first time in far too long, Li Ying Yue nodded. Her throat was too tight to speak.

After a bit she left, not noticing a black figure come and talk to Ma Jun.

She wondered around a bit before sitting on the damp grass at the edge of town. Li Ying Yue didn’t want to go home yet. Her stomach protested its emptiness.

A hand appeared in front of her face holding a steaming meat bun like the ones she had given Ma Jun. Startled, Li Ying Yue looked up into a stranger’s face. He was handsome with hair that was messy and almost entirely loose. He wore all black with red on the edges. The man was quite tall and Li Ying Yue felt a bit intimidated. He seemed dangerous to Li Ying Yue though she couldn’t quite pin down why. His eyes were pinched in a kind way and he was smiling. There was a black flute with a red tassel tucked in his belt. The flute’s description nagged at something in Li Ying Yue’s memory, but Li Ying Yue was more focussed on the beauty of such an instrument.

“Children should eat,” he said. His voice was smooth and a bit playful. He sat down next to Li Ying
Yue, but still gave her plenty of space. He held out the meat bun further.

Li Ying Yue hesitantly took the bun. She hesitated to bite even though her stomach protested. The man placed a small stack of wrapped buns and placed it between them. He took one and bit into it. Hunger overtaking caution, Li Ying Yue took a small bite of her own. Then she all but stuffed it into her mouth before taking a second one.

“That was a kind thing you did,” the man said after Li Ying Yue started a fifth bun, finally slowing down.

Li Ying Yue made a confused sound with her mouth full.

“Giving your only food to that man – Ma Jun? and telling him to worry about himself more than you,” he said, “Especially since you clearly need to be worried over from the sounds of it.”

Li Ying Yue stared at him with wide eyes. He glanced at her.

“I talked to – is it Ma Jun or have I got the name wrong? I have a rather terrible memory I’m afraid,” he said apologetically.

Li Ying Yue swallowed, “It’s Ma Jun.”

“She speaks!” the strange man chuckled, “Good. He seemed like a good person. I didn’t want to get his name wrong. I also talked to some of the other townspeople while I was looking for you. Everyone’s worried about what might happen to you. Your mother’s family isn’t well liked it seems, but everyone I talked to praised you as one of the sweetest, kindest girls they’d met. Your parents were very well liked, too.”

Li Ying Yue ducked her head down in pleased embarrassment. Her heart gave a pang at the mention of her parents.

“Your dad’s a cultivator, right?” the man asked, “I am as well. Was he teaching you?”

Li Ying Yue’s eyes widened. She looked up at the strange man and examined him. Now that she thought about it, the man did have the otherworldliness to him that cultivators seemed to have. It was just in a more… intimidating or unnerving way.

Li Ying Yue nodded to his question. For some reason, most people didn’t think her father was teaching her cultivation. Something to do with her being a girl. It confused Li Ying Yue. What did her gender have to do with learning cultivation?

“Where’s your sword?” she asked. What kind of cultivator went around without his sword?

“At home. You haven’t practiced cultivation in a while, have you?” the man observed.

Li Ying Yue looked at her feet. It was hard to meditate without her father next to her.

“Do you still want to be a cultivator?”

Li Ying Yue froze before staring up at the man. He finished off a meat bun before leaning back and looking up at her.

“I’m starting up a Sect,” he said, “But, obviously, I need disciples for that. I’m rather picky, I’m afraid, and I wanted to start off with younger disciples to train properly. In fact, apart from my four-year-old son, I don’t really have anyone I’d call a disciple yet. I do live in a community of cultivators,
but they’re all non-combatants and not what you’d call ‘spry’ anymore.”

“What…” Li Ying Yue didn’t understand, “Why are you asking me?”

“Because you put someone else’s needs above your own. Because you need a better opportunity than what you’ve currently got and I want to give you one – even if it’s not a great one. Because, in the rather short amount of time I knew you even existed, you showed yourself as a kind, considerate person.”

“That’s… I…” Li Ying Yue wasn’t normally so ineloquent, but what could one say to such things?

“It’s up to you,” the man said gently, “I live – relatively nearby, I guess? – I can come by in the future if you want to think about it.”

Li Ying Yue curled in on herself and thought.

She did still want to become a cultivator like her dad, just like she still wanted to become a musician like her mum. Her dad told her about a Sect of cultivators who specialised in music so she knew it was possible to become both. This man walked around with a flute instead of a sword so maybe he could help her in that regard as well?

Frankly, all of this seemed too good to be true. A strange man giving her food and asking her to join his future Sect? Offering to teach her to cultivate? In a time when she had… well… she had no one. No one to give advice or help her or support her decision or anything.

“What about my house? My parents’ things?” Li Ying Yue asked. She didn’t want to leave them.

“I have some empty qiankun pouches,” the man said, “We can pack up most of the things you want to take. You’ll have to leave the house though. From the sounds of it, your maternal relatives are taking it anyway.”

Li Ying Yue reluctantly agreed. Even if her maternal grandmother hadn’t entered her house, the woman made her presence felt through her sons who always obeyed her, unlike her rebellious daughter.

“I don’t even know your name,” Li Ying Yue pointed out.

“Ah,” now the man looked sheepish, lifting one hand to rub the back of his neck, “My name’s Wei Ying, courtesy: WuXian.”

For a moment Li Ying Yue just stared at him while his name clanged against so many bells now ringing in her mind.

“The Yiling Patriarch?” she asked, her voice going embarrassingly high. She’d heard of him. Her father had spoken of him when she was young and their small family had been afraid of a large Sect called Wen. He had also been spoken of a few years ago though Li Ying Yue couldn’t remember about what. She knew enough to be disbelieving and recalling…

Oh. Her eyes went back to that beautiful black flute. The ghost flute: Chenqing.

The most terrifying man in the cultivation world waved at her sheepishly.

“I’m Li Ying Yue;” Li Ying Yue said dazedly, forgetting that the man probably already knew that. Her manners had simply kicked in.
“Pleased to meet you!” Wei WuXian – Wei WuXian! – said cheerfully, ignoring her social faux pas.

“You,” Li Ying Yue was trying to get her thoughts together, “Don’t you have some weird way of cultivation?”

Wei WuXian laughed.

“I never heard of anyone referring to it in that way before,” he chortled. Li Ying Yue, realising what she said, wanted to smack herself.

“Forget I asked,” Li Ying Yue said desperately. Wei WuXian simply continued to laugh, lying fully on the ground now.

“Yes, I do,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, clearly ignoring her request, “It’s called demonic cultivation and it’s to do with using the resentful energy produced by ghosts, corpses and similar beings instead of the spiritual energy produced by a golden core. If you’re curious: I may or may not teach you demonic cultivation. If I do decide to teach you, it’ll be way in the future and you can choose whether or not it’s worth it. But learning demonic cultivation isn’t a requirement to be in… my… future sect.”

Li Ying Yue eyed him. He didn’t seem used to talking about his future sect. To be honest, Li Ying Yue didn’t know much about Wei WuXian’s cultivation apart from using his flute to control corpses. The last thing she had ever heard about him was that he had some kind of super fierce corpse as a servant.

“You’re asking me to leave my home,” Li Ying Yue said finally.

“I am,” Wei WuXian agreed, laughter fading away, leaving his gentler expression, “But, let me ask you this, Li Ying Yue: what’s the point of you staying here?”

“I…” Li Ying Yue faltered and looked down again.

Wei WuXian waited. When the girl didn’t say anything, he sighed and stared at the clouds.

“When I was six, my parents went out on a night-hunt… and they never came back,” he told her quietly. Li Ying Yue lifted her head to look at him, but the man kept his eyes on the clouds.

“I kept coming back to the city gates. They were rogue cultivators; we were always travelling, so we were staying at an inn. Over time the innkeeper took the donkey we owned and all their possessions as collateral for letting me stay and feeding me. When there was nothing left, he kicked me out. I still waited for my parents until survival took precedence. Finding food, shelter, something to burn in the winter… I forgot about them until their friend found me a few years later. I went with him because anything was better than where I was. He told me my parents would have wanted me to live as best I can.”

Silence.

Wei WuXian sighed. He hated talking about depressing subjects.

“Li Ying Yue, remember your parents and live well, the way they would have wanted you to. But don’t chain yourself to material things just because you think they’re all you have left. I may not have known your parents, but…” here, Wei WuXian thought of A-Yuan, “as a parent myself, I can tell you that you would have been the most precious thing they thought of. They wouldn’t have treasured your house or their things or this town half as much as they treasured you. If you want to protect their precious things and precious memories, then you have to protect yourself more than anything else.
Live in a way that makes you happy and would make them proud.”

Li Ying Yue’s breath hitched and more tears came to her eyes. She tried to wipe them away.

“Hey,” Wei WuXian said gently, “It’s ok to cry. It’s ok to miss them, you know.”

For the first time in nearly a year, Li Ying Yue broke down crying.

Wei WuXian sat up and gently tugged her to him. She came and cried into his robes. He put his arm around this little girl and looked up at the sky, giving both comfort and privacy.

Had Wei WuXian cried for his parents? He honestly couldn’t remember. He must have, in the days he stayed at the inn without them. He barely remembered anything from those days but an image of the city gates.

“I… I don’t even know why,” Li Ying Yue cried, voice hitching, “That man - cultivator just came and started yelling and then he… he…”

Wei WuXian didn’t hush her or encourage her to talk. She’d tell him as much as she wanted to. Wei WuXian sighed. As unfortunate as it was, sometimes people just did horrible things without anyone understanding ‘why’. From the townspeople’s gossip, the man responsible had been executed by some cultivators for various crimes, including the deaths of the Li’s.

But that wasn’t much of a consolation for the little girl who lost her world.

Li Ying Yue’s eyes had started itching. Despite everything, she had actually felt a bit better after crying, even if she was embarrassed by the wet patch on Wei WuXian’s clothing. He’d simply laughed it off and ruffled her hair among Li Ying Yue’s protests.

After her crying fit, Li Ying Yue felt more like the sure-minded girl she had been with her parents than she had since their loss. Wei WuXian was kind of scary, but he was kind and helped her a lot and had even made her laugh after she apologised to him about his robes. Li Ying Yue made an impulse decision and decided to go with him.

He was right. Was Li Ying Yue just going to cling to her empty house? No. She was going to become a musician cultivator. Even if Wei WuXian proved to be untrustworthy, Li Ying Yue figured she’d just aim between the legs and flee.

She walked with as much purpose as her nine-year-old body could hold up to her house. It was easy to sneak in and she immediately packed her stuff into one of the qiankun pouches Wei WuXian gave her.

Wei WuXian said he would meet her in front of her house after he sent a message ahead. Li Ying Yue wasn’t sure how he would do that. The man had simply winked at her.

Excitement was steadily growing in her. She knew where she was going now. Maybe not the actual place, but she knew what she was going to do.

“You!” a harsh voice snapped. Li Ying Yue jerked up and stared at her older uncle who stood in the doorway to her room. He had barged in without knocking or letting her know.
“What are you doing? Drop that, the Master will provide anything you need,” he said, walking and stepping on some of the clothes Li Ying Yue hadn’t managed to pack yet.

“What Master? These are mine!” Li Ying Yue protested. She didn’t understand what was going on. Unwillingly, panic began to ebb up from inside her.

Her uncle ignored her and grabbed her arm and tried to drag her up. Li Ying Yue slumped over, letting the man take all of her weight. He cursed at her and tried to get her up again. Eventually, he gave up and simply started dragging her across the floor. Li Ying Yue squirmed trying to get her arm free, but she didn’t have the leverage against his tight grip.

When they reached the door, Li Ying Yue decided to whirl around and sink her teeth into her uncle’s arm. He gave a bellow and a curse, but he also instinctively tossed her away. Li Ying Yue landed painfully on something that snapped from her weight. Cringing in pain she scuttled away from the man.

No, I was so close.

Li Ying Yue’s uncles had never hurt her before, but that didn’t mean that it surprised her that they did. The only reason she was surprised at all, was because it was so sudden.

She didn’t know where the big man wanted to take her or who this ‘Master’ was or what he did, but Li Ying Yue knew it wouldn’t be something she would like. Certainly, it would be nothing she would have ever chosen herself.

“You little animal!” her mother’s brother hissed, “You’re just like your bitch of a mother!”

Good.

“What are you doing?” the other brother complained, entering Li Ying Yue’s room.

Even if Li Ying Yue had decided to leave, it didn't chase away the vulnerable feeling of having her room invaded so casually.

“Little bitch bit me!” the older one complained.

“Leave me alone!” Li Ying Yue shouted, standing as tall as she could. This was the first time she’d even really spoke to the men since they had taken over her home.

“Don’t you talk back to us!” the older one raged, “You were better off not talking at all! No one cares about what you say!”

“I’m leaving!” she cried, panic creeping into her voice, despite trying to keep calm, “I’m not going anywhere you want me to. I’m going where I want to go!”

“You don’t get a choice!” the younger uncle snapped. He took a step towards her and raised his hand.

“I say she gets a choice,” a silky voice says behind her uncles. The voice is low, but heard clearly heard by everyone. It was like hearing a soft hiss and realising there was a deadly poisonous snake near your feet. It could lunge at any second if you twitched the wrong way. There would be nothing you could do, except lie there dying after such a creature bit you.

“Shizun!” Li Ying Yue cried. Wei WuXian stood in the doorway to her room. He seemed a bit surprised by her address. He looked at her reassuringly, checking her for damage before turning his
attention to her uncles.

Li Ying Yue’s heart was beating fast. Unlike before when Wei WuXian had an expression of gentle playfulness, now his expression was cold and distant. He looked at her uncles like even laying eyes on them was beneath his dignity.

“Who are you?” Li Ying Yue’s older uncle demanded, straightening to his full height. He was around the same height as Wei WuXian, but broader and more obviously muscled.

“Her new cultivation teacher,” Wei WuXian answered in a tone that was still arrogantly dismissive, “Didn’t you hear her?”

Li Ying Yue wondered if this was the same person who had comforted her before. He seemed so different.

“We didn’t hire you,” the younger uncle growled suspiciously.

Wei WuXian sneered disdainfully, “No one hires me. And if a cultivation teacher were able to be ‘hired’ neither of you would ever have a say in such things.”

Her older uncle stepped forward trying to intimidate Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian barely moved.

“A-Yue,” he said, ignoring the two men, “would you continue packing? Your uncles and I will talk outside.”

Li Ying Yue nodded.

“Now look here…” her older uncle started, reaching out threateningly. Wei WuXian caught his wrist and twisted. With a grunt of pain, her uncle was driven to his knees. Wei WuXian barely moved. When he looked at her other uncle, Li Ying Yue’s breath caught in her chest. His eyes were glowing red. Wei WuXian was smiling, or at least, that’s what her brain said. Her eyes were seeing a slash gape open on her new teacher’s face with white, thin, but oh-so-sharp needles inside.

“Now,” Wei WuXian said faux-pleasantly, “Let’s take this outside, shall we?”

Her younger uncle nodded frantically, eyes wide to the point that Li Ying Yue could see the whites of his eyes all around the dark pupil. The one on the ground grunted. Wei WuXian released him and stood aside, gesturing for them to go out of Li Ying Yue’s room.

“Well?” he prodded when they didn’t move. They scrambled out, trying to look like they weren’t as scared of the man as they really were.

“A-Yue, pack quickly. There’s a horse out the front. His name’s Khan. He’ll have saddle-bags. Pack everything you want to take with you in there. Are you ok?”

“Yes,” Li Ying Yue managed. She looked at him wide-eyed. His expression had returned to normal, eyes dark and smile nice again, “How did you do that?”

“Demonic cultivation has some side-effects,” he said dryly, “Let me go, uh, talk to those pieces of scum who are supposed to be your uncles.”

Li Ying Yue nodded mechanically. Wei WuXian gave one last smile before disappearing. It felt like a giant shadow or creature from a nightmare was prowling the house. Yet, Li Ying Yue didn’t feel afraid. After all, he wasn’t going to hurt her.
Li Ying Yue returned to packing with a fervour. After she was finished with her room, she’d take all of the other things around the house that she’d hidden. If she also packed some things purely to screw over her uncles, well, she had the space.

When she came out the front, she found the horse Wei WuXian talked about quickly. He was a massive creature, black and restless. He settled down when she came close. He even turned so she could have easier access to the mostly-empty saddle-bags. The only thing that couldn’t fit was her father’s guqin.

After waiting for a bit, Li Ying Yue decides to find her new teacher. She found him easily, but as soon as she drew near, she knew something was wrong.

Wei WuXian was not smiling anymore, not even that horrible slash from before. Her uncles’ bodies portrayed how nervous they were and how aggressive they were about it. Wei WuXian simply looked furious. Before she was too close, she heard what the man was furious about.

“You were going to sell her to a brothel?”

Li Ying Yue stopped, clutching the instrument closer to her chest, stunned.

What?

“Well, we aren’t taking care of her!” the younger uncle attempted to shout back, “It’s a waste of time and money! At least we’ll both get something out of this. We won’t have to pay for wasted space and that brat will get food and a roof over her head!”

“And the brothel will get something out of her, I’m sure,” the older one added.

“Oh, yes, very logical,” Wei WuXian said, very sarcastically, “Did you even check what the place you were going to sell her to is even like?”

“What’s the difference? One brothel is alike to another.”

“No, they aren’t. You dim-witted…” Wei WuXian cut himself, breathing heavily. Li Ying Yue made her way over to him. His expression was twisted in fury. She noticed that his eyes were red and glowing again. She would have compared them to glowing coals except they reminded her of blood too much.

“Can we go?” Li Ying Yue asked him. She didn’t want to stay here anymore.

Wei WuXian turned his burning eyes on her, but Li Ying Yue tilted her chin up, trying to show how scared she wasn’t to him.

“You can’t just take her,” her older uncle said, “She’s our…”

“She is not your property for you to sell off,” Wei WuXian cut off.

“It’s my choice and my life,” Li Ying Yue declared to her uncles, “and I choose to go with shizun. I’m not going to any brothel or anywhere else you might think appropriate. Or to whoever gives you enough money.”

She looked at the two men. Li Ying Yue never knew them before her parents died. She’d only seen them from a distance. Her mother had always steered her away with a dark look on her face. But Li Ying Yue had never seen them as family. Now, she certainly never will.
“I’m going to become a musician and a cultivator,” she said firmly, “Do whatever you like with your own lives, but you’re not my family and you’ll never have anything to do with me again. And I, for one, am very pleased about that. Goodbye.”

With that, Li Ying Yue turned and walked away.

“Don’t,” Wei WuXian growled behind her.

“This is kidnapping,” an uncle protested.

“I don’t care.”

“You should pay us for her instead,” the other said.

“All the money in the world couldn’t pay for a child’s life,” Wei WuXian said, “You’ve already got her house. I’m not paying you for a human life. Bother either of us again and I’ll stop being nice.”

Wei WuXian caught up to Li Ying Yue quickly.

“A guqin?” he asked.

“It was my father’s,” Li Ying Yue said, “I have my mother’s flute as well.”

“Alright,” Wei WuXian said, “Make sure you keep a good hold of it during the ride.”

“I will.”

Wei WuXian lifted her up to settle on the horse’s back. There were no reins. The man started walking and the horse followed.

Li Ying Yue settled into the saddle. A new song of her life was starting.

Just as Li Ying Yue thought that, Wei WuXian started whistling a tune. It made Li Ying Yue smile.

Chapter End Notes


2* Six Arts of being a Proper Gentleman according to Ancient China are: Rites, Music, Archery, Equestrianism (or charioteering), Calligraphy and Arithmetic.

I hope you like the First Disciple: Li Ying Yue. Name meaning is Li = black, Ying = reflection, Yue = moon. Basically, black reflection of the moon. Her father was a rogue cultivator and her mother was a musician/singer who was born into wealth. She’s only nine and just starting to move on from grief.
Chapter Notes

Hi, sorry I'm a bit late. The last couple of days had been exhausting and at least one of them was a nightmare. When one of the better parts of your day is a health check-up (including ecg, blood-drawing and finding out how much you weigh) that's just sad.

Next chapter is Yunmeng Lantern Festival!

The city called Yiling was bigger than Luo Qingyang expected. It was not a town people spoke much of in comparison to others, like Lanling. She had made a deal with a pack of merchants who were travelling from Yunneng to Yiling to trade their wares. There was one man among them that had been curious and unafraid to strike up conversation with her. He was respectful of her and they’d talked almost the entire way. Luo Qingyang liked him more than she had expected. He’d invited her to continue travelling with him after she spoke to her cousin. The other merchants had minded the invitation until she took care of a goblin’s nest in their way. After that they decided that they actually didn’t mind and had approved of the invitation from the moment it was uttered.

And now she was here. On the slope towards a mountain that gave most rational people nightmares. The line of wavering corpses was not a surprise, but it did give Luo Qingyang pause. Wei WuXian was kind, but he was also a man pushed into a corner. Just because someone was kind didn’t mean they weren’t capable of being very dangerous. Luo Qingyang did not want to push Wei WuXian (because she wasn’t an idiot unlike some people) and so wasn’t sure what to do exactly.

Thankfully for Luo Qingyang, Wei Ning had taken his duty of guarding the borders of the Burial Mounds very seriously. Thanks to his undead ears and a vague sense of the resentful energy that flowed throughout the mountain, he didn’t need to be near the border to sense that someone was there. As long as he was on the mountain, he could tell if someone was at the border.

When whoever it was didn’t leave or attempt to attack or force their way through the corpse barrier, Wei Ning went to see who it was.

What followed was the most bizarre conversation Luo Qingyang has ever had in her life (including the one she had with Lan Wangji after she left her old sect). After accepting the fact that, yes, Wei Ning was a fierce corpse and that, yes, he was perfectly conscious like a normal living person, Luo Qingyang decided, in the efforts of politeness, to call the fierce corpse by Wei Qionglin. As this was the first time in three or four years someone had referred to him by his courtesy name, Wei Ning almost thought she was talking to someone else.

This habit endeared her to everyone who heard her in earshot. Wei Ning, after hearing her story, decided to let her in and show her to where Luo Yaling was staying. He did not regret it, even after his sister scolded him for being too trusting. The way Luo Yaling and her cousin hugged each other was, Wei Ning felt, worth it.

They then fell into the old age tradition of sitting somewhere with a hot drink and telling each other everything that happened since they saw each other last.

Neither noticed the fuss made by people making a relatively new and small-ish hut available to be
lived in under the direction of an exasperated Wei Qing.

It was not long afterwards that Wei WuXian came home with a new arrival.

Li Ying Yue has been looking around in wide-eyed fascination. It was growing late by the time they returned and Wei WuXian was wondering if Wei Qing was going to hit him with her fan again for doing this unexpectedly.

Li Ying Yue was very curious about where she would be living now. Yiling was bigger than her old town. It looked interesting to explore and it was very crowded. Li Ying Yue didn’t feel the push of the crowd from atop Khan. Her position also gave her the opportunity to see everything much easier than she would have otherwise.

After going through the crowd, they came out of the other end of the city. Wei WuXian explained that they lived on a mountain called the Burial Mounds just outside of Yiling. He told her about how a great battle took place there centuries ago and the resentful energy had seeped into the mountain, especially as no one came to take care of the bodies. Afterwards, because it was considered a cursed place, people began dumping bodies there. Some were just nameless bodies or people who couldn’t afford a funeral. Others were murder victims, tossed in because it was such a convenient place to put such things. All of this, naturally, contributed to the resentful energy that had already existed. The resentful energy grew more potent over time, Wei WuXian explained. He stopped telling her things then, because they had arrived.

“What are those things doing?” Li Ying Yue asked, seeing the corpse boundary.

“They’re just walking corpses to deter anyone from just walking in,” Wei WuXian explained. When he approached, the corpses shuddered and moved aside like they were afraid. Wei WuXian and Khan walked in without a care. Li Ying Yue’s eyes were wide and she twisted around to watch the corpses go back into line, some still shuddering with that odd fear.

“Welcome to the Burial Mounds!” Wei WuXian said grandly, sweeping an arm out to show the blackened trees and dirt path. There were red lanterns hung among the trees that Li Ying Yue felt were really pretty at least. She wondered what they would look like when it was dark and they were lit.

“It’s not much, so if you’re expecting something grand, you’re out of luck,” Wei WuXian continued.

A cry went up, “A-Niang!”

Khan snorted as something small darted down the path and nearly ran into Wei WuXian’s legs.

“A-Yuan!” Wei WuXian said in delight. He picked up the boy with ease, settling him on Wei WuXian’s hip.

Ah, Li Ying Yue thought, this was the son. Who, apparently called the very masculine (if very good-looking) Wei WuXian, Mum. The boy was small, bright-eyed and clearly energetic, chattering to his mother about why he couldn’t come back earlier.

“I had to go slow for Khan and your shijie,” Wei WuXian laughed.

“Shijie?” A-Yuan asked in confusion. It was at that point that he noticed Li Ying Yue riding Khan. She gave a little wave. A-Yuan waved back.

“Hello, my name’s Li Ying Yue,” she introduced herself.
“Hi,” the boy said, eyes wide.

“You should introduce yourself too,” Wei WuXian said.

“Oh, my name’s Wei Yuan,” he said. A-Yuan had never had to introduce himself before his adoption and everyone had simply called A-Yuan, so he hadn’t had any trouble exchanging Wen for Wei. In fact, he’d probably already forgotten that he’d once been called ‘Wen’.

“There’s another lady here, A-Niang. Uncle let her in. She hasn’t done anything except talk to Aunt Luo though,” A-Yuan said. He sounded disappointed that the lady hadn’t done anything interesting.

“There’s another person here?” Wei WuXian sounded sharper at that.

“They said she’s Aunt Luo’s family,” Wei Yuan said. He didn’t seem worried about his mother’s sharper tone. He simply cuddled against his mum’s neck.

Li Ying Yue was distracted by the view of the small settlement. It seemed to have some ongoing construction to one side of a building that dwarfed all the others. It was actually quite nice. Li Ying Yue couldn’t help but be amused and already fond of the buildings with their different sizes and shapes. The little gardens and pot plants were pretty and the small amateur farming fields made the place seem quite quaint. Li Ying Yue liked the colour black (it was part of her name after all) and that seemed to be the dominating colour. The buildings and a lot of the flora were black and a lot of the people were dressed in black too, like Wei WuXian.

There did seem to be a permanent shadow over the place, like the sun was constantly hiding behind the clouds even when it was sunny. But, Li Ying Yue didn’t mind that.

“A-Ying!” a voice called. Li Ying Yue turned to see a pretty young woman with a frown on her face walk towards them.

“Qing-jie!” Wei WuXian greeted, “What’s this about a visitor?”

“She’s Luo Yaling’s cousin, apparently. Came here when she took a look at those lists we handed out and realised that her cousin was alive. Now, what’s this about a new disciple?” the woman said. Her voice seemed stern.

“Oh, right. This is Li Ying Yue,” Wei WuXian said, gesturing at Li Ying Yue who waved, trying not to seem timid, “she’s nine and she’s learning to play the guqin and the flute. She’s pretty smart.” Li Ying Yue nearly blushed.

“A-Yue, this is my older sister, Wei Qing,” Wei WuXian continued.

“Nine? That’s too young to live on their own, A-Ying,” Wei Qing said.

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re going to leave her alone. She can get meals from the community pot and we’ll check in on her every day if we don’t see her. From the sounds of it, A-Yue has been taking care of herself for the past year anyway. Where’s the hut you prepared?” Wei WuXian said, waving off the concerns.

Wei Qing groaned, but didn’t protest further. She led them through the small village to hut on the
further side to the entrance. Wei WuXian set down his son and then helped Li Ying Yue down from Khan. Both he and Wei Qing began unpacking the qiankun pouches and giving them to Li Ying Yue and Wei Yuan to carry inside.

Li Ying Yue looked around the hut that was to be her new home. It was small, especially compared to her former home. There weren’t that many rooms. But there were table and chairs, a vanity, several shelves and cupboards and a bed already installed. The bed looked freshly made up. There were flowers in a misshapen pot on the table that Li Ying Yue couldn’t recognise, but were red and looked and smelled pretty.

It might be really small, but after the yawning abyss that was her former home, Li Ying Yue certainly didn’t mind. She was a bit worried about where to put all the stuff she had collected though. A-Yuan walked through and put the qiankun pouch on the table with the flowers.

“Do you like them? Auntie Ai let me help pick them!” A-Yuan said, pointing at the flowers.

“Thank you,” Li Ying Yue said, smiling.

“Do you want help unpacking, A-Yue?” Wei WuXian asked, “I have to go check out the visitor, but Qing-jie and A-Yuan can help.”

“I want to help! Can I help?” A-Yuan asked excitedly.

“If you like,” Li Ying Yue said.

Wei WuXian grinned, “I’ll be back later.”

Li Ying Yue looked around her new house. Wei Yuan frowned when nothing came out of the qiankun pouch and opened the ties a bit more

“Wow,” Li Ying Yue said quietly, amazed. She couldn’t believe it.

Behind her, there was a thump and clatter as Wei Yuan succeeded in overturning the qiankun pouch and was promptly buried under a pile of clothes as large as he was.

“You look familiar,” Wei WuXian declared to his visitor. He frowned, head tilting, eyes squinted as he tried to figure out why the woman was familiar.

The woman couldn’t help but sigh in exasperation. She’d heard things about Wei WuXian and his memory, or lack of. Luo Yaling, looking very happy, giggled behind her hand. The woman was dressed plainly, but she was clearly a cultivator. She actually looked quite travel-worn.

“A rogue cultivator?” Wei WuXian wondered. He didn’t think he’d ever really met a rogue cultivator. Just sort of seen them at events. They were like a part of the background, which seemed rude. Rogue cultivators, because of the lack of support from a Sect, were often highly skilled, but often didn’t have the polished and varied skills or access to tools that a Sect Cultivator has. Plus, there was a bit of a prejudice against them among the Sects.

“I am now,” the woman confirmed, “I wasn’t when we met.”

“Oh,” Wei WuXian said, blinking. It didn’t narrow it down, unfortunately, “What happened?”
The woman was pretty, she did look a bit like Luo Yaling actually, though her features weren’t as delicate as her cousin’s. Her features didn’t look that attractive right now, however, as they twisted into a scowl.

“They believed that because I was a woman, I was incapable of thinking logically or reasonably. They thought I was just a ‘sentimental woman’. When they were the ones just jumping on the gossip bandwagon and weren’t actually trying to ascertain the truth,” she said bitterly.

“Oh, WuXian cringed in sympathy. He had obviously never encountered such a thing, but he could see sympathetic ‘I’ve been there’ looks from every woman in the vicinity. It sounded horrible and confining in the way only social constructs could create.

“My name is Luo Qingyang, but my friends called me Mianmian,” the woman said.

For a moment Wei WuXian continued staring at the rogue cultivator in confusion, clearly digging through his memory. Finally, he hit his open palm with the side of his fist in triumph.

“Mianmian! From the XuanWu caves,” Wei WuXian nearly shouted in accomplishment, “I’m glad you came out of that, and the whole war, fine. Small world though.”

“It really is,” Luo Yaling said, “My cousin said you prevented her from getting burned. She hadn’t mentioned your name at that time so I didn’t realise it was you. She thought you might have died.”

“I’m glad you helped Yaling,” Luo Qingyang said, “None of us knew what happened to her.”

“I’m happy to help,” Wei WuXian said, then he changed the subject, “Are you planning on staying for a few days?”

“Can I?” Luo Qingyang asked. She didn’t want to be rude, but she also didn’t want to leave Luo Yaling just yet.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian said.

“Qingyang can stay with me and my husband,” Luo Yaling said firmly, “We’ve been getting our house expanded anyway before the Chang’s house became high priority.”

Everyone was set on expanding or building an entire new house for the Chang couple and having it ready and baby-proof before the baby came. Considering that everyone only found out about the pregnancy a few days ago (which felt a lot longer) it would probably be done well before the due date unless one of their budding architects went overboard on the designs.

“Mianmian,” Wei WuXian started.

“You can just call me Luo Qingyang, you know,” Luo Qingyang said.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian acknowledged, “Anyway, Mianmian, are you planning on staying as a rogue cultivator or will you eventually join up with a Sect?”

Luo Qingyang sighed in aggravation, “On my own. I don’t think I can adhere to another Sect’s rules and guidelines anymore. It’s actually quite freeing, being on my own. Even with the inherent danger of travelling and going on night-hunts by myself.”

Being a rogue cultivator was a dangerous path. Most cultivators tended to prefer going in groups or as partners so they can watch each other’s backs during a night-hunt. It was extraordinarily useful to simply have someone else there. It was why Wei Changze joined Cangse Sanren’s night-hunts
despite not being good at cultivation, instead of staying back and looking after a young Wei WuXian.

There were people like Lan Wangji who went night-hunting on their own. But, as part of a Sect, he simply updates his Sect on where he is or where he’s going and if no one hears from him, the Sect Leader sends out a squad of cultivators to find out what happened. It means that the job is never left unfinished and either the remains are retrieved, if there are any, or the cultivator is rescued and given medical attention. It’s a very useful safety net.

For those who are associated or joined a Sect, it means there are never cases like Wei WuXian’s. Where no one even noticed the deaths until months later and, by then, the new orphan has disappeared. Most children of rogue cultivators who are left behind often remain alone. Wei WuXian knew exactly how lucky he was that Jiang Fengmian cared enough to notice that his friends weren’t sending letters like usual. That he cared enough to investigate what happened and then try to find his friends’ son. Even if it had taken Jiang Fengmian years to track down Wei WuXian, Wei WuXian was profoundly grateful that he had not stopped and had continued until he had succeeded.

Hmm… Wei WuXian had an idea. Now, who to talk to? Oh, wait. He was still in the middle of talking to someone.

“I’m glad you like it so much. I hope you’ll come by and visit us here,” Wei WuXian said, glancing at Luo Yaling, “I know your family will appreciate it.”

“I’d be happy to,” Luo Qingyang said.

“I’ve been making tokens for people to be able to come in and out of the Burial Mounds. If you’re staying for a while, I’ll have time to make one for you. I’m hoping to succeed before Yunmeng’s Lantern Festival,” Wei WuXian said.

“Isn’t that in a few days?” Luo Qingyang asked. Having been in Yunmeng recently, she could remember talk and notices about it.

“Yes.” It was another thing on his to-do list.

Wei WuXian waved and went to look for someone. He had been intending to go back and helping Li Ying Yue unpack, but he did have things to do before he forgot. Wei Qing was helping Li Ying Yue with A-Yuan. He needed to talk to Shen Shuyi at some point to talk about lesson plans. But while it wasn’t yet evening, he should go do errands in Yiling.

Normally Wei WuXian went to Yiling with some company. Wei Yuan and Wei Qing were busy, Luo Yaling was occupied and most of the others still didn’t like leaving the safety of the Burial Mounds. So, Wei WuXian went to find the one person who would accompany him.

“Ningning!” Wei WuXian called in delight. The fierce corpse would probably look mortified if his face wasn’t stuck the way it was. Wei WuXian could still kind of tell, “Come with me to town!”

“Eh? Why?” Wei Ning was confused and dismayed, “Are you going to continue calling me that?”

“Relax,” Wei WuXian said in his most reassuring voice. He slung his arm around hid dead adopted brother and steered him toward the village. “I call Jiang Cheng, ‘Chengcheng’, so it’s not just you. And I’m sure you can deal with it better than he can.”

“You mean: without threatening violence?”

“Paperwork? Excessive violence.”

“Ge, what are we doing?” Wei Ning was confused. It was a normal state around Wei WuXian.

“Setting up a mailbox!”

Wei Ning blinked. He didn’t need to blink, but he found it a good way to get his confusion across.

“We have Mulan…”

“This is for situations that Mulan can’t cover,” Wei WuXian said, “Besides, I told this guy who is apparently a pseudo-uncle or something for our newest resident that he just had to put Burial Mounds in the address with Yiling and it should get here. That way Li Ying Yue can keep in contact with her only remaining family!”

Wei WuXian looked very pleased with himself for this idea. Wei Ning was also becoming excited at this.

“That sounds lovely!” Wei Ning said earnestly.

Wei WuXian nodded graciously, “And now, with Mianmian, we have another person who can use it to keep in contact with her family! Since she’s a rogue cultivator, it’d be hard for Mulan to find her since she wonders around so much.”

It took them the rest of the evening to go over the paperwork for a mailbox. Wei WuXian didn’t know what was so difficult about it. Everything that can be labelled ‘Burial Mounds’ goes into the box. Some allocated person (probably Luo Yaling) picks it up and delivers the letters exactly to their addressed recipient. Why all the paperwork?

At least he’d had time to check over the prototype for his new tokens, even discussing it with Wei Ning. He figured he’d take it for a test run when they got back.

That was exactly what they did. He checked in on Li Ying Yue and A-Yuan. A-Yuan was escorted to his grandmother’s, Li Ying Yue was taken by Shen Jinjing to get dinner and Wei WuXian convinced Wei Qing to be his test dummy (he was careful not to use those words though).

“So…” Wei Qing eyed the piece of black jade suspiciously, “You want me to just walk in?”

“That’s the idea,” Wei WuXian said, nodding.

“And if your freaky corpse security line gets aggressive?”

“I’ll be ready to play Chenqing if anything goes pear-shaped,” Wei WuXian reassured, holding up the black flute in demonstration, “Mulan and Shang will be keeping an eye on things too.”

Mulan cawed from a branch above them. Her chest was puffed up in importance. They were outside the boundaries of the Burial Mounds, far enough away that Wei WuXian’s aura couldn’t affect the corpse line, but close enough for them to hear the flute.

Wei Qing sighed, “You are the only one I really trust,” she told the horse. Shang whinnied smugly.

“Hey!” Wei WuXian objected.

Wei Qing merely sighed, threatened Wei WuXian some more, and finally walked up to the barrier. The carved black jade was in her hands. Mulan took flight. As Wei Qing came closer to the shambling line, Wei WuXian noticed a good sign. Something Mulan confirmed.
When someone comes up to the barrier of walking corpses (which aren’t walking at the moment) the shambling corpses become focussed on them. They’re obedient to Wei WuXian. They’ll stay still and not attack until someone attempts to get through. But they can’t help but notice the warm flame of life in someone and they don’t have the brain power (they don’t have any brain power, actually) to keep what they’re noticing a secret.

But these corpses haven’t seemed to notice Wei Qing even when she’s right in front of them. Good. Wei WuXian had worked on the black jade tokens so they would make someone have a signature matching the Burial Mounds. This meant that, as far as the mountain and anything on it was concerned, whoever held on to that token was a part of the Burial Mounds, and therefore, belonged there.

Wei Qing squeezed through the corpses with no trouble. She turned around and waved. Wei WuXian let out the breath he’d been holding and lowered Chenqing. It worked. Now for the next test.

Wei Qing came back over, examining the token.

“How are we going to wear these, anyway?” she asked.

Wei WuXian picked up Suibian, heart panging. Even though Suibian was with him, Wei WuXian still felt a sense of loss that he did his best to brush aside.

In response to Wei Qing’s question, Wei WuXian shrugged.

“On your belt?” he suggested, “Or we could tie it to your hair. We can attach some red tassels or something.”

Wei Qing hmm’d, thoughtful.

“Here you go,” Wei WuXian said, handing her his sword hilt-first.

Suibian was the only cultivation sword in the Burial Mounds. Everyone’s sword had been confiscated from them at the end of the Sunshot Campaign. Even when they had been confined to their small corner of Qishan and still going on night-hunts, no-one had been permitted to have their cultivation sword back. At this point, many had accepted that their swords were lost forever. Probably even melted down.

There had been a few tears at that. Just one more thing over many to cry over.

Wei WuXian had been having extensive talks with Luo Chen who had been a sword maker. Thanks to the things they had taken from the Nightless City and their own resources, Luo Chen believed he could make new cultivation swords for any that wanted them. And, more importantly, for their future disciples. But, first, they had to construct a forge. A process that was ongoing. Luo Chen turned out to be meticulous in what he wanted for his forge.

In the meantime, they had Suibian.

The next test they were doing would be flying on a cultivation sword into the mountain. It wouldn’t be considered polite. The same way just flying into the middle of Lotus Pier or Cloud Recesses would be considered rude. But it would be useful for emergencies. When people needed to be flown straight to the healer, for example.

Or like when Lan Wangji had taken Wei WuXian the night A-Ning had finally awoken.
They were going to see if the barrier of resentful energy would stop them while they had the token. It shouldn’t. Wei WuXian had even communed with the Burial Mounds on the matter. But they still had to test things.

“What the…?” Wei Qing muttered, sounding baffled.

“Qing-jie?” Wei WuXian asked in confusion. She hadn’t even unsheathed Suibian yet and she was frowning at his sword which made Wei WuXian feel vaguely offended and defensive.

“It’s stuck,” Wei Qing said, demonstrating. Wei WuXian could see her attempting to pull out the sword, but it didn’t budge. Wei WuXian frowned as well.

“When did you last pull it out?” Wei Qing asked.

“Not that long ago. Here, let me try,” Wei WuXian offered.

The sword slid out easily.

“What? I swear that was stuck tight!” Wei Qing exclaimed examining the blade. Wei WuXian shrugged and sheathed it again. He handed it back to her, hilt-first. Wei Qing eyed him then the sword in suspicion. Instead of taking the sword, she tried to unsheathe it while Wei WuXian was still holding it.

It didn’t budge.

Wei Qing tugged again, nearly pulling Wei WuXian off his feet. Mulan wondered if they were playing tug-o-war. Shang decided he wanted in if they were.

“We’re not playing, Mulan,” Wei WuXian grunted, “What is going on?”

“Maybe, your sword has sealed itself,” Wei Qing suggested.

Wei WuXian laughed. A sword sealing itself was something that happened once a century, usually to the best of swordsman. It had been something a teenage Wei WuXian had fantasised about: to be among the ranks of those cultivators considered to be the very best swordsman. It was a fantasy Wei WuXian had given up.

“It can’t have sealed itself,” Wei WuXian disputed, “I’m kind of missing something for that.”

“I don’t think this has to do with that,” Wei Qing said, “From what I know, the sword spirits are the ones who decide about sealing. If they are a powerful enough blade with a powerful enough spirit and, depending on their wielder… It might not have anything to do with you now. It might have to do with how you and your sword developed prior to… everything.”

Wei WuXian was quiet. Wei Qing had some good points. Wei WuXian just struggled to believe it. The last time he and Suibian had been proper partners had been when he’d been forced to give up the sword to Wen administrators and musclemen at their ‘training camp’. It wasn’t a good memory.

Wei Qing examined his face.

“We’ll have to do the test another way,” she said, “Perhaps, we can organise Jiang Wanyin to come over and be useful.”

Wei WuXian was too wrapped in thoughts to even smile at the way Wei Qing worded things.

“He’s going to want to know why,” Wei WuXian pointed out.
“We’ll tell him that your sword has sealed itself and that you can’t be the tester for reasons that are true.”

“And if he wants to try Suibian himself?” Wei WuXian asked quietly, looking up at the mountain and its mist.

“I’m sure one of us can deflect him,” Wei Qing said, “He’s easily distracted.”

“Yeah, he is,” Wei WuXian agreed, “But he doesn’t forget either. He might pick up on something eventually.”

“Or he might not. Or we can deflect it indefinitely. It’ll be fine,” Wei Qing attempted to reassure. Despite being a doctor, she wasn’t very good at the whole ‘reassuring tone’ thing. She was better at giving confident facts.

“Besides,” Wei Qing added, “He might not expect me or A-Ning to be in on anything to do with keeping secrets. Especially, if we can use A-Yuan in the distraction.”

“Got some ideas already?” Despite himself, Wei WuXian had to smile.

“Like I said: he’s easy to distract,” Wei Qing said, sounding a bit too smug.

They made their way back to their settlement.

“You know, we don’t even know for sure if Suibian’s sealed,” Wei WuXian tried, “It could just be something wrong with the sheathe or something.”

Wei Qing just gave a look that clearly said how unlikely she felt that was. Their seemed to be an undercurrent of Wei Qing’s particular brand of pity. It just made Wei WuXian want to sulk.

“We can get Uncle Chen to take a look,” Wei Qing offered tactfully.

Wei WuXian sighed. He looked down at the sword. Most days, he hated looking at it. It was only because Wei WuXian hated neglecting his faithful blade's upkeep more then being reminded of what he lost, that the sword was still kept in top condition. Wei WuXian barely had any time at all with Suibian as his partner. In fact, soon Wei WuXian would be a demonic cultivator for longer than he had fought with Suibian.

That was… a sadder thought than Wei WuXian expected it to be.

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Jiang Yanli,

I’m sorry you haven’t been getting much sleep. A-Ling should be calming down soon? He can’t go on forever. If it helps, one of the women here is now pregnant and everyone is stressed about it. Or elated. Or a weird combination of both.

At least the golden peacock is helping? And Madam Jin?

I hope you’re getting enough sleep for the Lantern Festival. It’s been far too long since we’ve celebrated. I’m glad that you’re bringing Jin Ling (even if it means bringing said peacock). Maybe the pretty lights will cheer him up?
I decided that I’d bring a few people along with A-Yuan. Don’t worry, A-Yuan and I will still be with you for most of the festival. They’ll be just doing their own thing at the festival. I’ve already asked Jiang Cheng about accommodation. They’re the youngest people here and I believe that they should have the chance to go out and do some fun things without worry or fear.

I have something to give everyone as well. It’s a surprise.

There’s a new resident at the Burial Mounds. A nine-year old girl named Li Ying Yue. She’s going to be my disciple. Aunt Shu is already testing her, so we know what level she’s at. She’s sweet. Good with A-Yuan, happy to help with whatever needs doing (although she isn’t allowed in the kitchen anymore. A cook she is not) and shaping up to be a phenomenal singer and musician. I can’t understand how her two uncles were going to sell her to the nearest brothel just because they cared more for money.

Sorry, that was a depressing turn. At least I took her back to the Burial Mounds with me? She seems very happy here as far as I can tell.

Oh, well. You can meet her soon.

I’m looking forward to seeing you again! And A-Ling as well.

See you soon,

Wei WuXian

Jiang Cheng,

Hey, all set for the festival? It’s been far too long since I’ve attended. It was always the highlight of the year. Hopefully A-Ling doesn’t cry throughout the entire thing. A-Yuan has been interested in seeing A-Ling again as well.

I have a surprise for you and A-Jie as well.

We were wondering if it was possible to get some accommodation? Two rooms with one bed (for couples) and one room with two beds? There’s a couple of people who I thought would enjoy the festival. The younger residents mostly. One is my newest disciple. She’s a nine-year-old girl that already shaping up to be a fantastic musician/singer.

Anyway, I heard you helped out Mianmian. If you’re interested, she made it ok and had a heartfelt reunion with her cousin (or so I was told, I wasn’t there for it). I’ve figured out a way for them to keep in contact without telling Mianmian about Mulan. Not that Mulan would have worked. I mean, how would Mulan be able to track Mianmian? Or know when Mianmian wanted to send a letter or something?

Also, I found out you’ve been spoiling my bird. What’ve you got to say, huh?

(doodle of a jolly man laughing)(another doodle of someone (most likely Wei WuXian) dancing ridiculously)

I am so excited for the festival! I’ll see you soon!
Wei WuXian

Wei WuXian, you idiot!

It is literally the week of the festival! Which has people from all over visit! Accommodations are already packed, and you want me to try and find three extra rooms?! Are you a dumbass?

What am I saying: of course, you are!

Thankfully, for you, I have some rooms available at Lotus Pier. Just keep from reminding me where these people came from. Bow down and thank me for my graciousness, heathen.

I’m glad that woman made it to you. Did you know she stood up for you at the Discussion Conference that happened after Qiongqi Path (the first incident)? I’ll tell you about it later when I see you.

You have no idea how busy I am. I kind of want to hit my head until I fall unconscious. That way I can sleep without stressing over all the things that haven’t been done yet.

See you soon,

Jiang Cheng

P.S. I don’t spoil your damn bird. Where did you get that idea?
Yunmeng Lantern Festival

Chapter Notes

Hey! It’s been a while. Same thing unfortunately. I thought August would be a slower time for work, but apparently not.

Here’s the Yunmeng Lantern Festival. We’ll be heading to a new year for our characters in Cradle. I’m hoping to have a chapter or a section of a chapter devoted to Yunmeng Lantern Festival to help mark the years and the way things have been/will be changing. That’s what Wei WuXian will be contemplating about at the end of the chapter at least.

Yunmeng’s Lantern Festival was the biggest event in all of the surrounding area. It was prime tourist season and a holiday where families came together to make their lanterns and send them off. The streets had lanterns of every size, colour and shape strung up. Merchants created booths along all the main roads and along the river with everything for sale from food to crafts to ready-made lanterns (those were usually for tourists who only came for the novelty).

Wei WuXian had been enamoured from the first Lantern Festival he had experienced. Jiang Cheng had been delighted in showing the then smaller boy around all of Yunmeng. There were many places to find with all kinds of lanterns, some only the locals knew. The two boys had sat with Jiang Yanli as she patiently taught young Wei Ying how to make the paper lanterns and helped Jiang Cheng with his.

Every Lantern Festival is a cherished memory for Wei WuXian. He almost teared up at being able to walk these streets again at such a time. Not only that, but he was sharing these traditions with Wei Yuan and even Wei Qing, Li Ying Yue, the Xia’s and the Shen’s. Wei WuXian had originally invited the Luo’s, but with the arrival of Mianmian, they had decided to gracefully bow out and give their place to Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing.

Wei WuXian had spent most of yesterday teaching them how to make the lanterns and had packed all of them carefully. The only sad part about this was that Wei Ning wasn’t going. Wei Ning had been discomforted at the idea that the Burial Mounds would be left all-but unguarded and also discomforted by the thought of the crowds. As such, he volunteered to stay behind and had to try and convince Wei WuXian to let him. Unable to push when Wei Ning was making a request for himself for once, Wei WuXian had simply sulked.

In the end, Wei Qing convinced her youngest brother to join in on the lantern making and Wei Qing would release his lantern along with her own. That mollified the both of them.

Wei Yuan and Li Ying Yue were wide-eyed with awe and excitement as they approached. Music and laughter were easily heard from the riverside city. It was much brighter than other places they had seen at this time of the night. All the lanterns everywhere were lit and the colourful streamers that were attached blew in the wind. Combined with the merchant stalls and the festive clothes everyone was wearing made the place quite a sight. Li Ying Yue was wearing one of her nicer outfits that she had packed. Wei Qing and Wei WuXian were wearing the same thing they had worn at That Discussion conference and the others were also wearing either the same black robes or other clothes commissioned from Chang Ting.
They left the horses outside and Mulan flew ahead of them. Wei WuXian made sure to hold Wei Yuan’s hand, remembering when he’d lost the child in a crowd previously. Even if it had led to a happy evening, Wei WuXian did not need that panic attack tonight, thanks. Wei Qing had volunteered to look after Li Ying Yue despite her attempting to convince them that she was a big girl and didn’t need to be minded like a child. The idea was universally vetoed.

Now Li Ying Yue looked like the nine-year-old she was, staring around with wide sparkling eyes at everything. Wei Yuan was the same, the boy was actually bouncing. Wei WuXian had to keep his attention on holding onto the boy’s hand or Wei WuXian felt he would bounce off into the crowd. Even the adults (and he used that term loosely with Xia Bolin) were staring around with in some form of excitement or pleasure. The eternally cynical Xia Bolin was even looking excited and Shen Shuyi was even obviously smiling!

Even though Wei WuXian knew he should meet up with Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli at Lotus Pier, he couldn’t help but get distracted by the delicious smells from the food booths. Eventually, he reasoned that he could get something to eat while they headed toward the Pier. Unable to decide, Wei WuXian asked A-Yuan what he wanted to eat.

“That!” Wei Yuan pointed after staring around a while. Wei WuXian nodded. Before they got in line they turned and waved to the others. Wei WuXian and Wei Yuan would be spending time with the Jiang’s while the others would be wondering around the festival looking at wares and playing games.

In the end, their journey to Lotus Pier was delayed. Many vendors recognised Wei WuXian and were eager to talk to him again. Wei WuXian had to assure people that, no, he hadn’t forgotten Yunmeng; yes, he would visit again; no, his fight with Jiang Cheng wasn’t that bad; no, he wasn’t planning to take over the world. Could you imagine Wei WuXian in charge of the world? He’d rather kill himself. That sounded like torture.

Wei Yuan was entertained for a while with his food and watching all the colourful things go by, but he soon became bored when his food was gone, and his mother kept saying the same kind of things to a bunch of different people. He almost went off by himself, but his previous experience and Wei WuXian’s tight grip stayed him. Instead, he tugged on Wei WuXian’s robe.

“Aren’t we going to see Uncle Jiang now?” he asked plaintively.

Wei WuXian looked down at the boy in surprise before laughing.

“A-Yuan has spoken! Excuse me everyone,” Wei WuXian said. He picked A-Yuan up which the child was happy with. He saw a lot more from this height.

“So,” Wei WuXian said, eyes sparkling in the lights, “Why call him ’Uncle Jiang’?”

Wei Yuan shrugged, “He didn’t tell me what to call him. I have Uncle and Aunt and Yima and Yifu. Someone told me I shouldn’t call him Jiujiu so he’s Uncle Jiang.”

Wei WuXian laughed again, “If he asks you to call him something else, you will, right?”

“Yes,” Wei Yuan nodded, “Is something wrong with calling him Uncle Jiang?”

“I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

They managed to avoid getting caught by people and made it to the entrance of Lotus Pier. It was a big wooden gate. The dark wood was charmingly elegant especially combined with the purple lotus shaped lanterns. The disciples on guard duty (who must either be on short shifts, volunteers or people who annoyed Jiang Cheng) straightened up with wide eyes at Wei WuXian’s approach.
“Hello,” Wei WuXian said jauntily to their frozen expressions. The man waltzed into the pier with his son on his hip before the guards could react.

“This used to be my home,” Wei WuXian told A-Yuan in a softer tone than usual.

A-Yuan blinked and looked around. It was evening, the sun almost fully set, and it made everything dark. The majority of the lanterns were outside or in the common areas. Lotus Pier was elegantly sophisticated. The building couldn’t be considered opulent in any way even if it was obviously wealthy. The dark wood and purple décor were soothing.

It was a very nice place.

“Do you miss it?” A-Yuan asked. Do you want to live here instead? He didn’t say.

A-Yuan was young enough not to know the full story, but he knew that everyone thought that they had taken Wei WuXian away from something. Everyone felt bad about it. A-Yuan never understood it. Wei WuXian never seemed unhappy where he was. The closest A-Yuan had seen was with that song he wrote, but even that didn’t seem to have anything to do with their home or anything.

But A-Yuan looked around this place as his mother walked through the halls and realised that this was the man’s home. It was home to Wei WuXian the same way home to A-Yuan was black bamboo and mismatched houses and the red, red blossoms in the trees.

“I miss it,” Wei WuXian said, ignorant of his son’s revelations. He looked around and sighed, full of nostalgia.

“But I couldn’t live here anymore,” Wei WuXian continued. Wei Yuan stared at his face, “I… outgrew Lotus Pier, I guess.”

“Outgrew?” A-Yuan asked in confusion, tilting his head.

“Yes,” Wei WuXian nodded, “And the Burial Mounds had been calling me home. Honestly, even if it hadn’t been for you and your relatives, I probably would have left sooner or later anyway.”

It was a hard thing to admit. Growing up, Wei WuXian had committed himself to serving YunmengJiang for the rest of his life. To stay by Jiang Cheng’s side and bring the Sect what prestige he could.

But then the Sunshot Campaign erupted. After everything that happened, Wei WuXian found he didn’t quite fit in with the YunmengJiang that Jiang Cheng had painstakingly rebuilt. No matter how much Wei WuXian tried, he still felt like the Lotus Pier that had been his home, where he had belonged, was the one that had burnt down with all of his fellow disciples, Madam Yu and Uncle Jiang.

Wei WuXian had tried to find his place in the rebuilt Lotus Pier. He had tried not to let on to Jiang Cheng or Jiang Yanli how restless and confined he had been feeling because he still wanted to be with them and the Sect. Besides, Jiang Yanli would have looked sad and Jiang Cheng would have taken it as a criticism on how he had rebuilt the Sect and that wasn’t true at all. Jiang Cheng had done a truly daunting task admirably. Wei WuXian had simply grown too wildly outside of the sect to be comfortable in the cultivated garden of YunmengJiang.

And the Burial Mounds had been calling him. Not demanding, more of a wistful prayer, like a child makes. Wei WuXian had left with such a large part that used to belong to the Burial Mounds. The Mountain couldn’t forget it or the man who had saved it from the crushing weight of pain. Wei WuXian had resisted. There was nothing for him at the Burial Mounds except death and painful
memories. What could he do with a mountain spirit anyway?

Combined with the rumours that LanlingJin had been perpetuating, it had felt like the world had been conspiring to get him to leave. When Wen Qing came to him for help and Wei WuXian saw Qiongqi Path, he finally accepted it.

“So… you’re happy at home? The Burial Mounds?” Wei Yuan asked.

“Yes,” Wei WuXian said, “Why all the questions?”

Wei Yuan shrugged, embarrassed, and shoved his head into Wei WuXian’s shoulder.

Wei WuXian carried the child through the familiar corridors, past familiar rooms and unfamiliar disciples staring, wide-eyed, at them. Eventually, he came to the actual pier and had to stare at the river gleaming silver moonlight, dotted with warm yellow lanterns in various shapes. Wei Yuan had never seen such a large body of water before and was in awe. Wei WuXian smiled at the familiar, comforting sight and continued to carry the awestruck child to their destination.

It was a seating area far out on the wide river. It was big enough for a small party. It was a favourite place for most of the family. Wei WuXian could still wistfully think of Madam Yu sitting there like a queen criticising something or another that a disciple did inadequately; Uncle Jiang, gently amused and rebutting his wife by pointing out things a disciple improved on in a rare tease; Yinzhu and Jinzhu flanking Madam Yu or in a corner, giggling or making sly comments; young Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli and Wei Ying putting the last touches on their lanterns.

There were not that many people there now. Only three figures and a bundle.

Wei WuXian walked up the long wooden walkway quickly. He wanted to get rid of these maudlin thoughts. This was his first Lantern Festival without the four adults. It was the first Lantern Festival for A-Yuan and A-Ling. Wei WuXian was determined not to be overemotional.

Wei Yuan was staring at the water, afraid to fall in. The river at home was a trickling brook compared to this river.

“A-Xian!” Jiang Yanli waved him over. She didn’t look that sleep-deprived, so it looks like she’s gotten some sleep. Gentle excitement lit her features. Jin ZiXuan grunted in greeting, standing and leaning against a pole. He had been staring out over the water like many of them had done before.

“ Took you long enough!” Jiang Cheng snapped at him. Mulan was perched on the table in front of him.

Wei WuXian laughed, “Sorry, sorry. Journey took longer than expected.”

He let down A-Yuan who clung to his robes.

“Hello, A-Yuan,” Jiang Yanli greeted, wanting to spend more time with her brother’s adopted son.

“Hello, Yima,” A-Yuan greeted. Jiang Yanli smiled brilliantly, pleased he was using her requested term of address.

“Yifu.” Jin ZiXuan nodded awkwardly in return greeting. That A-Yuan was still hesitant with the man even though he wasn’t wearing LanlingJin gold was still noticeable.

“Uncle Jiang.” Jiang Cheng made a strangled sound. Immediately, A-Yuan became worried. He walked over to the man. Jiang Cheng was slightly intimidating for the small child; tall and constantly
scowling. But Wei WuXian was scary too, so Wei Yuan didn’t have a problem drawing near Jiang Cheng.

“Did you want me to change it? I can call you something else,” Wei Yuan said worriedly.

Jiang Cheng waved an impatient and slightly imperious hand in negation.

“Did your,” Jiang Cheng almost said ‘dad’ before he remembered and switched, “Mother tell you to call me that?”

“No. You didn’t tell me what to call you, so I call you Uncle Jiang. Do you want something different?” Wei Yuan looked up at the man anxiously. He suddenly realised that this was his mother’s other family and that he wanted them to like him.

“Uncle Jiang’ is fine,” Jiang Cheng said gruffly.

Wei Yuan, unused to Jiang Cheng’s personality, still looked worried. Jiang Cheng ruffled the boy’s hair in response.

Wei WuXian couldn’t help but smile fondly at this. Jiang Cheng was really doing well to forget about A-Yuan’s origins. He sat down and leaned over to peer inside a basket beside Jiang Yanli.

“Aww, is this Ling-er? I think he’s grown!” Wei WuXian said in delight. A-Ling had some kind of toy and was entertaining himself by smacking it into everything he could reach. Luckily, Wei WuXian was too far – not that it stopped his nephew from trying. Jiang Yanli giggled.

“He should be,” Jin ZiXuan grumbled. The look on his face was fond though, “all he does is eat and sleep.”

“And cry,” Wei WuXian said, having heard about Jin Ling’s recent crying fit.

“Don’t remind me,” Jin ZiXuan muttered.

Jiang Yanli giggled again, “He’ll be able to roll around by himself soon. Then he’ll be crawling everywhere. I think he’ll be just like A-Cheng was at that age.”

“You don’t remember me at that age. You were too young,” Jiang Cheng said suspiciously.

A-Yuan walked around to peer into the basket. Wei WuXian lifted him up to sit on the bench. He made a game by reaching out a hand, inviting A-Ling to smack it before taking it away, forcing A-Ling to miss.

“Aunt Yinzhu and Aunt Jinzhu told us all about how you would crawl off when whoever was watching you had their back turned,” Jiang Yanli said cheerfully, “Including that time…”

Jiang Cheng groaned, having a feeling about which story this was.

“When you nearly fell into the river from the Pier at 6 or 7 months. If Mum hadn’t grabbed you…” Jiang Yanli said. It had been a terrifying experience for their mother who had only put him down for a moment to move something around to make juggling a baby easier and then panicked when she realised her son was motoring straight toward the edge of the Pier.

“Thank you, A-Jie,” Jiang Cheng said loudly, hoping for an end of this story. He rearranged the lantern building materials pointedly.

Cheng looked outraged.

“And that’s when Mother instituted a policy that babies could only be put down in rooms that could either be locked or had barriers,” Jiang Yanli told her husband.

“How did you survive until childhood?” Jin ZiXuan asked. He dodged a thrown piece of rice paper. Wei WuXian laughed, and A-Yuan giggled.

“Dad said he was just trying to get an early start on swimming,” Jiang Yanli said, “He said he used to always head straight for the water too. And I fell in when I was three. Aunt Yinzhu had been watching me and she said I was trying to pick the lotus flowers.”

“So, this is a family issue,” Wei WuXian said smirking, “I guess you’ll have to watch out for A-Ling around bodies of water until you’re sure he can swim.”

“That won’t be a problem at Koi Tower,” Jin ZiXuan said.

Mulan cawed, showing Wei WuXian a bird’s eye view of the gardens surrounding Koi Tower.

“Don’t you have several ponds at Koi Tower?” he asked casually.

“They’re shallow,” Jin ZiXuan said.

“What about that one to the north with the big red bridge? If he fell from that…” Wei WuXian trailed off innocently, “Not to mention how they might be shallow for an adult. But are they shallow for a toddler?”

Jin ZiXuan considered that and resolved to restrict A-Ling’s access to the gardens.

“Come to think of it,” Wei WuXian said thoughtfully, “You don’t really know how to swim, A-Yuan. I’ll teach you tomorrow morning before we leave.”

“I’ll teach him tomorrow,” Jiang Cheng said, “You won’t be up until nine, anyway.”

“What do you think, A-Yuan?” Wei WuXian asked, internally delighted that Jiang Cheng would be teaching his son how to swim, “A-Cheng was the one who taught me how to swim.”

“Really?” Wei Yuan said, staring at Jiang Cheng. He had been staring apprehensively at the black abyss that was the river before hearing that.

“Really?” Jin ZiXuan said in surprise, “Aren’t you younger than Wei WuXian?”

“Yeah, so?” Jiang Cheng said, resisting the urge to snap at his brother-in-law.

“There weren’t many opportunities to learn how to swim on the road,” Wei WuXian said, leaving out that most people didn’t know how to swim. The Sect’s required you to learn (and YunmengJiang was the undisputed champion of anything to do with the water) and anyone who fished or lived near the water naturally learned, but that wasn’t that common. Jin ZiXuan himself had learned to swim at Lotus Pier during his trips there as a child.

“Do you know what to do with your lantern, A-Yuan?” Jiang Yanli asked.

“Umm, you write wishes on them?” A-Yuan answered.

“That’s right,” Jiang Yanli said, smiling gently, “You can write one or three wishes. No more than three and two wishes are considered unlucky.”
“Really?”

“Yes. Do you know what you want to wish for?”

A-Yuan considered this very carefully. He leaned over and tugged at Wei WuXian’s sleeve. Amused, Wei WuXian obediently leaned down. A-Yuan asked in whisper that was heard by everyone there: “Can I have the same as your second wish?”

Wei WuXian chuckled, “Of course. You want me to write it?”

Wei Yuan nodded. The Yunmeng Lantern Festival took place at the end of winter. It was a celebration of the end of one year and the beginning of the next. Wishes for the next year were written on the inside of a lantern. The further a lit lantern rose in the sky and disappeared, the more likely they would come true. For some reason, likely involving some lore that Wei WuXian had forgotten about, writing two or four wishes was unlucky and it was likely that your wishes would never come true.

“You told him your wishes?” Jiang Cheng asked, already finished writing his wishes and had them face down so no one could read them.

“Kind of,” Wei WuXian shrugged. He didn’t think it was a big deal that A-Yuan knew his wishes. He would know A-Yuan’s since Wei WuXian was the one writing them down for the illiterate four-year-old.

Wei WuXian had already written his wishes. He just had to put his lantern together. He wrote out A-Yuan’s wish and set it aside to dry before showing A-Yuan how to construct his lantern, using Wei WuXian’s as a guide. Jiang Yanli helped construct Jin ZiXuan’s and also constructed a baby’s lantern that had a prayer for baby boy’s written on it in lieu of a wish as well as her own. After they had carefully tucked away the constructed lanterns, Jiang Yanli went to the kitchens and helped bring out dinner.

They chatted and caught up. Wei WuXian, and occasionally Jiang Cheng, tossed a few zingers at Jin ZiXuan who managed to return some of his own. It was prevented from turning into what they had been like as teenagers, thankfully. Wei WuXian pretended not to notice Jiang Cheng sneaking food to Mulan. He also pretended not to notice Jin ZiXuan being defensive of his plate whenever he saw Mulan.

“Oh, that’s right!” Wei WuXian said suddenly after finishing the food and now, currently savouring the sake.


“I have something for you all,” Wei WuXian dug into his pockets. After a moment he dropped four – tassels? – in the middle of the table. They leaned in curiously.

Jiang Yanli picked one up. It was black jade carved into a yin-yang shape; the yang part painted white. On one end was a deep red tassel, long yet thin. The other end was a thin red ribbon, like a string. It was gorgeous. They all were.

“They’re tokens into the Burial Mounds,” Wei WuXian said excitedly, “They blend your living aura
into the mountain’s, so it seems like you belong there. That way the corpse barrier and the resentful energy won’t block you or anything.”

“I have one too!” A-Yuan proudly showed off his ponytail with a token similar to Wei WuXian’s hanging from it.

“Why is it a hair accessory?” Jin ZiXuan asked, picking up a token.

“Well, I was talking about that to Qing-jie,” Wei WuXian said, warming up to the topic, swinging the sake, “Hanging it from your belt like GusuLan does is just asking for it to be stolen. I mean, I stole one within two hours of stepping into Cloud Recesses.”

Jiang Cheng, who already knew this, still buried his face into a hand. He had gotten so many questions when the stolen token had been recovered from Wei WuXian’s guest room after he left Cloud Recesses. Lan Qiren’s face had been so red, it had looked purple.

“You stole…” Jin ZiXuan cut himself off, disbelieving, “Why did you steal a token? You had a guest one!”

“Yeah, but those are limited, and they can track you with those,” Wei WuXian waved off Jin ZiXuan’s indignation, “How else could I sneak out to get some Emperor’s Smile and decent food?”

“A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said in a faintly scolding tone, “You did give it back right?”

“I left it behind in the room they gave me, front and centre, A-Jie!” Wei WuXian reassured.

“That’s alright then,” Jiang Yanli said nodding. Jin ZiXuan looked at her in disbelief.

“And he left me to answer questions about it!” Jiang Cheng said, pointing accusingly at his brother.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian saluted him.

“You’re seriously alright with this?” Jin ZiXuan asked Jiang Yanli.

“They weren’t feeding my brothers properly!” Jiang Yanli said, “They needed proper food. And it’s not like it was hurting anybody.”

“Like you didn’t have a secret store of food in your room,” Jiang Cheng said to Jin ZiXuan.

“Nie-xiong sold sweets out of his,” Wei WuXian said, impressed, “He made a tidy profit actually.”

“Anyway, hair accessory?” Jin ZiXuan said, “And doesn’t YunmengJiang’s bell also hand from your belt?”

“That’s different. It’s a bell. It rings every time someone new touches it. Kinda hard to steal or lose. My way, it’ll also be hard to lose in a fight or from a thief. If something caught your hair, you’re in serious trouble anyway. And it’s easy to conceal this way,” Wei WuXian explained.

“What’s with you and secrecy?” Jin ZiXuan muttered.

“Habit,” Wei WuXian shrugged, “I’ve also got an extra feature. It needs to be keyed to a specific person. Once it’s keyed in, it can’t be undone except by destroying the token. But it means that the person whose been keyed to that token has to be with that token and alive to be able to get through. Another security measure I put in.”

“You’re paranoid,” Jin ZiXuan said flatly.
“And I’m still alive,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, “You should learn some.”

Jin ZiXuan made a face but, remembering recent events with his clan, didn’t argue.

“Please, uh, ‘key’ me in?” Jiang Yanli asked, holding out the token she had picked up. Wei WuXian laughed and tried to find somewhere in her hair to put it. Between him and Jiang Cheng, they figure it out and thread it through one of the twists in her hair.

Wei WuXian closed his eyes. This had been easier to do with the residents of the Burial Mounds. The people have been living there for over two years now, and they were acclimatised to the resentful energy – yin energy, Wei WuXian reminded himself – from the mountain, thanks to the food they ate. Jiang Yanli, Jiang Cheng and Jin ZiXuan have practically nothing to work with, the miniscule amounts they ate fading away without the continuous reinforcement the Burial Mounds’ residents have.

All he needed was a small spark.

Well, the equivalent of. ‘Spark’ was, in no way, an adequate description for yin energy. He’d practiced doing this. First with Wei Qing, who was able to help him figure out how to insert a bit of yin energy into someone without disrupting their cultivation and who was already acclimatised to yin energy. Then he tried with Li Ying Yue who had the foundations of cultivation and hadn’t acclimatised to the energy yet.

It was a good thing he started with Jiang Yanli. Her lower cultivation made it easier. Spiritual energy – or yang energy, Wei WuXian supposed – did not mix well with yin energy. This had been known for centuries. It was basic stuff. Another reason imitators of the Yiling Patriarch ended up being no trouble for anybody except themselves. The only ones that ended up uninjured and/or alive were those without much cultivation ability at all.

But with Wei Qing and other volunteers from the Burial Mounds, Wei WuXian had figured things out. You could be both a cultivator of the ‘righteous’ path and the ‘demonic’ one. You just had to be very, very careful. You could also have a small bit of yin energy residing inside you, enough to be noticeable, without it impacting your health or cultivation.

That was what Wei WuXian was doing. Combining the faint traces of resentful energy from her trip to the Burial Mounds with a drop of his own, he could safely place it in Jiang Yanli’s body and connect it to the token in her hair. Enough to activate the token, but not enough to harm her and in an area of her body where it wouldn’t interfere with her sluggish spiritual flow.

Jin ZiXuan and Jiang Cheng were harder. Jin ZiXuan had tied it underneath his ornamental hair piece so it wouldn’t show. Wei WuXian tactfully didn’t point out that was the exact reason he’d designed it that way. Now, no one would know that Jin ZiXuan basically had permission to enter the Burial Mounds at will. His spiritual energy was a lot brighter to Wei WuXian’s senses, harsh, like the summer sun. It was a little more difficult to place the yin energy so it wouldn’t interfere with his spiritual energy. Wei WuXian was a little… ok, a lot more worried about something going wrong.

Thankfully, it succeeded and Jin ZiXuan didn’t seem to notice anything different which had Wei WuXian letting out both an internal sigh of relief and giving himself an internal cheer squad.

While he had been navigating Jin ZiXuan’s internal energy, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli had undone Jiang Cheng’s bun and braided the token into one of his side-braids before redoing the hair.

Navigating Jiang Cheng’s energy was… well, it was harder than Jin ZiXuan’s for a very different reason. No matter how much Wei WuXian did not want to have contact with Jiang Cheng’s spiritual
energy, he forced himself to go slow, to do the job properly. He did his best to ignore the familiar spiritual energy and the way it felt like coming home.

Finally, it was done and Wei WuXian stepped back with a grin.

“What do you think?” He asked.

“It’s great A-Xian,” Jiang Yanli said, “We’ll keep them on us.”

“Sect Leader!” a disciple ran up and saluted respectfully, “It’s time for the lanterns to be lit!”

“Understood. Make sure everything’s prepared and let the crowd know,” Jiang Cheng ordered. The disciple saluted and walked briskly to do as he was told.

“So, remember what to do?” Jiang Cheng snarked at Wei WuXian. Behind them, Jiang Yanli picked up the basket with Jin Ling while her husband took the three lanterns. Wei WuXian let Wei Yuan carry his but did his best to keep an eye on him. Wei Yuan knew to be careful with his things but he was still only a small child and tended to forget. Wei WuXian had been going to take the boy’s hand but A-Yuan beat him to it by grabbing onto his leg instead. He seemed nervous about the water. Wei WuXian just patted his head.

“Of course I remember! Why would I forget?” Wei WuXian replied to Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng just gave him look that silently said, *You’re a dumbass.*

“Because it’s you. How good is your memory again?” Jiang Cheng said in his usual mocking tone.

Well, Wei WuXian couldn’t argue with that. Besides, if he did, Jiang Cheng would bring up examples. He probably wouldn’t even remember some of them! Jiang Cheng nodded smugly.

YunmengJiang’s Sect Leader and immediate family were usually the ones to set off their lanterns first which was a signal for everyone else to light their lanterns as well. It’s always been a beautiful spectacle to see all the lanterns drift into the sky.

Walking to the spot, Wei WuXian couldn’t help but reminisce. He used to be teasing and shoving Jiang Cheng behind the tall calm figure of Jiang Fengmian and the elegant poise of Yu ZiYuan. Jiang Yanli would either be giggling or chiding them gently to be careful with their lanterns. A few steps behind the family would be Yinzhu and Jinzhu who would be taking bets on who would win the argument and if one of them would lose their lantern or fall into the river.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Now Jiang Cheng took point. Wei WuXian with A-Yuan attached to his leg and Jiang Yanli holding Jin Ling flanked him. Jin ZiXuan behind them. Jiang Cheng and Wei WuXian were still snarking and teasing each other and Jiang Yanli was still giggling. When Wei WuXian glanced back, Jin ZiXuan had a long-suffering expression on his face, but Wei WuXian thought he could see a hint of a smile too.

There was a small pier that allowed everyone on the bank of the river to see them. The riverside was crowded, like always. All the lights except the standing braziers were doused. Wei WuXian felt a little like he had his first Lantern Festival. He couldn’t identify all the feelings, but he knew he was overwhelmed. After officially leaving YunmengJiang, Wei WuXian had never thought he could be here again.

It wasn’t a bad feeling.
Jiang Cheng used a long thin stick from the brazier called a lighter to light his lantern. He kept a hold of it however, and gave the lighter to Jiang Yanli. She lit Jin Ling’s lantern that Jin ZiXuan was holding before giving it to Wei WuXian. He knelt down.

“Be careful, A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian warned, lighting the boy’s lantern. He made sure the wide-eyed boy was holding the lantern properly before lighting his own and sticking the lighter back into the brazier.

“To a new year,” Jiang Cheng said quietly. Beside him Jiang Yanli and Jin ZiXuan both had a hand on Jin Ling’s lantern, prepared to launch it together, the baby himself trying to reach out to the lantern with a chubby arm from where Jiang Yanli was holding him, braced by Jin ZiXuan’s other hand. Wei WuXian picked A-Yuan up as carefully as he could with one arm.

“To a new year,” they all echoed. Jiang Cheng released his lantern, giving a gentle push. The married couple and Wei WuXian released theirs a second later. All along the riverbank lanterns were lit, thousands of them. Jiang Cheng took Jin Ling from Jiang Yanli, leaving her and her husband to light their own lanterns. Wei Yuan looked nervous and hadn’t released his lantern.

Knowing his usually confident son was worrying about doing it wrong, Wei WuXian placed a hand over A-Yuan’s and guided him to releasing his lantern.

Wei Yuan watched in awe as his lantern drifted away. There was a faint breeze that lifted the lanterns and blew the lanterns up and across the river. Jin ZiXuan’s and Jiang Yanli’s followed after A-Yuan’s. Soon they were joined by thousands of lanterns from the riverbank.

Wei WuXian shifted his grip on A-Yuan to hold him more securely and stepped forward so he was standing next to Jiang Cheng. They all looked up at the lanterns flying into the sky. Wei WuXian holding A-Yuan, Jiang Cheng holding Jin Ling and Jiang Yanli and Jin ZiXuan holding each other.

Wei WuXian knew that Wei Qing, Li Ying Yue, Xia Bolin, Xia Shijing, Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing were in the crowd releasing their own lanterns and smiled.

The overwhelmed feeling was gone. Instead a happy, content feeling filled him.

He looked back at all the things that have happened. There were regrets – Jiang Fengmian, Madam Yu, everyone that had been lost all those years ago – and there had been frustrations and hardships, fear and grim, bloody-minded determination to survive. But, standing here next to most of his family, Wei WuXian wasn’t sure it was so bad where he had ended up, even if it was nothing like what he had imagined, wished or hoped for growing up. He was in a much better state than he had been not even a year ago.

For better or for worse, he had a goal to work towards now. For A-Yuan, Li Ying Yue and everyone that had trusted him to stay on the Burial Mounds, he was going to work towards a future where they can safe, free and happy. He was going to work towards a future where he, Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli could visit each other and where he and Jiang Cheng could work as a duo. A future where A-Yuan could live without fear or discrimination for his bloodline.

It might not have been what he had thought of before and yet Wei WuXian wanted this new future he was imagining. Besides, the important things were the same.

Before the destruction of Lotus Pier, Wei WuXian had written three wishes.

Today, Wei WuXian had made the exact same wishes.

The lanterns floated over the river, rising toward the starry sky like they wanted their lights to join the
stars, mirrored by the river below.

Chapter End Notes

Well, things will be changing a little from here. We’ll have some plot developments and romantic developments (see you soon LWJ!) and, very importantly, some YilingWei development! It won’t be an official Sect for a few years, story-time. Within the next year of story-time, we’ll meet Xiao Xingchen and Song ZiChen, look in on LanlingJin with MXY and a brand new character. We’ll also get at least one new disciple and a look at the births that will be happening in the Burial Mounds!

We’ll also see what I’m planning with HOB’s characters! I have barely read HOB so I’m not going to use too many of their characters until I’ve read it further. I hope I’ll get the characterisation of the character’s I will be using correct though. But I had an idea that required one of HOB’s character’s so I can’t help myself.

There are still some canon things I will have to deal with, such as XXC, SZC and XY. But apart from that and certain snakes in shadows, I’m pretty free to play with my new sect in this world.

Hope you’ll enjoy!

Headcanons:

Wei WuXian and the GC: it was made clear when JC confronted Wifi in the temple that Wifi missed what he had given up. He doesn’t regret it and would do it again, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t grieving over what he lost. Wifi strikes me as the sort of person who doesn’t like feeling negative emotions so he shoves them away, ignores them and distracts himself to forget what made him feel negative. This is ok for little things, but the GC business isn’t little. It’s akin to giving up a limb. Considering how necessary it is for cultivators to have a GC, the reaction to someone losing it would be the same as suddenly becoming disabled. Wifi is feeling loss and grief and before he took to the Burial Mounds he couldn’t show it. Even now, he can only talk about it to two people. Developing demonic cultivation prevented him from feeling useless. Wifi has grown to appreciate being a demonic cultivator and even embraced it. He’s growing to love demonic cultivation, but it can’t replace what he lost. Thankfully, he is slowly growing past this grief and sense of loss he’s been ignoring. Wei Qing and Wei Ning helped out a lot. His solution with Suibian also helped even if he won’t take any action about it for a decade story-time.
Visitors

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello! I hope you’re all ready for something new!

Also, because I keep forgetting, I just want to say that there’s a Russian translation and a Spanish translation currently underway! Thank you all! I’m so glad that you think my story is worth translating! Link’s below (If I can do hyperlinks correctly, I’ve never tried before)

Spanish: Here
Russian: Here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was spring. The world was alive with flowers, bringing more colour and filling the breeze with sweet scents to seduce the bees. A crow flew overhead the rolling green hills dotted with flowers and trees. Two horses were racing each other below, each with a rider on their back. They had been running at a full gallop for a long time now. Any other horse would’ve stopped running or fallen over dead from the exertion by now.

These horses didn’t have to worry about dying, however.

Wei WuXian laughed, the wind and the speed stealing the noise from his mouth.

Between Khan’s pride and Shang’s competitiveness, races like this were becoming common. They were exhilarating. Wei WuXian knew that if he could see Wei Qing’s face right now, it would be grinning in excited delight, a rare look for the haughty medic.

Riding a galloping horse and not having to worry about the creature’s health was a joyous experience. It reminded him of flying on Suibian.

Of all the things he had lost when he had that surgery, Suibian was the thing he had missed the most. Even more than the extra sturdiness or the way the world had seemed brighter and fuller. Sword fighting had been an enjoyable hobby and flying was one of the greatest experiences in the world. The loss of such a bond was horrible. Finding out that Suibian had sealed itself…

Wei WuXian didn’t want to neglect Suibian, but he couldn’t use the sword anymore. Luckily, he had a plan for that. It wouldn’t come to fruition for another decade, but Wei WuXian felt it was the right way to deal with the situation.

But at least he had the greatest horse and crow in the world.

Mulan flying high above, shared her mental space with her master and saviour. Wei WuXian could experience everything Mulan could. The feeling of the wind through their feathers, the sight of the brightly coloured ground beneath them – all the freedom and joy of flying through the air on nothing but the wind and Mulan’s effort. It was almost an out-of-body experience and Wei WuXian could barely feel the wind against his face or the way Khan rocked beneath him.

Distantly, Wei WuXian could hear Wei Qing laugh in exultation. The two of them were jumping
over fallen trees and navigating the uneven ground as fast as they can, Khan and Shang whinnying challenges at each other, goading each other faster without their riders’ input.

Wei WuXian’s sight was mostly Mulan’s which meant he missed seeing what made Khan suddenly jump. He did hear a yell, however. Mulan swooped over to see. Wei WuXian drew concentration back to his own body faster than usual which almost gave him mental whiplash. Since Khan had been going so fast, he couldn’t just stop and instead slowed to a canter turning in a wide circle to see who he had almost trampled.

“Are you crazy?” Someone yelled.

Khan slowed as he cantered then trotted in circles around two men. One was helping the other off the ground and checking him over for injuries in the process. The standing one was dressed in black edged in steel-grey and looking rather angry. The one Khan and Wei WuXian nearly trampled was dressed in white that now probably needed to be laundered.

They were cultivators.

“Sorry! We didn’t see you there!” Wei WuXian called out. When Khan was finally able to stop in front of the two men, Wei WuXian slipped off. By then both men were standing. The one in white didn’t look as upset as his friend at least. Wei WuXian bowed in apology.

“Are you alright?” Wei WuXian asked. He spared a brief thought wondering where Wei Qing had gone. Mulan indicated that she’d go look.

“I am alright,” the one in white assured, “It was mostly surprise. I was not expecting that.”

The white one was smiling. He was handsome with a look about his eyes that made him seem rather youthful and gentle. He looked like someone who was eternally curious and would wander off at any time to satisfy that curiosity. The other one was also handsome but did not look prone to smiling like his companion. Instead his expression seemed to default to serious. At the moment, he was looking at Wei WuXian with suspicious caution.

That one won’t tolerate nonsense.

For some reason, the white robes of the smiling man seemed familiar. But they weren’t GusuLan robes and Wei WuXian didn’t know of any other sect or rogue cultivator that would go around wearing white of all things. Wei WuXian shrugged it off. If it was important, he would either remember later or he could ask the man.

“Forgive us, perhaps you could help us?” the man in white asked, his eyes looking at Wei WuXian’s face like he was trying to place where he’d seen it before. His companion glanced at the horse that should be blown after a gallop like that, but looked fresh, “My name is Xiao Xingchen and this is my dear friend Song ZiChen.”

Wei WuXian greeted them politely, “My name is Wei WuXian. This is Khan and my sister Wei Qing and her horse, Shang, are somewhere around here.”

Wei WuXian was expecting many reactions from them. A flinch, surprise, hostility, panic even. He wasn’t expecting the white one – Xiao Xingchen – to light up and lean forward in excitement.

Wei WuXian was already planning a refusal if these people asked him for training in demonic cultivation, but was derailed when the man said in excitement: “You are SanRen-shijie’s child? Cangse SanRen? I thought so! You look like her picture.”
“What?”

“Ah,” the man bowed his head, “I am also a disciple of Baoshan Sanren. I was hoping to discover what happened to my shixiong and shijie in addition to my own goals when I came down from the mountain. When ZiChen told me that shijie had a child, I insisted on meeting you.”

Wei WuXian glanced at Song ZiChen, wondering how much the cultivator had told Xiao Xingchen about him.

“You knew my mother?” Wei WuXian asked, turning his attention back to Xiao Xingchen.

“I’m afraid I was rather young when she left,” Xiao Xingchen said apologetically, “But everyone told me stories about her. I was surprised to hear that she had married. From what I was told, she was against the idea of getting married at all. Too much of a free spirit.”

Wei WuXian grinned, “I’m like that as well. I was told that my mother refused every man and sect that made an offer. She was good friends with my father and Uncle Jiang, neither of whom asked for her hand in marriage. One day, she apparently shocked everyone when she asked my father to marry her.”

Uncle Jiang had told him the story, smiling fondly the entire time.

*Even without Cangse Sanren’s reputation for refusing, it would’ve caused a scandal. Not many women had ever asked a man for his hand in marriage,* Uncle Jiang had said. His gaze had slid away from Wei Ying at that point.

Wei WuXian wondered if Uncle Jiang had been thinking of his mother or if he had been thinking of Madam Yu.

This talk brought Lan Wangji to Wei WuXian’s mind. With difficulty he brushed off the distraction. He didn’t need to think of Lan Wangji and marriage in the same situation.

An image came to him of Lan Wangji in wedding red, looking at him with those yellow eyes. The image nearly caused Wei WuXian to slap himself so he could concentrate on the conversation he was supposed to be having.

“Why did you leave the mountain, if you don’t mind me asking?” Wei WuXian said.

“What was the point of learning cultivation if you don’t use it to help people?” Xiao Xingchen said honestly.

Wei WuXian gave a genuine smile at that. Even Song ZiChen looked like he agreed with Xiao Xingchen despite his stern demeanour.

Ah, so they were good people. Wei WuXian was glad.

“A-Ying!” they heard Wei Qing call out, “What are you doing?”

Wei WuXian gave a wave to the horse and rider making their way towards them at a brisk trot. He wondered if their new company could hear the note of worry in her voice or if that was just him.

“Meeting my shibo*!” he called back.

“What?” Wei Qing said in confusion, pulling up beside him. Mulan swooped down and landed on Wei WuXian’s shoulder.
“This is my older sister, Wei Qing. Her horse is named Shang,” Wei WuXian introduced, “Jie, this is Xiao Xingchen, my shibo, and his friend, Song ZiChen.”

Wei WuXian glanced at Song ZiChen but he didn’t move to correct Wei WuXian so he must’ve gotten the name correct. Wei Qing blinked and slid from Shang’s back. The three greeted each other.

“Would you like to come back to the Burial Mounds to talk over tea?” Wei WuXian proposed. Wei Qing gave him a cautious look. Wei WuXian understood. These people could be lying, could be good actors and hadn’t had a chance to prove themselves trustworthy. It was a risk, but Wei WuXian was sure it would be fine. If anything did happen, well, Wei WuXian was strongest while he was at the Burial Mounds, anyway.

Song ZiChen clearly hesitated but didn’t disagree with Xiao Xingchen’s delighted acceptance. Wei WuXian pegged him as the cautious one to Xiao Xingchen’s reckless curiosity. Yet while Song ZiChen was clearly wary of Wei WuXian, he wasn’t afraid and didn’t seem to believe that Wei WuXian had nefarious plots like other cultivators Wei WuXian had encountered after his move to the Burial Mounds.

“Is it safe?” Song ZiChen asked.

“Is what safe?” Wei WuXian asked in confusion. He’d begun walking toward the Burial Mounds. They weren’t that far. Khan and Shang had been racing in a large circle around the mountain and town. Once they hit the road to Yiling, they would’ve turned in to head back to the mountain. At that question, however, Wei WuXian turned to look back in confusion.

“The Burial Mounds,” Song ZiChen said, heedless of his companion’s warning look, frowning slightly.

“It must be if he’s living there,” Xiao Xingchen reasoned.

“It’s safer than it has been since that battle all those centuries ago,” Wei WuXian said. At the mention of the battle that ended their lives, Khan and Shang both snorted.

“Do you know what that battle was about?” Xiao Xingchen asked, keeping up with Wei WuXian easily. Behind them trailed Song ZiChen and Wei Qing, eyeing each other suspiciously. The horses made up the rear. Mulan took flight, surprising Xiao Xingchen. Wei WuXian ignored it.

“That’s a long story,” Wei WuXian said, “and you wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Try me,” Xiao Xingchen said.

“It was a battle between the forces of heaven and rebels from heaven. The rebels escaped to come live here on earth and the forces of the martial gods came here to kill them all,” Wei WuXian summarised bluntly.

The two cultivators looked surprised. Song ZiChen clearly didn’t quite believe him, but he didn’t try to claim Wei WuXian was a liar either.

“What were the rebels rebelling against?” Xiao Xingchen asked. Wei WuXian couldn’t tell if he believed him or not.

“It wasn’t just one easily explained reason,” Wei WuXian said after struggling with himself on how to put it, “They were unsatisfied with how things were done in heaven for a while, but a significant event pushed them to fight their way out.”
Looking at his audience, Wei WuXian realised that he wouldn’t be able to get out of telling the whole story. He sighed, recalling the memories of others that had been shoved into his head when he had absorbed their resentful energy.

“Some kind of creature was created on earth one day. It wasn’t human but looked a lot like one. The gods realised that it contained a massive amount of power. Combined with its mysterious creation they decided to capture him. They placed him in heavy chains that required super strength just to lift one and he had one on each wrist, ankle and his neck. They also made an artefact that restricted his powers. Some kind of limiter that went around his head like a crown.

“Only, the thing is that the ‘creature’ was just a kid. Only a year or two old and looked like a ten-year-old child. He was growing, learning and developing and that included his power. They realised that his potential could exceed the power of most of the gods, so they used that limiter to stunt the growth of his powers. In other words: they were attempting to cripple him.”

“That’s horrible!” Wei Qing exclaimed, “Because, what? They were afraid someone would be more powerful than they are?”

“That and they considered him a dirty, unclean creature due to his origins,” Wei WuXian said, “Thankfully, it was Guanyin who took responsibility for him in heaven and declared her nephew or something as caretaker. The kid quickly grew attached and while the god denied it, he came to consider the kid as his son.”

“That’s something at least,” Wei Qing grumbled.

“Haven’t you heard this before?” Song ZiChen asked.

“I never asked.”

“What happened then?” Xiao Xingchen prodded.

“Well, they befriended three martial gods who knew something fishy was going on in the upper parts of heaven. Don’t ask me what though. I didn’t get that bit. I do know they wanted to use the kid as some kind of attack dog. Killing something is unclean so the gods don’t kill because it makes them feel dirty. But they considered the kid already unclean so… The god who had adopted the kid wasn’t involved in the military or anything and he didn’t want the kid involved either. But there was some kind of hostile altercation and the kid’s limiter broke.”

“Was the child ok?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

“At first,” Wei WuXian said, “But the power overwhelmed him. He wasn’t used to it and it was painful, so he went berserk and killed a bunch of the gods trying to subdue him. After a bit the power took its toll and he collapsed. The four friends got him out of there and then rebelled. They intended to flee and exile themselves to earth. They did manage to succeed and made it here, due to one’s sacrifice, but they were pursued. They made their final stand on the Burial Mounds, which had been named something else before then. Heaven sent an army to wipe out those that defied them, and the rebels were one exhausted kid, a bureaucratic god who’d spent his life behind a desk and two martial gods. In the end, everyone except the kid died. And the kid was heartbroken. When his foster father died, he stayed there mourning for 3 months before the gods convinced Guanyin, the only one not afraid of him, to come and take him away. Guanyin, on orders from the emperor in heaven, locked the kid away under a mountain. Not the Burial Mounds. I don’t know which mountain but, as far as I know, he’s still there.”

“That’s horrific,” Xiao Xingchen said, aching with sympathy, “The whole tale is terrible.”
“Wait, that last part sounded familiar,” Song ZiChen said, brow furrowed, “Imprisoned under a mountain... There is a tale about a monster infiltrating heaven and challenging the gods. It sullied heaven by slaughtering gods outside the rules of combat and the forces of heaven gathered together and banished the monster to earth where it was imprisoned under a mountain for the rest of eternity.”

“What is it they say, Qing-jie? ‘History is written by the victors?’” Wei WuXian asked sarcastically.

Wei Qing sneered. She had been on both sides of that saying, equally unwillingly.

*Wait. Does that mean our horses are...?*

Wei Qing turned around. Shang deliberately looked away. Khan wasn’t paying attention, but to Wei Qing’s shrewd eyes, it looked forced.

*Great. Our horses are, or were, divine. Couldn’t you have mentioned that, A-Ying?*

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It turned out that Xiao Xingchen and Wei WuXian got along splendidly. They’d gone to Granny’s house where the elderly woman had tried to make them tea. She’d been derailed by Wei WuXian’s protests and, without either of them noticing, Wei Qing had made the tea while they argued (which wasn’t actually an argument because it was far too polite and mild for that) and served it to their guests.

Wei Ning was supervising Wei Yuan and Li Ying Yue as they explored the Burial Mounds. Shen Shuyi had drilled the girl mercilessly on what she knew, her calligraphy, her music, her art, poetry, equestrian skills, archery and other weapons until the poor girl felt like her brain was coming out of her ears. Shen Shuyi was now drawing up a draft of the lesson plans that would receive input from Wei WuXian and Wei Qing before becoming finalised.

Wei Qing had begged leave after serving tea to go perform some of her errands. In the meantime, Wei WuXian chatted to Xiao Xingchen about his mother and everything that Xiao Xingchen had experienced since he left the Baoshan Sanren, with the occasional input from Song Zichen. Xiao Xingchen was bound by oath not to say anything that could give away the location of Baoshan Sanren’s mountain, so he was purposely vague on those parts and Wei WuXian didn’t pry. He only exclaimed in horror about not having spicy food.

Xiao Xingchen was delighted. Wei WuXian was clearly not the person rumours made him out to be. He also seemed to take Song ZiChen’s surly bluntness in stride, not trying to make him actively participate in their conversation, but not forgetting or ignoring him either. All too often, Xiao Xingchen has seen the man who he had become so close to, be ignored or put down in some way. Wei WuXian never seemed bothered by it. If anything, Wei WuXian seemed amused.

“Do either of you have any particular goal, outside of night-hunts?” Wei WuXian asked idly, pouring tea for them and wishing there was alcohol, “Admittedly, I don’t know much about the temple you’re from, Song ZiChen. Is there a position there you want?”

“Actually...” Xiao Xingchen hesitated, glancing at Song ZiChen. The dream had originally been Song ZiChen’s. It had been a private wistful thing, but when he had confessed it to Xiao Xingchen, he had fallen in love with the idea. Thanks to Xiao Xingchen’s enthusiasm and support, Song Zichen was given that final push to start actively working towards it with a growing determination matched by his friend.
“We wish to start a sect of our own,” Song ZiChen said, “One, not determined by bloodline, but by merit, skill and deeds.”

Wei WuXian looked surprised.

“That sounds lovely,” Wei Ju said from her corner with her knitting, proving that she had been listening in. Xiao Xingchen and Song ZiChen were impressed with her. It was clear that she was mostly using touch to ensure that her knitting didn’t have any flaws instead of her weak eyes.

“Creating a new sect is no small thing,” he said, “But I can see a sect that has that system being really popular among those that dislike the way the Great Sects are run and can’t get opportunity to rise. You’d need a lot to get started though. Finance, a place to train and live, people to help run things…”

“It’s a big undertaking,” Xiao Xingchen said, smiling, “But I believe we can do it.”

“Didn’t say you couldn’t,” Wei WuXian retorted, “But it would take a long time to create a sect, establish it and then work to ensure it lasts long after the two of you are gone. What’s your first step?”

“Establishing ourselves and our reputations,” Song ZiChen said firmly, “That way people will know us as honourable cultivators worth learning from. That way we can draw in disciples and it’ll be easier to get people to agree to help us.”

Wei WuXian smiled wryly, “Take it from me: never underestimate the power of reputation. If you construct the right reputation, then you’ll be more likely to draw in disciples who have the right values. I never paid attention to my reputation and it bit me in the ass when others manipulated my actions to their advantage. You’ve heard of,” here Wei WuXian looked at Xiao Xingchen who blinked in confusion. Wei WuXian turned and directed his words at Song ZiChen, “You’ve heard of my reputation, I’m sure.”

Song ZiChen nodded, a curl of distaste in his lip.

“I’ve had people gather at the bottom of the Burial Mounds crying out to become my disciple bearing banners declaring ‘All hail the Yiling Patriarch, Lord of Evil,’” Wei WuXian affected his voice to be mockingly sinister for the last part then sighed.

Wei Ju made a disgusted noise, “You’re not like that at all. If we could see that, then it should be no hardship for others.”

“Well, you are rather terrifying, A-Ying,” Wei Ju said apologetically, “And I still let you look after my grandson and we still stayed here with you.”

“The point is: if you want to attract the right type of disciple, then you need to be known for the values you want your disciples and sect to have,” Wei WuXian explained, “It’ll be a lot easier than what I’m doing.”

“What you’re doing?” Xiao Xingchen asked curiously.

“I’m also thinking of creating a sect one day,” Wei WuXian admitted carefully. He still wasn’t sure if he could trust them, but he felt that they were good people, so he took a chance.

“Teaching demonic cultivation?” Song ZiChen said carefully. He wasn’t sure about demonic
cultivation. He had believed it an unrighteous and bad path to cultivate on but had re-evaluated that upon meeting the creator. Considering how inaccurate the stories about Wei WuXian seemed to be, Song ZiChen decided to go with Xiao Xingchen’s opinion that they simply didn’t know enough about it.

The scene he saw entering the Burial Mounds concerned him though. Those walking corpses were afraid of Wei WuXian. Walking corpses weren’t afraid of anything except other corpses and creatures which used resentful energy that were stronger than they were. That had many implications about what Wei WuXian did to himself to use resentful energy. Song ZiChen had to resist the urge to interrogate the man.

“For those that would be suited to it,” Wei WuXian allowed, “I don’t believe that everyone has the… personality for demonic cultivation.”

“Personality?” Xiao Xingchen asked, leaning forward curiously.

Wei WuXian shrugged, “I’m not sure how else to put it. I already found one disciple who has the potential as well as my son. We’ll see what happens when they grow up a little though. Nothing’s set in stone at this point.”

Thankfully, Song ZiChen and Xiao Xingchen seemed to accept that. They still seemed curious though. Xiao Xingchen looked like he was restraining himself from blurt out questions and Wei WuXian could feel Song ZiChen’s eyes boring into his skull.

“Well, we’ll have to consult with each other on each other’s progress,” Xiao Xingchen said brightly, “If you don’t mind us visiting again, of course.”

“Not at all,” Wei WuXian waved it off. He thought about giving them a guest token, but he didn’t trust them that much.

“Actually,” Wei WuXian glanced at Granny, catching her attention, “Shibo, I was wondering if I could ask a personal favour. It’s not very much. You won’t have to go out of your way or anything…”

“What is it?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

Wei WuXian glanced at Granny again. She got the hint and packed up her knitting.

“I need to check on the kitchens anyway,” she said. She patted Wei WuXian’s shoulder on the way out.

“What was that about?” Song ZiChen asked.

Wei WuXian had been thinking about how to ask this. He didn’t want to give too much away.

“I don’t have that many secrets unless they’re about how to become a demonic cultivator, but I am protective to the one’s I do have, and this regards one of them,” Wei WuXian said slowly.

Song ZiChen and Xiao Xingchen listened attentively. Wei WuXian glanced at Song ZiChen and grimaced. He didn’t ask the man to leave though. These two were close. Wei WuXian didn’t want to put more suspicion on himself or damage their relationship as secrets tended to do.

“During the Sunshot Campaign, prior to becoming a demonic cultivator, I constructed a ruse,” Wei WuXian started.
“Before you became a demonic cultivator?” Song ZiChen picked up.

“Just after Lotus Pier’s destruction. In fact, the last part of the ruse had just been completed when I was taken by Wen-dogs and thrown in here,” Wei WuXian explained.

“What was the ruse?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

Wei WuXian ran a hand through his hair, trying to think of how much to tell them.

“Do you know Jiang Cheng? Jiang Wanyin, the YunmengJiang Sect Leader?”

“I’ve heard of him,” Xiao Xingchen confirmed, Song ZiChen nodding.

“Your brother. Sworn or foster or something,” Song ZiChen added.

“We grew up together, so we consider each other brothers,” Wei WuXian explained, “He was injured in the aftermath of Lotus Pier’s destruction by Wen-dogs. The only way to help him would be an experimental surgery. I knew he would never agree to it, if he knew everything. But I couldn’t leave him like that. So, I lied and told him that I knew how to find Baoshan Sanren.”

Wei WuXian explained how he had created an elaborate act for Jiang Cheng to follow, making him memorise answers as if they were passwords, blindfolding him on a mountain in Yiling, ordering him to claim he was Wei WuXian to get an imaginary boon from Cangse Sanren’s teacher. By the end, Xiao Xingchen and Song ZiChen were staring at him, wide-eyed and speechless.

“I came back down that mountain to meet him in that town like a promised, but Wen-dogs captured me. Luckily, they had left before Jiang Cheng came,” Wei WuXian finished.

“What exactly did you want me to do?” Xiao Xingchen asked, astonished.

Wei WuXian grimaced, “Not let on that I was lying through my teeth. Usually Jiang Cheng could tell when I’m lying, but he wasn’t able to tell at that time. His injury and grief shook his focus. He trusted me and, even though it was for his sake, I lied to him.”

“Why wouldn’t he have agreed to the surgery?” Song ZiChen asked.

“The only one who could perform the surgery was Wei Qing - Wen Qing back then. After Lotus Pier, he never would have put his life, or mine, in the hands of someone named Wen. Then and now, he would rather exterminate anyone named Wen. Jiang Cheng’s only just learning to tolerate my people and there’s nothing here to associate us with QishanWen, not even their names,” Wei WuXian said.

“Your life?” Xiao Xingchen asked delicately.

“The surgery required a donor,” Wei WuXian offered after a moment of hesitation.

“For an organ or something similar?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

“Forgive me shibo, but that is all I’m going to tell you. Will you keep my secret?” Wei WuXian asked. He tried not to let on how much he needed to hear an affirmative.

“What would be the problem if he knew now? If you are as close as brothers than surely, he would eventually understand that you did it for his survival,” Song ZiChen said.

Wei WuXian shook his head, “He would never forgive me for what I gave to him.”
Song ZiChen couldn’t argue against Wei WuXian’s conviction. He still wasn’t quite sure he understood, however.

“I understand,” Xiao Xingchen said staring at his tea. He took a sip, thinking. Finally, he said: “I am no healer, so I would never have been involved in such things. If I was inquired, I can say that there was an outsider who came and was permitted healing some years ago, but I never knew who or for what. But I will only do so if asked.”

Relief swamped Wei WuXian. He bowed low in his seat, “Thank you.”

Wei WuXian turned to Song ZiChen. Realising what Wei WuXian wanted, Song ZiChen sighed.

“I will not reveal your secret,” he said.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian repeated. It was no less genuine, though it held less of the pure relief that had swamped him moments ago.

When they were walking back down the mountain to the city of Yiling, Song ZiChen brought it up again.

“Donating organs?” he asked Xiao Xingchen. Song ZiChen couldn’t help himself from looking back at the wall of walking corpses. It felt unnatural to have his back facing them.

“Oh, yes. Kidneys, liver and the like,” Xiao Xingchen said, “We can even transplant eyes and make them work the same as if someone had been born with them.”

Song ZiChen shuddered in mild revulsion, “People walk around with some random stranger’s organs in them? That sounds horrific.”

“They’d have to be compatible and we ask for volunteers, naturally,” Xiao Xingchen explained further, smiling fondly at Song ZiChen’s reaction. He wasn’t offended by it. He never was.

“Still, I don’t understand why it must be a secret,” Song ZiChen continued, frowning.

“How would you like it if someone gave you something like that without telling you until after?” Xiao Xingchen asked.

Song ZiChen frowned. He had difficulty imagining someone giving up some kind of organ for him. Wei WuXian was clearly healthy enough though he looked a little gaunt. If he had any health troubles from donating, Song ZiChen wouldn’t be able to tell. The surgery had clearly worked. Both brothers were alive. Song ZiChen thought that Jiang Wanyin might be mad, but not to the point of never forgiving the other man.

But then, Song ZiChen knew he might not have the same perspective. Song ZiChen, couldn’t quite imagine such a situation and he might feel differently if such a thing did happen to him. In this, he would trust Xiao Xingchen’s opinion of the matter. The other man was much more empathetic than Song ZiChen, so he trusted him on emotional matters like these.

“What did you think of your shizhi?” Song ZiChen asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, he’s quite different from the rumours,” Xiao Xingchen said happily, “I think I quite like him. We’ll have to keep in contact in the future.”

Song ZiChen gave a noise of agreement and they turned to trying to find an inn for the evening.
“Wait, Xia Shijing is pregnant now?” Wei WuXian said in disbelief.

“Yes,” Wei Qing said, grumpily. She attacked her dinner with her chopsticks, “As if we haven’t panicked enough over Chang Ting’s pregnancy. We don’t even know the effects of everything on the pregnancy yet and we have another to keep track of.”

“Isn’t Xia Bolin a bit young to be a parent?” Wei WuXian asked.

Wei Qing made a face, “There’ve been others that young who have had children. At least Xia Shijing is of a decent age for pregnancy.”

“They’re both younger than I am, and I still think I’m too young to be a parent,” Wei WuXian pointed out waving a piece of chicken in emphasis. Wei Qing made a disgusted face at the much redder food on her brother’s plate.

“You can’t put your own feelings into this situation,” Wei Qing said, “Besides, Xia Bolin isn’t a cultivator or anything like that. If anything, he was a peasant. It’s relatively normal to have children at that age among them.”

“But he’s not among them now,” Wei WuXian said, finishing his meal and clearly wishing for more.

“That kind of mindset isn’t easy to change, especially since no one else has children here,” Wei Qing said. She shrugged, “I’ve told them I can terminate the pregnancy safely if they want to wait to have children. I’ve given them a deadline to think it over. But I think they’ll keep it at this point.”

Wei Qing put a vegetable in her mouth and chewed. Wei WuXian stared at A-Yuan making a mess of Granny’s knitting supplies in the guise of ‘helping’. Li Ying Yue, who had come over for dinner, was trying to detangle everything. Granny didn’t look like she minded. Wei Ning sat next to Granny and watched fondly. He’d finally stretched out instead of being balled up like he had been trying to take up as little space as possible. Wei Qing swallowed.

“If it helps, it’s not like they’ll be alone,” Wei Qing said, “Everyone’s going to want to help out with the new babies and Xia Shijing will have Chang Ting as an adviser, same for Xia Bolin and Chang Jianhong. Every kid in this place is going to have a billion uncle’s and aunt’s looking out for them, including you. A-Yuan and A-Yue will jump at the chance to play surrogate older cousins to them too.”

“As long as they’ve thought this through,” Wei WuXian decided.

“It’s your fault anyway.”

“How do I have anything to do with it?” Wei WuXian asked in disbelief.

“The date of conception was around the time of the Yunneng Lantern Festival,” Wei Qing said, “Looks like they took advantage of that private room in the inn.”

Wei WuXian burst out laughing, “Looks like they did!”

A comfortable silence followed for a moment before Wei WuXian bent over and picked up the sword that had been by the table. It was brand new, only completed that day, and hadn’t developed a
sword glare yet. The sheathe and handle were vermillion and the handguard was made of brass into an elegant phoenix in flight. To Wei WuXian’s slight surprise, the yin-yang symbol was embossed on the sheathe and blade near the handguard. Where the name is ordinarily engraved was another symbol that had the yin-yang in the middle and almost illegible characters coming from it in eight directions to form an octagon. It was the eight trigrams symbol.

“This is beautiful,” Wei WuXian said, examining the sword from all angles, “Luo Chen does good work. What are you naming it?”

Wei Qing reached over and tapped the eight trigrams symbol, “Bagua.”

Wei WuXian laughed. Bagua meant eight trigrams.

“Who else has asked for new cultivation swords?” Wei WuXian asked, putting the newly forged sword aside.

“Practically no one,” Wei Qing said, “Shen Shuyi and Shen Jinjing have. They said they’ll need it for teaching disciples. No one else has come forward yet.”

“Is it because they miss their old swords or because they don’t want to tempt the world by having cultivation swords again?”

“More the former,” Wei Qing sighed, finishing her meal, “And they don’t really want or need them because they don’t plan on going on night-hunts. They don’t need cultivation swords to support a sect anyway. Plus, they know that there’s only a limited amount of metal at the moment.”

“Yeah,” Wei WuXian sighed, “I guess the next step is to try and earn a more stable means of income.”

“Good luck!” Wei Qing said, toasting him with her cup of tea.

Wei WuXian made a face. Wei Yuan and Li Ying Yue giggled. Granny also chuckled.

“Why don’t you sing us a song, dear?” Granny asked Li Ying Yue, “Keep A-Ying’s mind off money and future problems.”

Li Ying Yue brightened up before frowning in thought. She gazed at the knitting.

“Ok, the Spinning Song,” Li Ying Yue decided. Wei Yuan stopped messing with the yarn and sat staring at his shijie in anticipation. He loved songs. He still had yarn in his hair.

Li Ying Yue began humming. Recognising the classic song, Wei WuXian pulled out Chenqing to play. A guqin would have been better, he felt. His thoughts flashed to Lan Wangji for a moment before he focussed on the scene in front of him.

“In the span of time, we live out our lives, calmness sweeps us off our feet. In the end, we are left with memories kept. Locked away as they spiral down and fade away from thee. As for me, I’ll sing the song of now. For that’s all that I can do. Though my memories escape me, they’re a part of my heart just as I have thought of you…”

Chapter End Notes
*Shibo = martial uncle.  
A reminder that Shizhi is martial nephew.  
I take no credit for the Spinning Song. The version I listen to is here: Spinning Song 'English Cover'.

I hope you liked Xiao Xingchen and Song ZiChen! They actually haven’t known each other for long at this point, but they’ve become close fairly quickly as tends to happen when you experience and fight life-threatening danger together with someone. I see Xiao Xingchen as someone who doesn’t hesitate to jump in and help and is endlessly curious about everything. We only get to see him in Yi City and a glimpse in the extra bonus chapters. I imagine that he was more subdued after everything that happened before Yi City.

Song ZiChen doesn’t hesitate to help people either, but he’s more of a type to hang back and analyse everything first so he doesn’t jump in headfirst. I also see him as being a bit more of a social recluse/introvert. You can be introverted and not really like people or talking to them and still want to help people. He’s suspicious and compassionate!

Xiao Xingchen is the one leaping into trouble and Song ZiChen leaps after him because this idiot will get himself killed otherwise. Yet Song ZiChen wouldn’t change it for the world because life with Xiao Xingchen is so much more enjoyable.  
Burial Mounds’ History: So, if anyone is wondering about why that story may or may not be familiar, I got the basic idea from Saiyuki Gaiden, altered slightly. Hopefully, it will also be able to fit in with canon HOB with the emperor of heaven being the same guy. Before anyone asks, no, Xie Lian wasn’t involved in this. I’ve thought about what kind of battle would’ve taken place there since the beginning, remembered Saiyuki Gaiden and ran with it.

Of course, now that I’ve finished this chapter, I remembered something else I wanted to write in while XXC and SZC were at the Burial Mounds. Oh well, this just means there’ll be future visits!
He Jianyu was many things. He thought of himself first and foremost as a survivor. He didn’t get caught up in agonising over how things were unfair or in taking revenge on those that wronged him. Not that he *didn’t* take revenge when the opportunity arose, but it was only if he could get away with it and it benefited him in other ways. Otherwise it wasn’t as important as other things in his life such as not dying. That was the most important thing.

The second most important thing to He Jianyu was not being bored. It grated on him when there was nothing to occupy his mind. It felt like his brain turned itself inward to try and scrape itself against the insides of his skull. It drove him insane. There were only so many ways he could think of trying to steal or extort something before he had to turn to something else to occupy him. So he thought about the what the stars were, how big the world is, why the sun moved the way it did. *Anything.* Any mystery, as long as it could occupy his brain so it wouldn’t tear itself to pieces, was good.

He Jianyu had been living on the streets as long as he could remember. Whether he was an orphan or abandoned or runaway, he couldn’t remember and didn’t care. He’d survived to adulthood, well, late teens anyway. Unlike many others. His superior brain helped him with that even if it drove him crazy in other ways. He was able to get jobs doing all kinds of things. He actually had a good reputation. He figured things out quickly and was able to figure out how to make things more efficient in the process. He wasn’t bad-looking either, which helped, even if he was shorter and slighter than most men (better for thieving and making others underestimate him). He had a way of sheepishly smiling that made him look innocent.

But the jobs were easy. Good just for getting money and a warm meal. It made surviving easier and perhaps he could’ve been content with that had he been a normal intelligent person. He Jianyu wasn’t though. He needed mysteries to occupy his brain.

So, when cultivators came to town when He Jianyu was younger, he sneaked after them. How did cultivation work? What made cultivators so different, so much more ethereal than the average person?

He’d been fascinated by what he saw. Cultivators only taught other cultivators and disciples. You had to be born into their world or taken in by some cultivation temple or something similar. There were *secrets* to unravel.

It was a mystery he could figure out, that he could gain more and more clues to understand how their ‘cultivation’ and everything worked! It was the perfect solution and He Jianyu was overjoyed! He’d managed to figure out math and reading, so he could figure this out too.

One of the first things he did was look at the cultivation manuals on sale. He quickly figured out that they were fakes sold by charlatans. This meant he could only find clues from cultivators themselves.
After thinking to himself, He Jianyu decided to try and spy on them whenever he could find them. The ‘Great Sects’ were out. So large and wealthy – they must have high security measures, including things He Jianyu wouldn’t be able to grasp until he knew cultivation.

So, he broke into the smaller ‘sects’ instead. Small families who practiced cultivation and went on night-hunts together. He watched them train, even lucked onto a beginner’s lesson, without them realising. He Jianyu realised quickly that cultivators were much more aware of their surroundings. They could see further and hear much more than the average person. It made He Jianyu much more cautious when dealing with them.

Once, he was daring enough to break into a cultivating family’s house (which was more like a large shack) to read their books.

He Jianyu began to cultivate himself. The only way to know if a hypothesis was correct was to test it, right? He knew it was risky. He could be doing it wrong or he could be at risk of ‘Qi deviation’ which didn’t sound pleasant. But He Jianyu couldn’t resist. He had to know if he was right.

Then, a few years ago (at least He Jianyu thought it was a few years ago; time tended to blur together) a new mystery arose. This one was a mystery even to cultivators. He Jianyu was fascinated.

He Jianyu didn’t care about the Sunshot Campaign. As long as he kept his head down and avoided the cultivators in sun robes, He Jianyu was perfectly fine. He was more interested in hearing about the newest mystery in the cultivation world: The Yiling Patriarch who could harness resentful energy to raise corpses and control them.

Best of all, the normal cultivators couldn’t figure out how the man (Wei WuXian, He Jianyu thought his name was) had done it either. Most of the stories were of the man’s feats on the battlefield with many either gloating at the Wen’s terror or uneasy at the idea of someone being able to control so many fierce corpses.

He Jianyu learned so much from the ensuing conversations as the cultivators tried to figure out how the man had harnessed resentful energy. Not just about this ‘demonic cultivation’, but also about regular cultivation! He Jianyu amused himself by seeking out the Yiling Patriarch one day to thank him. Whoever it was would be so baffled!

Rumours continued about the man. He Jianyu wasn’t bothered though they created conflicting reports about his character over the years. He Jianyu was more interested in the methods of cultivation. He was forced to put demonic cultivation on the backburner. It seemed more dangerous than regular cultivation and it was harder to get accurate facts about it.

Until one day, he was confronted by a smiling man in the golden robes of LanlingJin.

He Jianyu eyed him warily. There were rumours about LanlingJin recently. About trying to assassinate Wei WuXian and a disastrous Discussion Conference.

“He Jianyu, correct?” the man asked politely.

“I am,” He Jianyu confirmed. He wondered if he had to change his name in the future.

“My name is Jin Guangyao. You’ve been on a couple of night-hunts recently in the area, I understand,” Jin Guangyao said, hands clasped politely in front of him.

He Jianyu had been on small night-hunts. He was still amused that he was able to pass for a rogue cultivator just setting out on his own. It had been a profitable few trips. He Jianyu had managed to steal a few qiankun pouches with cultivation supplies that he’d been instantly fascinated with. The
only disappointment was that he’d been unable to get his hands on a Demon Wind Compass. It had been made by the Yiling Patriarch and it made He Jianyu’s fingers itch to get a hold of it.

“I have,” He Jianyu confirmed. He scratched the back of his head with a sheepish smile, looking as harmless as possible, “I’m just starting out.”

The smiling man appeared amiable and elegant. He was about He Jianyu’s height and appeared to have a kind expression to match his permanent smile. He looked very calm, in fact. Too calm, He Jianyu couldn’t read him at all. He thought of the many knives concealed on his person and wondered if he might need them. He Jianyu continued to try and appear harmless. He was very good at it.

“Interestingly, we have yet to find anything about your background and you don’t have a sword,” Jin Guangyao said, “When did you start cultivating?”

Of course He Jianyu didn’t have a sword. If there was one object he couldn’t steal, it was that one. The other man sounded legitimately curious so He Jianyu gave him the truth.

“I’m not sure. I was young, but I’m afraid I never marked the passage of time,” He Jianyu said, plotting escape routes in his head.

“Who was your teacher?” Jin Guangyao continued to inquire.

“I’m afraid you wouldn’t know him,” He Jianyu ducked his head, surreptitiously eyeing the other man, “He’s been gone near the same amount of time as I’d been practicing cultivation.”

Yeah, like He Jianyu was going to admit how intelligent he really was to other people. He certainly wasn’t going to admit that he’d figured everything he knew about cultivation out on his own. Better for them to underestimate him and safer to stay under their radar.

How had he been picked up now?

“So you’ve been practising cultivation with no teacher all these years?” Jin Guangyao sounded impressed.

He Jianyu didn’t let his guard down, “I guess?”

Jin Guangyao looked thoughtful for a moment, “I believe I have an offer for you. How about we discuss it over tea or a meal?”

“I don’t really have any money, I’m afraid,” He Jianyu lied apologetically. There was money in a hidden pouch.

“Oh, don’t worry at all,” Jin Guangyao waved his words off, “Of course I’ll pay. I am the one extending an offer after all.”

What offer? He Jianyu restrained his curiosity, knowing that he’d be told soon.

It turned out the offer was something He Jianyu was very interested in.

“We’ve been searching for cultivators who would help us research the Yiling Patriarch’s demonic cultivation,” Jin Guangyao explained, “Wei-gongzi has refused to let anyone know anything about it. It’s all very strange. Why would he keep the knowledge of such a path to himself when being able to control corpses would reduce potential hazards and civilian fatalities in night-hunts so easily?”
He Jianyu busied himself with the food so he couldn’t be expected to answer. All he had were rumours of the Yiling Patriarch. Whether that was the truth about the man was unknowable. But He Jianyu could tell that Jin Guangyao and his sect wanted knowledge of demonic cultivation for more than ‘reducing hazards and fatalities’. Considering the recent conflict between the Yiling Patriarch and LanlingJin, they probably wanted to show up Wei WuXian or find a weakness in his cultivation to sabotage him.

“We want to discover more about this new path,” Jin Guangyao continued, “Unfortunately, many people are afraid to investigate it due to centuries-old superstition and fear. My father and I were hoping that we could find people out there who aren’t afraid of demonic cultivation and will want to learn about it. I am hoping that you will be one of those people.”

“Why me?” He Jianyu asked. This was an honest question from him and he tried not to let on how much he wanted to learn about demonic cultivation.

“You may have had the basics from your late teacher, but the fact that you were able to figure out so much on your own since then is outstanding,” Jin Guangyao said warmly, “You clearly have what it takes to help unravel the mysteries of an entirely new way of cultivation.”

He Jianyu thought for a moment, chewing his food.

“What exactly would be expected of me?” He Jianyu asked.

Jin Guangyao launched into an explanation. He Jianyu would be a guest cultivator at Koi Tower. That would include room, board and food. He would even be given a stipend that was given to every guest cultivator. He would also be given everything required to experiment with resentful energy. Yes, including access to the library and any notes they had squirreled away on resentful energy, Jin Guangyao confirmed.

He Jianyu considered it carefully. This would be everything he wanted. A place to learn proper cultivation and given the tools he needed. And all he had to do was something he wanted to do anyway.

It was way too good to be true.

“Let me get this straight: you’ll give me free food and correct training in cultivation as well as pay me and all I have to do is research resentful energy and the demonic cultivation the Yiling Patriarch developed?” He Jianyu looked at Jin Guangyao sceptically.

Jin Guangyao laughed gently, “I think you underestimate how many people refuse to touch anything the Yiling Patriarch does with a ten-foot pole.”

“Alright. What’s the catch?” He Jianyu asked.

“Only that we have proof that you are actually researching what we’ve asked you for,” Jin Guangyao said.

“You want results,” He Jianyu guessed. He’d seen some people get impatient when someone couldn’t come up with something they wanted immediately. It would be a bad environment for research.

“That would be ideal,” Jin Guangyao said, “But I am aware that not everyone is the prodigy Wei-gongzi is. What I was thinking was more along the lines of progress reports. You wouldn’t be the only one researching either. We’ve picked up a few people willing to work on this.”
“Would I have to work with them?” He Jianyu asked.

“Only if you want to,” Jin Guangyao assured.

He Jianyu leaned back and thought. This would be the best offer he would ever get in his life. It could still go pear-shaped, but He Jianyu wasn’t going to trust Jin Guangyao or Lanling Jin. Hadn’t they broken hospitality with Wei WuXian? They should probably be thanking every deity they could think of that the Yiling Patriarch had decided to go for a peaceful resolution instead of making Koi Tower into a bloodbath. He might not be so forgiving next time. He Jianyu definitely didn’t want to stick around for that.

So, agree, but keep his escape routes open. And He Jianyu didn’t necessarily need to put *everything* into these ‘progress reports’. Good thing his handwriting was so bad due to lack of practice. That’ll come in useful.

“Very well, you have a deal,” He Jianyu said, “When do I start?”

“I don’t want to be poor. I don’t want to be poor,” Wei WuXian chanted under his breath as he made his way back up the Burial Mounds. Luo Yaling looked at him sympathetically.

“That is why I can’t go back and do something horrible to that piece of…”

“Wei-laozu,” Luo Yaling interrupted, glancing toward the barrier. A black jade token glinted in her hair. For some reason, everyone disapproved of him swearing in front of the kids. Wei WuXian didn’t understand why. How do they think he learned those words? No one minded swearing in front of *him* when he was Li Ying Yue’s age.

“Besides, he’s not saying ‘no’,” Luo Yaling added, “I think you frighten him.”

“Not *enough* apparently,” Wei WuXian grumbled. Then he paused and went over that sentence. When had he grown to count other people’s fear of him as an __asset__?

Ugh. He needed alcohol.

They were just returning from a visit to the landowner in charge of most of Yiling city. All Sects, Great and small, needed funding. Night-hunts by themselves weren’t profitable. Some people could make money off monster parts or something similar. But that wasn’t a stable income. Then there were the night-hunts where all you were hunting were creatures that didn’t leave anything behind, like ghosts, so you couldn’t profit off them. Sometimes, particular ghosts, corpses or monsters would prove too difficult or troublesome and a reward was posted for dealing with them. But that was rare.

Some people would talk about cultivators being paid by villagers for protecting their homes. Some cultivators did do that, usually the unscrupulous ones. It was a point that most respecting cultivators refused monetary payment by people wanting to protect their homes. All cultivators usually asked for was a bed with a roof overhead and maybe a warm meal.

Some rogue cultivators like Luo Qingyang were hired by travellers to protect them on the road. That was acceptable since there was no guarantee they’d even be needed.

But sects were different. A sect was usually a giant machine made of cultivators and everybody who
supported them. Small sects had to scrounge for things like protective clothing or make their own talismans from scratch. Big sects like YunmengJiang needed funding to ensure that everybody was clothed, fed, trained, supplied and that Lotus Pier itself was maintained. Then there was the extra pay to be used for personal things outside of cultivation.

In short, they needed reliable, stable income.

Thankfully there was a solution.

Taxes.

Residents were taxed by the landowner who was taxed by the lords in charge of the region who were in turn taxed by the Emperor. The Emperor made it so Sects were tax-free so long as they did their jobs. The region gave the local sect a portion of their taxes in exchange for living in a safer area. Great Sects tended to cover a larger range of towns and areas than smaller sects because they had more people and, therefore, also needed more funding. One of the reasons LanlingJin was so wealthy was because they had the wealthy and populous trading capital as one of the areas under their jurisdiction.

In the old days when the Great Sect's had only just been starting up, representatives needed to travel and meet with the Emperor to get permission to start a sect. These days, new sects were more common, particularly after the power vacuum caused by the Sunshot Campaign. You only needed to go to the local lords to make a deal and they would send a notification to the Emperor.

This was one of the very few times the cultivation world intersected with the mundane one. As much as cultivators liked to portray that they were above such worldly things like money, they needed it just as much as a regular person.

So, here Wei WuXian was, with Luo Yaling because she was much better at money and negotiating than him, trying to talk to the local landowner or minor lord or whatever he was for this same deal.

The stupid fat man was trying to hold out on giving Wei WuXian funding. It was ridiculous! No minor sect had ever tried to cover Yiling because that meant they’d have to take charge of the Burial Mounds. It had been too intimidating a task for most cultivators. This was probably the first time anyone had made such an offer to settle a sect here and the fat man didn’t want to give up a portion of his own income to protect the region from the things cultivators hunted. Probably because he never had to deal with them himself.

Wei WuXian was asked to prove himself before the fat lordling would make a deal. There was a situation about a day or two ride away that needed a cultivator to look into it. Well, fine. Wei WuXian would look into it anyway. But why did he need to prove himself? Hadn’t taming the Burial Mounds not been proof enough?

When Wei WuXian had accompanied Jiang Cheng to restore YunmengJiang’s funding, the local lord had been so grateful that Yunmeng was still in the care of the Jiang family instead of some branch of QishanWen. He’d even offered to help find workers to help rebuild Lotus Pier.

QishanWen, Wei WuXian had discovered, had been notoriously tight-fisted and had extorted large amounts of money for their branch offices without doing as much of the work as they should. The branch office in Yiling under Wei (then, Wen) Qing had been a rare branch where it had a decent reputation due to Wei Qing and her people making their services as healers free in return.

Wei WuXian sighed. It looked like he’d be making another trip. He’d take Khan of course, but A-Ning could probably stay behind, if he wanted. Mulan could go wherever she thought she was
Even though Wei WuXian was trying to establish a sect’s deal with funding, there were few cultivators in the Burial Mounds who could go night-hunting. Wei WuXian, Wei Ning and Wei Qing was it. Wei Ning didn’t like to go alone and Wei Qing was primarily a healer so it fell to Wei WuXian to do all of the night-hunting at this point. Shen Jinjing volunteered to help with the local night-hunting. Her sword was in the process of being made. Once it was, she could go night-hunting much to Shen Shuyi’s silent worry. Due to the injury to Shen Shuyi’s meridians, it wasn’t safe for Shen Shuyi to join her wife on every night-hunt. You never know when a simple night-hunt might turn complex and since Shen Shuyi’s injury damaged her spiritual energy flow, it was too risky for her to night-hunt too frequently.

Wei WuXian paused before noticing something at the base of the Burial Mounds. A small figure was jogging towards them, not that they’d noticed. Luo Yaling put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile. Wei WuXian waited and then jumped in front of them. The little girl yelped and tried to dodge before she ran into them.

“Shizun!” Li Ying Yue whined, looking up at him with a pout. She tried to remove the strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail to hang in front of her sweaty, flushed face. They flopped back into their prior position.

“Focus on your surroundings, A-Yue,” Wei WuXian attempted to scold through his laughter.

Li Ying Yue groaned. She tried to massage her leg muscles after she caught her breath a bit. Mulan, who must have been keeping an eye on the girl, swooped to land on Wei WuXian’s outstretched hand.

“What did you do?” Wei WuXian asked. Shen Shuyi believed in making her students run laps as punishment the same way Madam Yu had once made her disciples hold huge weights in the training grounds. Lotus Pier wasn’t really conducive to running laps since most of it was on the water. Swimming laps maybe, but not running them.

“Shifu caught me writing music instead of taking notes,” Li Ying Yue admitted sheepishly. Shifu was what Li Ying Yue had decided to call Shen Shuyi.

“You can work on your music in your own time. You need to know the theoretical stuff before you can learn the cooler physical stuff or have free time to decide what to do for yourself,” Wei WuXian told her. Li Ying Yue nodded in resigned understanding.

“Though, at least you should be doing proper stretches now, instead of attempting to massage your muscles,” Wei WuXian said.

“But I still have two more laps of the mountain to go,” Li Ying Yue protested.

“Yes, but you stopped to take a break and talk to me. You should be stretching in that time or jogging on the spot, not whatever you’re doing right now. So, stretch,” Wei WuXian ordered.

Li Ying Yue huffed a sigh and began to stretch. Wei WuXian began to correct her. Luo Yaling decided to leave them to it and wished them luck before returning home. Mulan fluttered to a branch so Wei WuXian could try and get Li Ying Yue off balance in her stretches. Several times Li Ying Yue nearly fell face first into the dirt. A good sense of balance was very important in a cultivator. Otherwise they had trouble staying on their swords. It took a very klutzy cultivator to fall off their sword. Wei WuXian had seen it happen before with one of his, now deceased, shidi.
After Wei WuXian was satisfied with her stretches, he sent her off to finish Shen Shuyi’s laps. He then went to find the older woman. She was sitting in the shade with tea steaming in mismatched cups in a tray beside her with Shen Jinjing. Shen Shuyi was listening as her wife talked about the progress Luo Chen made on her new sword.

After getting an update on Li Ying Yue’s progress, Wei WuXian went to fetch Suibian and find Wei Ning. Wei Ning was playing hide and scare with A-Yuan among the bamboo. A-Yuan had to find his uncle before his uncle could sneak up to him and scare him. Wei Ning had found it surprisingly fun to use the noises he made as a fierce corpse to play with his nephew especially since A-Yuan started giggling after he shrieked in surprise every time. A-Yuan was also getting surprisingly sneaky for a four-year-old thanks to this game. Li Ying Yue like to play too, as both finder and scarer.

“A-Ning! I could use your help for something!” Wei WuXian after Wei Ning won, grabbing A-Yuan off the ground so his shrieks turned into high-pitched laughter. “A-Yuan, do you want to come? It might be a bit boring though.”

“I’ll come!” A-Yuan said. He squirmed down from his uncle to cling at Wei WuXian’s leg.

“What are we doing?” Wei Ning asked.

“Obstacle course for A-Yue to practice her balance,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, “We’ll need to cut down some branches and bamboo to make things she can hop on.”

Wei Ning nodded in understanding.

“Where are we building it?” he asked.

“In the river,” Wei WuXian said, “That way she has something to break her fall.”

Wei Ning blinked, “Really?”

“That’s how we did it in Lotus Pier,” Wei WuXian explained, “We had a course near the banks. The further out you got, the harder it was. If you fell in, you had to swim back to the start. Naturally, you had to know how to swim before this. But everyone did by that age.”

Except for Wei WuXian, who sometimes struggled against the stronger currents. But the practice he gained from falling in so far out had actually helped him become a better swimmer. A-Yuan had his lessons with Jiang Cheng in Lotus Pier the morning after the Lantern Festival while Wei WuXian had been sleeping in. Later, Wei WuXian remembered that Li Ying Yue might not have known how to swim. Unfortunately, Jiang Cheng had been too busy by then, but Jiang Yanli had volunteered to teach the girl and Wei WuXian and Wei Yuan had decided to accompany them. To their delight, Li Ying Yue took to swimming like a duck to water. In contrast, Wei Qing had been resolutely standing away from the water the entire time.

The river that ran through the Burial Mounds was too small and shallow to be considered a proper river by Wei WuXian’s standards, though many of the other residents disagreed. In the deepest part, the water came up to Wei WuXian’s waist. He’d taken A-Yuan out there to practice swimming since the festival, though he’d made the child swear not to go swimming unless he had someone with him.

Wei WuXian and Wei Ning spent the rest of the afternoon cutting bamboo and thick branches down to size. Wei Yuan tried to help carry them to the river. Wei WuXian plotted out where they all would go in the mud. The bamboo and wood would be stepping blocks for trainees to learn to balance on them without falling into the river. They decided to plant the bamboo poles first and do the wooden ones the next day.
They had been going to do the wooden ones that day, but they’d gotten distracted. Wei WuXian, feeling mischievous, decided to splash a lot of water onto Wei Yuan and then had to hold on to the flailing child while he laughed. Wei Yuan decided to get revenge by clinging to Wei WuXian with one hand and trying to splash him with the other. Wei WuXian continued laughing even as nearly choked on the river water hitting him in the face. The ensuing splash fight ended when they ganged up on Wei Ning who had still been trying to continue working. Once they’d tried to combine to give a big splash to Wei Ning, Wei Ning had surprised both of them by turning around and practically sending a wave on the two of them.

Parent and son both burst out laughing once they got out of the water. Wei Ning, who had not expected how big the splash he sent would be, kept trying to profusely apologise.

After his dinner, Wei WuXian lay back on the ground and sighed. At some point, someone had decided to build a fire-pit and have a bonfire most nights. It was a place for them to gather and have meals together. It was a substitution until the communal eating hall would be ready. Since the hall would be the biggest and most important undertaking yet, it was taking a while to build.

Somewhere in front of them Wei Qing and Shen Jinjing debated on who would take Li Ying Yue back to her bed. The poor girl had been exhausted and had fallen asleep not long after she had eaten. Granny had to restrain A-Yuan from waking her up.

In the meantime, full of food and sleepy himself, Wei WuXian began thinking about what he had to do and had already completed. The Stygian Tiger Seal was destroyed and the remaining piece that Nie Mingjue had been so worried about was sealed away in a place no-one would think of. Hopefully, after he had investigated this night-hunt for the stupid lord whose name Wei WuXian had already forgotten, they would have more funding. Even if he couldn’t exactly claim he had a sect, he had an apprentice, at least. Said apprentice’s training was underway. Even Wei Yuan had started being given games that were actually cultivation practices in disguise.

Wei WuXian had spoken to Mianmian before she left and told her that they were thinking of starting a sect and offered to let her join. Luo Qingyang had hesitated, saying that she wanted to focus on her golden core rather than try and learn a whole new way of cultivating. She had been thoughtful after Wei WuXian told her that she didn’t have to learn demonic cultivation. He told her that she didn’t have to decide until a few years into the future though. It would take a while for him to gain enough disciples to fill a sect.

Speaking of disciples, Wei WuXian would have to take some time to go and wander around in hopes of finding someone who had it what takes to learn demonic cultivation like he had with Li Ying Yue. Wei Qing had hit him with her fan when he told her that was his plan to find more disciples. But, as he told her, it worked for Li Ying Yue!

There was a letter drop set up for Mianmian, Ma Jun and anyone else to send letters to the people living on the Burial Mounds. Wei Qing was in semi-frequent contact with the local midwife for Xia Shijing and Chang Ting along with Lai Ai.

Hmm. That was something on his to-do list. He had to check on the how the babies were developing with resentful energy.

Overall, he didn’t have that many things on his to-do list. It was manageable even if he had remained busy so…

A memory of white and solemn yellow eyes burst before Wei WuXian’s eyes. He groaned. He still didn’t know what to do about ‘feelings’ for Lan Wangji. He’d decided to not decide anything just yet. Which was code for ‘I don’t want to deal with this right now. Or ever.’ In fact, with helping Li
Ying Yue settle in, the Lantern Festival and even meeting his shishu, Wei WuXian had barely thought about him!

… too much, anyway.

He wasn’t even around.

Wei WuXian groaned again, grinding his palms into his eyes, not noticing the concerned looks of those surrounding him.

“I’ll take A-Yue to her bed,” he said out loud. He really needed to stop thinking about this.

Chapter End Notes

He Jianyu 何建宇 = He means what/who/how etc. Jianyu means ‘building the universe’. I basically wanted his name to mean ‘how to build the universe’. It was so interesting writing the exchange between him and JGY. Two sneaky, manipulative people who hide behind amiable masks. Who do you think is going to be more duped?

As for the second part: can someone explain to me how the financial system works in MDZS?! A reviewer said they get money from night-hunting. Like, yeah, no they don’t. In the book they refuse money from people because it wasn’t right to take their money when they were going to perform the night-hunt anyway and some of those night-hunts take place in areas where there are no residents. And don’t say they get money for every monster or whatever they defeat. This isn’t a video game where they drop money as they disappear. Who would pay for those monsters etc. to be defeated? How would they even get proof that whoever did actually kill that monster or exorcize a ghost? It isn’t logical.

So how do they get income?

Would you believe I’ve been wanting to rant about this since the first couple of chapters of this story?

So this is my explanation and the reason why some sects are wealthier than others.

Next is an actual arc. I’m shocked at myself.
Hi guys!

Unfortunately I have some not-so-good news. Due to my work life and other things I’m dealing with in RL I’m going to have to drop my schedule down to every two weeks. If I catch up to my schedule I’ll start posting weekly again. But if I don’t have a chapter up one weekend, it means that I’ve had to skip a week due to various obligations. There will be a new chapter the week after with certainty.

I hoped that I wouldn’t have to change my update schedule, but unfortunately things don’t always work out the way we want.

In the meantime: enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wei WuXian wanted to sigh. He’d left home early that morning (or what he considered early anyway). The night-hunt was about a day’s ride without breaks, impossible for any horse but his. He was to investigate a village for malicious spirits. Wei WuXian didn’t know much, but apparently a family home had burned down with only one survivor, the youngest daughter who wasn’t even ten yet. The girl had severe burns and had been in a catatonic state that she’d only just recovered from. But, according to the stupid fat lord, there had been strange events and incidents since the house had burned, believed to be from ghosts.

There wasn’t much more information than that and Wei WuXian wasn’t even taking those things as 100% true until he’d verified them at the village. It was possible these ghosts could be anything from her family concerned about their youngest member to her family wanting her to ‘join’ them and prepared to do so forcefully.

Wei WuXian desperately hoped for the former, if only for the sake of that little girl.

This was the second time he’d come across a girl under ten who’d lost her entire family. Wei WuXian could only hope that her situation was better than Li Ying Yue’s.

On top of all that, it was starting to rain.

Wei WuXian’s hair was weighted down against his skull and the back of his neck. Water ran down his back under his robes. Khan was also noticeably irritated with the mud he was walking through and the rain soaking him. He gave off the same smell as a graveyard in the rain. Mulan wasn’t with them, thankfully. She hated the rain.

This was ridiculous. He had to get them out of the rain or they’d both end up at the village annoyed enough to let their auras of fear loose which was precisely what Wei WuXian didn’t want to happen. He needed the people in the area to trust that Wei WuXian and his disciples would take care of the supernatural threats. Nor become terrified of him. He needed those ‘Lord of Evil’ rumours to stop, at least in the places he called home.
Sighing again, Wei WuXian looked around for a convenient overhang or something. There wasn’t anything near for a convenient cave which Wei WuXian lamented. There were always convenient caves in these kinds of situations in books and stories. But, noooo, he couldn’t have that kind of luck.

Khan picked up the pace in a bouncing trot. The warhorse went off trail for a bit. Wei WuXian hoped he’d found something. The trees allowed occasional cover from the rain in return for bigger droplets of water in infrequent drips.

In turned out that the horse had. Up ahead was what looked like a woodcutter’s cottage judging by the covered pile of logs. There was also a stable, thankfully. Wei WuXian slid off, feet squelching into the muddy grass. He dashed to the door and banged on it.

“Anybody home?” Wei WuXian shouted. He paused. No answer. Khan whinnied, flashing an image of the empty-looking stable and the lock preventing Khan from getting out of the rain.

Wei WuXian cursed.

“Excuse me! I’m borrowing your stable!” he shouted just in case. Wei WuXian dashed back into the rain to unbolt the stable door for the warhorse who charged in as soon as it was open enough.

Wei WuXian made a face as he tried to brush and shake off as much water as he could, removing the wet hair from his face. Khan shuffled around further inside and Wei WuXian sighed again before hunting down some grooming tools.

As much as he told people that undead horses didn’t need grooming gear, it turned out that relying on them to stay clean by themselves was another matter entirely when they were as eccentric as these three. Wei Qing had been forced to groom out dried mud from Shang before. It was also discovered that if they got wet than it was just better to groom out the water as soon as possible or they’d smell like decay and rot.

As much as Wei WuXian had gotten used to such a smell, that didn’t mean he really wanted to smell it when he didn’t have too.

He was part way through brushing Khan down when the stable door opened.

“Hello?” a pleasant male voice called out as he were strolling along in a sunlit garden. No care at all.

Wei WuXian paused. Something niggled at his senses.

“Here!” Wei WuXian called out, “Are you the owner of this place?”

Wei WuXian would bet that he wasn’t.

“No, just another unfortunate traveller caught in the rain,” the man said. Wei WuXian could hear his boots walking towards him.

Bet won.

“There hasn’t been anyone here for a while, I believe,” the man continued, coming into sight.

Wei WuXian took him in. Pale, with one dark eye and the other under a black eyepatch, long hair unbound by anything except a single braid near his face capped by a red coral bead. He was wearing a red tunic which Wei WuXian mentally raised an eyebrow at. That kind of rich colour meant expensive fabric and dye which meant the person in front was definitely not poor. Attached to the man’s silver belt was a sword, possibly a dao. Paired with the silver belt was a pair of engraved
silver armbraces. Those, along with the very good boots and the cream coloured pants, helped point to wealth. The man was even carrying a folded red umbrella which Wei WuXian couldn’t help but look at enviously for a moment to the man’s apparent amusement.

Yet, the man was casual and deceptively confident. Combined with the sword and the way he held himself, pointed at someone who knew how to fight and knew he was good at it. Wei WuXian had looked like that once. Well, a cockier version anyway.

Something was still off about him and it took a moment before it clicked.

Oh.

He really needed to train that ability; he’d barely noticed he’d even had it until now.

Well, at least he’d figured out why the man before him was so confident.

“Hopefully they won’t mind us squatting then,” Wei WuXian said, “Which way are you heading after this?”

The man leaned casually against a beam, observing idly. Wei WuXian couldn’t help showing his surprise when he claimed he didn’t know or care.

“I am merely a wanderer,” he said, “What’s your destination?” Despite his question, he didn’t seem fully invested in anything, holding himself aloof from the conversation.

“I’m a cultivator and there’s been reports of ghosts that I’ve been asked to check out,” Wei WuXian said.

“Oh?” the man raised an elegant eyebrow.

“I don’t know the facts for sure,” Wei WuXian admitted, “A house burned down with only a single survivor, who is a child, and that was thought to be the origin of the malicious ghosts. I’ll be able to investigate more when I get there.”

The man nodded in understanding.

“My name is Hua Cheng,” he introduced himself.

“Wei WuXian,” he replied in kind, “This is Khan.” Khan nickered.

The man didn’t react to Wei WuXian’s name which would have sent alarm bells ringing if Wei WuXian hadn’t already figured him out. Still, had the man known he was a demonic cultivator and, therefore already knew his name, or does he actually have no clue?

“Perhaps we should travel together after the rain lets up?” Wei WuXian offered, nearly finished with the horse. Hua Cheng shrugged.

“I brought a sheet for cover for you to get into the house since my umbrella is better for one person,” Hua Cheng said instead.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian said gratefully.

They didn’t make much small talk while waiting for the rain to fizzle out. Hua Cheng took out some dice and rolled them in his hand. Hua Cheng said that he travelled everywhere and anywhere, and Wei WuXian told him that he was trying to better establish himself as a cultivator.
Wei WuXian still kept his guard up but felt that the other man simply didn’t care enough about Wei WuXian to do anything to him. It was actually an amusing novelty to Wei WuXian. Steadily, Wei WuXian began to trust that he wouldn’t be stabbed in the back or something.

“Do you have experience with cultivators?” Wei WuXian asked idly after Hua Cheng asked if he was travelling on his own, since Hua Cheng knew most cultivators night-hunted in groups or pairs.

Hua Cheng didn’t answer for a moment.

“I knew a cultivator a long time ago,” Hua Cheng said finally.

Wei WuXian didn’t pry further.

“Do you want to help with my investigation then? You’re just wandering around looking for entertainment anyway. Might as well help this child and her deceased family with me,” Wei WuXian offered.

Hua Cheng gave him a peculiar look at that. Wei WuXian wasn’t bothered. Either Hua Cheng would agree to his suggestion or not. Wei WuXian would just have to keep an eye out either way.

It was just as the sky lightened and the rain was reduced to sprinkling that Hua Cheng nodded and agreed.

They made surprisingly good time after that considering that they both had to walk with Khan plodding along behind.

The village wasn’t overly large. It was more of a stop along a semi-common trade route to the capital from Lanling. The head and spokesman of the village let them in for tea. Wei WuXian ignored the prickling of danger up his neck from having Hua Cheng walk behind him. The other man looked like a bored young master. At least he wasn’t being rude, just distant. Wei WuXian put it aside to focus on getting all the facts for this case.

“The house belonged to a poet from the capital,” the spokesman started explaining after pleasantries were over and his wife had poured the tea, “A scholar, so he had quite a few books and loose papers. We believe the family’s cat had knocked over lamp in Master Xu’s library which started the fire. The bedroom of Master Xu and his wife was right over the library, so we think they died of smoke inhalation in their sleep before the fire reached them. Xu Baoli, the older daughter, was fourteen and had her room locked so she couldn’t have escaped. Xu Biyu was Master Xu’s younger daughter and the only survivor. Her room was the farthest away from the fire. She used to be quite lively compared to her calmer older sister. We believe, from her injuries and how we found her, that she had woken from the fire and jumped from her window. Luckily, it had just snowed so she had something to cushion her landing.”

The 8-year-old girl had still sustained painful burns and a fractured arm. She’d been catatonic under medicine, shock and grief for months. Strange things happened around her while she had been catatonic, and she had said strange things, but the villagers had brushed it off.

“Xu Biyu always had such a wild imagination,” the spokesman’s wife explained, “She’d dream up the strangest things. Cities that existed under water or a ship that flew through clouds. She’d have tea parties with her stuffed animals and hold long conversations with them. Combined with the medicine we just thought it was her dreaming again.”

It was only after Xu Biyu had recovered enough to walk and do things on her own again that problems really started up.
“Things would randomly get broken,” the spokesman said sighing, “We thought it was her acting out. After she woke, she became strange, well, stranger than usual, and began to misbehave. Not wanting to stay at her caretaker’s place, refusing to take medicine, wandering around at night chasing cats. It was only after a door was damaged beyond the capacity of any child that we began to realise.”

“Xu Biyu would act like she can hear things and see things that the rest of us couldn’t,” the man’s wife said concerned, “We thought she’d gone mad from grief and her injuries. But when we confronted her about the things, we thought she had broken…”

“The table broke,” her husband continued, “It was a big sturdy table at that, and no one was even close enough to touch it. It was like someone smashed it right through the middle. Splinters went everywhere.”

“Were there any near Xu Biyu?” Wei WuXian asked.

“No, she was in a clear area.”

“Some people are saying that she’s a child of misfortune,” the wife said, conspiringly. “After what happened to her family and everything that’s happened since?”

“I doubt it,” Wei WuXian said, brushing off the groundless accusation, “Where is Xu Biyu staying? You mentioned a caretaker?”

“Master Xu occasionally met with some students from the capital. They would come up here for parties and favours. There had been a party of them staying in the village at the time. They had gone to a party held at Master Xu’s a few days beforehand. They were all horrified at the fire. In the end, after much debate, one of them decided to remain behind to make sure Xu Biyu was being taken care of. After seeing his concern, Xu Biyu was released to his custody after her injuries had mostly healed,” the spokesman explained.

“He’s a nice helpful young man,” his wife input, “So very compassionate. But Xu Biyu’s wildness must be very trying for him.”

“We’ll need to speak with him,” Wei WuXian decided, “But first: can you tell me what the late Xu family was like?”

The spokesman and his wife acquiesced and began to talk about the late family. The Xu patriarch was an accomplished scholar and poet whose head could be in the clouds even as he seriously debated upon the meanings of notable poems. He was an affectionate father who doted upon his daughters and never seemed to wish for a son. He even taught his daughters everything he knew about poems and other scholarly things which seemed to have surprised the spokesman and his wife.

Madam Xu was a woman of peerless elegance and the one who corralled their daughters so they could appear presentable. She was both someone who wanted things done properly and with good manners, but took her husband’s educating their daughters as natural. She was kind and dignified and a subject of much admiration in the village. That she could still be considered beautiful after two daughters certainly helped.

Xu Baoli, the eldest daughter, took after her mother. Even at fourteen, she was already beautiful and elegant with proper manners. A dutiful daughter and sister. She could debate with her father’s students on poetry (a fact the spokesman seemed uncomfortable admitting) and play the guzheng. She never seemed to mind her adventurous and imaginative younger sister, often taking care of her when their parents were busy and encouraging Xu Biyu’s strange questions and wild imagination.
What could be found of their bodies from the burnt-out wreck had been cremated and given the proper rites. There could be no problem with the way the bodies and funerary rite had been handled.

Wei WuXian left the spokesman’s house thoughtfully. He barely took notice of Hua Cheng following. The sun had set in the meantime so there were few people in the streets. Only in the restaurant district was there anything lively.

“What do you think?” Wei WuXian asked Hua Cheng idly. Hua Cheng shrugged, indifferent.

“I wouldn’t know,” Hua Cheng said, “The family seems normal enough. But I’m not sure what kind of ghosts would break things, probably frightening their family member, but not want to harm them at the same time.”

Wei WuXian hummed in agreement. If the Xu family ghosts didn’t want to harm Xu Biyu, they probably didn’t want her to join them just yet. That was a good sign. But then, why were they so violent?

Something wasn’t adding up here.

“What did you make of the claim that the girl is a child of misfortune?” Hua Cheng asked. There was something off in his voice. Wei WuXian mentally shrugged it off.

“Ridiculous,” Wei WuXian snorted, “If someone’s that unlucky it must be curse of some kind and curses can be broken.”

“What if they were born under an unlucky star?” Hua Cheng continued.

“Still wouldn’t mean much,” Wei WuXian said after thinking for a moment, “A child born under an unlucky star can’t be unlucky all the time. Same as a child born under a fortunate star can’t be lucky all the time. Besides, in a situation like this, I’d say that the child would be even more of a victim. It’s not their fault after all.”

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything in response to that.

Wei WuXian stopped in surprise. A white cat had run towards them. Without fear, it began to twine around Wei WuXian’s ankles. Wei WuXian was stunned. Usually animals ran away from him (except dogs unfortunately), this was the first time something had run toward him.

“Wait! Come back, Chai Jun!” a girl burst out of the same narrow road the cat had come from and stopped before she could run into them.

The girl looked up at them stunned and slightly out of breath. She was wearing clothes that looked clean and weren’t messy, a remarkable thing for a girl her age. Strangely, her hair had been cut short, barely brushing her shoulders.

“Xu Biyu?” Hua Cheng asked.

“I… yes,” the girl, now revealed to be Xu Biyu said. Wei WuXian suddenly understood. It was likely that Xu Biyu’s hair had been singed and they’d been forced to cut off the damaged hair, leaving it short. Xu Biyu couldn’t meet their eyes, focussing on the now purring cat instead.

“Why were you doing that?” she hissed, picking up the cat hurriedly and backing away. The cat, despite his prior running away, looked perfectly content to be in the girl’s arms.

Wei WuXian crouched down, putting himself more at the girl’s level and smiled. He did his best to
“Hello Xu Biyu,” he said, “My name is Wei WuXian, and this is Hua Cheng. We’re here to find out why your parents and older sister can’t move on.”

The girl didn’t react to his name either, Wei WuXian had been gambling on that. The spokesman had only mused that the name had sounded familiar which Wei WuXian counted as a good thing.

Xu Biyu still looked suspicious and about to bolt, clutching the cat like a lifeline.

“Have you eaten dinner yet? We could talk over a meal,” Wei WuXian suggested. He really should save his money, but Wei WuXian was of a school of thought that conversations always came easier over food or alcohol. Since alcohol was out of the picture due to the girl’s age, food it would have to be.

“Not hungry,” Xu Biyu said, still wary.

“Well then, is there somewhere you want to go so we can talk? Anywhere you want,” Wei WuXian said.

Xu Biyu hesitated. Wei WuXian heard a rustle and saw Hua Cheng also kneel from the corner of his eye. Looks like the other man had finally decided to stop being an indifferent observer.

“It’s entirely up to you,” Hua Cheng said.

Xu Biyu hesitates more, but when neither pushed her for a quick decision, she decided to trust them. The girl takes them into a small public garden. It was very pretty and in such a hidden spot that only an adventurous child could discover it unless you knew it was there.

“Can you not tell anyone about Chai Jun?” Xu Biyu asked, clutching the cat.

“Who?” Wei WuXian asked, baffled.

“The cat,” Hua Cheng said. To Xu Biyu he asked: “Is this the cat you had with your family? The one that knocked over the lamp?”

“That wasn’t Chai Jun!” Xu Biyu cried. She paused for a moment, gathering herself, “I mean, Chai Jun is my family’s cat. But he didn’t knock over anything! He couldn’t have.”

“Why not?” Wei WuXian asked.

Xu Biyu looked at defiantly, like she wasn’t sure they’d believe her.

“Because Chai Jun was upstairs, in my room, with me,” Xu Biyu said, “He always sleeps in my room and my door was closed. Chai Jun is the one that saved my life. He woke me up and led me to the window. He couldn’t have been downstairs.”

Wei WuXian frowned at that. That was possible. In things like fire, animals always noticed before their humans. It was very likely. But it was also possible that the cat knocked over the lamp and then ran straight to Xu Biyu’s room.

“But then why were we told that the cat knocked over the lamp?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Because no one listened to me after I woke up!” Xu Biyu cried, “They told me that the medicine made me confused and it did: there are still things I don’t remember. But I remember Chai Jun waking me up and jumping toward the window. And I always take Chai Jun to my room at night to
“So, it wasn’t him!”

“Xu Biyu,” Wei WuXian said gently, “Can you tell me what you do remember from that night?”

Xu Biyu looked hesitant but nodded.

“We were in the library and everyone’s right about one thing, it was a fire-trap,” Xu Biyu began slowly. “We’d been reading or playing music. My parents and sister went to bed. I took Chai Jun and a candle. I swear I put out the lamp in the library! I went to bed and closed the door, like I usually do. There’s usually a dim lamp lit in the hallway in case one of us had to get up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I have nightmares and I like to go to jiejie’s room if Chai Jun can’t help. I slept; I think. I had strange dreams. Or maybe it was the medicine. I’m not sure.”

Wei WuXian nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“What were the dreams?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xu Biyu hesitated, “The hallway lamp wasn’t lit. I opened my door a little, quietly as I could. I thought I saw a shadow at the end of the hallway going past my parents’ room. It was heading towards my sister’s room and mine. I remember being scared. I closed the door and went under the covers and I heard strange noises. I thought there was a monster, or it was a nightmare. Next thing I know, Chai Jun jumped on me and there was smoke, and the hallway looked the same colour as a fireplace. I tried to go through, but it was so hot, and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Chai Jun jumped at to the window and when I followed, he jumped outside, so I did too. I fell in the snow and I swear I could see some sort of creature at the tree line that ran away. But that might have been a shadow…”

Xu Biyu trailed off, uncertain, “I must’ve passed out after that.”

Wei WuXian nodded. That was very uncertain testimony. Very suspicious testimony at that. A shadow and strange noises at the same night as a suspicious fire? It was possible that it was only a nightmare. But, if the deaths had been caused due to suspicious circumstances, then it would explain the ghosts’ behaviour. They were worried that Xu Biyu might be killed in an ‘accident’ like they had been. Following this theory, the easiest way for them to calm down and pass on would be to ensure that Xu Biyu was safe. Which meant finding out the true circumstances of her family’s death.

There was also one thing that rung suspicious bells in Wei WuXian’s head and a glance towards Hua Cheng’s frowning face said that he had picked up on it too.

“You didn’t lock your door?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xu Biyu shook her head, “I don’t like feeling trapped somewhere. I used to always have my door open a little to let in the hallway light, but I was told that was for babies, so I started closing my door fully.”

“You still didn’t lock your door even after you saw something scary in the hallway?” Wei WuXian asked.

“I didn’t think of it,” Xu Biyu said, shamefaced, “I was afraid it would hear me.”

“What about your parents or sister?” Wei WuXian asked carefully, “Did they lock their doors?”

“No,” Xu Biyu answered, “Well, sometimes my parents do, but not all night and jiejie never locks her door. She says I’m always welcome to sleep with her after a nightmare.”

The spokesman of the village had said that Xu Baoli’s door had been locked.
“Where do you keep the keys to your rooms?” Wei WuXian asked.

“In our rooms, or with us, if we’ve locked them,” Xu Biyu replied, looking confused.

They had to go check out the house, Wei WuXian decided. But it wouldn’t be a good idea to take Xu Biyu with them.

“Thank you, Xu Biyu,” Wei WuXian said, “You’ve given us a lot of information. Are you going back h- to where you’re staying now?”

Xu Biyu shook her head. She had a stubborn look on her face.

“I’m going to get my rabbit,” she said in an intense tone that said, ‘nothing is going to stop me’.

Wei WuXian was caught up in being impressed that such a young and grieved girl could make such a tone that her actual words slipped by him for moment.

“Sorry. Your what?” Wei WuXian asked.

“My rabbit!” Xu Biyu looked upset now, “My aunt told me that Master Gu has him. So, I was going there to ask for it back when I saw Chai Jun. People hate Chai Jun because they say he’s bad luck and killed my family, so I ran after him.”

“You have a pet rabbit?” Wei WuXian asked in confusion, “Wait, your aunt? I thought you lived with one of your father’s former students. Why aren’t you living with your aunt?”

“No, my rabbit’s a toy,” Xu Biyu said, “But he reminds me of a dear friend who’s always late. And I wasn’t allowed to live with my aunt because she lives in a brothel. Sorry, because she’s ‘not reputable’. I go to visit her anyway.”

“You don’t see her work, do you?” Wei WuXian asked cautiously.

“No, Auntie makes sure she keeps me away from stuff like that,” Xu Biyu said, “She says I’ve got a chance to live properly like my mother and that I shouldn’t waste it.”

“A wise woman,” Hua Cheng murmured.

“She used to sneak over to my house in disguise to have lunch with my mother and play with me and jiejie,” Xu Biyu said. For the first time, she showed a smile

“Alright then,” Wei WuXian decided, “Why don’t we escort you to this Master Whoever to help you get your rabbit back?”

“Really?” Xu Biyu asked surprised. Wei WuXian wasn’t sure what it meant that the girl was repeatedly surprised by them talking to her or listening to her. It was like, since she lost her family, she was expected to rely only on herself. He really had to talk to this caretaker of hers.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian said, looking at Hua Cheng who nodded in agreement.

Xu Biyu led the way. She’d been forced to drop the cat, but it had stayed near the forest so Wei WuXian convinced her it would be fine. On the way Xu Biyu told them about Master Gu. He was a man who helped her father sell his books of poetry. After the fire, he had taken charge of her father’s funds to pay for Xu Biyu’s medical bills.

Wei WuXian was having flashbacks to Li Ying Yue’s situation again.
“I like rabbits,” Wei WuXian told Xu Biyu, “They’re so plump and make good meat.”

Wei WuXian burst out laughing at the horrified look on Xu Biyu’s face.

“I caught two live rabbits and gave them to someone once,” Wei WuXian continued.

“That’s nice of you,” Xu Biyu said, eyes round, “Did they keep them?”

“I think so,” Wei WuXian said, thinking about Lan Wangji. “I did tell him we should barbeque them, but he lived in a place that forbade killing of any kind, so he got a bit upset with me. He didn’t like it when I broke the rules.”

“Some rules are rather silly, I think,” Xu Biyu said, “But then, why did you catch the rabbits and give them to him?”

“Oh, I just did that because I knew it would annoy him,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully.

At this point even Hua Cheng was side eyeing him in a way that asked: ‘are you serious?’

“I wonder what he did with them?” Wei WuXian mused to himself.

“Here it is!” Xu Biyu said, running up a little to open the door and walk straight in. Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng followed. There were a lot of artwork everywhere. The whole lot looked very expensive.

“Master Gu – that’s my rabbit!” Xu Biyu’s voice changed part-way through. She had already knocked and walked through a door to what looked like an office of some kind.

“What is with you and this rabbit?” a man’s voice exclaimed. His voice was not pleasant to the ear, rough and grating.

“Give it back!” Xu Biyu demanded, sounding ruder than they had heard from her before.

“No, it’s collateral. Your healer wasn’t cheap, and I’ll probably have to organise to pay for something else you broke.”

“I haven’t broken anything!”

“Listen, we have had enough of your tantrums. You keep going on about this rabbit like you do with the fire.”

“The fire wasn’t because of the cat!”

“Well, if it wasn’t the cat that started the fire than who did it, hmm?”

Wei WuXian had had enough. He did not like that tone.

“Something we are in the middle of investigating,” Wei WuXian said, smoothly stepping into the room behind Xu Biyu. The resentful energy and its aura of fear slowly seeped out of him like invisible mist, unnoticeable to everybody.

Almost everybody. Hua Cheng stepped into the room as well, eyeing Wei WuXian more suspiciously than the well-dressed man on the other side of the room. On the table behind the unknown man was a well-loved stuffed white rabbit.

Wei WuXian gave a disapproving look to the man. He tried to channel every instructor who’d ever
wanted to pull their hair out because of Wei WuXian’s antics. It was a look that asked why you couldn’t grow up and act like an adult for once.

“Really? Taking a toy from a child?” Wei WuXian asked. The man turns red at the combined look and tone of disapproving adult.

“It’s collateral!” the man insisted.

“Uh-huh,” Wei WuXian gives the stuffed rabbit a look-over. Hua Cheng goes to stand behind Xu Biyu, single eye roving over the décor. “How much would that thing cost again?”

The man (Wei WuXian couldn’t be bothered remembering his name) seemed to turn even redder, now starting to turn purple.

“Fine,” he snapped, picking up the worn rabbit and tossing it in Xu Biyu’s direction. Hua Cheng caught it, frowning, and gave it to Xu Biyu properly.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian said, deciding to reward him even if the words lacked sincerity, “Now, could you tell me what you remember about the day of the fire? Did you encounter any of the Xu family? Where were you? How did you find out about it?”

“What?” the man appeared to need to gather himself at the change of subject, “I hadn’t seen any of the Xu family since the party at their house the day before. I was working that afternoon and I woke up to shouting from the nightwatchman like everyone else. I got dressed in a hurry and rushed over but there wasn’t a single part of that house that wasn’t on fire. All we found was that girl in the snow with that damn cat hissing and yowling. If anyone would know anything, it would be that girl next to you. She probably even had something to do with it.”

What?

“How could she have done that?” Hua Cheng asked, voice dropping and turning dangerous. Xu Biyu stared wide-eyed. Contrary to her stubbornness before, she now looked fragile and about to cry.

How could anyone think she had something to do with this?

“Oh, come on! With how erratic and crazy she’s been, something’s clearly wrong with her. Maybe she was playing with the candles or thought setting things on fire would be fun. I don’t know! But something’s gone wrong with her head and with people like that, who knows what they’d do!”

Wei WuXian was speechless. He knew of the condition that the man was talking about. It was described as people who were born missing something vital. Compassion or mercy or love.

But Wei WuXian had met people like that. Ok, he had met their ghosts but, same thing, right?

Xu Biyu was not like that.

Xu Biyu, who had been suspicious of them, who clutched her cat like she was terrified they’d hurt it. Who still let the cat go when it wanted to leave even though she clearly still wanted to use it as a purring safety blanket. That little girl whose voice broke talking about her older sister always keeping her door unlocked so Xu Biyu could crawl in with her after a nightmare. No one who clearly cared could be like that. No one who felt lack of care towards others could fake those little things like that.

“Nothing’s wrong with my head,” Xu Biyu’s voice came from behind a rigid Hua Cheng. Her voice was dripping with hurt, shock and confusion, “It’s a perfectly normal head. Very headsome, I’d say.
Just as head-like as any others.”

“What nonsense are you spouting now? Headsome?” the flushed man said far too loudly for the room they were in.

Before either of the two dangerous men could respond, Xu Biyu muttered: “Better looking head than yours. Mine doesn’t look like it belongs on a fruit plate.”

Despite his anger and the tense situation, Wei WuXian had to actively suppress his laughter. Hua Cheng was grinning in a way that reminded one of predator who’d thought of a lovely idea on the best way to play with their food.

“She’s an eight-year-old grieving child! Of course she’s acting out!” Wei WuXian said in disbelief, “You can’t expect her to behave exactly the same as she always has!”

“She’s always been strange! Making up bizarre words like ‘headsome’ and whatnot! Talking to things that aren’t there. Talking about people and so-called friends that don’t exist…”

He was cut off by Wei WuXian who had had enough.

“You don’t have children do you? I hope not, for their sake. She’s eight, and her closest playmate was her teenage sister. Of course she’d make up her own playmates! Her own games and stories! Just because she has an active imagination doesn’t make her strange and certainly doesn’t make her murderous!”

“Do you have anything actually useful to tell us?” Hua Cheng asked, rudely.

The man blustered for a moment.

“I don’t think so,” Wei WuXian decided, “But if there is something we’ve forgotten, we’ll be sure to return and ask. Good bye.”

He turned and gestured. Hua Cheng accompanied Xu Biyu and her rabbit out of the house. Wei WuXian shot one last glare towards the inhabitant before following. They’d take Xu Biyu back to where she was staying. It was time to talk to this caretaker of hers.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to point out that my geography is bad and that I am taking so many liberties with that. So many.

The problem with writing Hua Cheng – and Luo Binghe for that matter – is that they don’t care about anything unless their SO is involved. This makes them so hard to write because their primary motivation is just not there. This is worse for HC than LBH in my opinion because at least we have an idea of what LBH would do/be like without his Shizun. Hua Cheng? No clue. I don’t even know if I’m getting his characterisation right because I haven’t finished the Ban Yue arc in his novel yet, but I’m writing his character. *headdesk*

Please let me know if this is believable!

As for the character of Xu Biyu. She, and her whole situation, is based off of a video
game which, in turn, was based off of a classic novel. Just giving you hints about what inspired her. I'm actually disappointed in myself. I don't think I'm being creative or original enough for this arc. As always, let me know what you think!
Xu Arc: Gao Yan

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm late! I've been so busy the last couple of weeks, you would not believe!

Congratulations to those who guessed Alice: Madness Returns. I haven't played the game but I want to one day.

I've altered what's happening with Xu Biyu a little. The last part of the chapter gives clues. Otherwise you might find out next chapter.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Xu Biyu’s caretaker was currently renting a small house. He barely had enough room for himself, an eight-year-old girl and the mass of books and papers everywhere. Gao Yan was a young man who looked like a poor country poet. He was tall, thin and had a slightly distracted air about him, like he was thinking about something else. Gao Yan didn’t seem to have a firm countenance at all. There was no habitat Wei WuXian could think of as more suitable for him than the messy and mismatched stacks of books and poems.

When Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng brought Xu Biyu back with her rabbit, he merely sighed and let them in. Tea was offered and accepted. Once that was done, Gao Yan looked at Xu Biyu defensively clutching her rabbit and sighed in disappointment. It sounded like he’d done it a lot.

“A-Yu, I told you to forget about that rabbit,” he said gently, yet still scoldingly, “It’s for the best, remember? Don’t you want to forget all those painful memories? The rabbit will bring them all back. Better to leave them behind.”

The voice was very comforting and soothing. The way he spoke was almost sorrowful. Wei WuXian could almost be fooled into thinking Gao Yan was giving good advice. Xu Biyu looked torn, the stubborn look that had been on her face in Master Gu’s office was long gone. She was looking the smallest and most defenceless since Wei WuXian had met her.

“Surely not all the memories are painful,” Hua Cheng said suddenly, “Even some painful ones might still be treasured if they are to do with someone you love. That rabbit; didn’t you say it reminded you of someone important to you?”

Xu Biyu blinked up at him with wide eyes. She nodded.

“A dear friend,” she confirmed.

“I have not met this ‘dear friend’, A-Yu. Where are they?” Gao Yan asked, sounding concerned.

“I don’t know,” Xu Biyu said, clearly trying not to cry.

“We’ll talk about it later, A-Yu,” Gao Yan said, sighing again. He missed Hua Cheng opening his mouth to further the subject. There was a stubborn slant to Hua Cheng’s features, but he didn’t object to shelving the subject.
Wei WuXian was impressed. Clearly Hua Cheng wasn’t as unaffected as he seemed. That was the most emotion he’d seen from him. As for the situation itself, Wei WuXian didn’t see what was wrong with Xu Biyu keeping the rabbit. In the end, wasn’t it her choice? She should decide whether the rabbit and any memories attached would be worth keeping. Wei WuXian hoped he will remember to tell Xu Biyu that before he left. Memories of his parents had been painful at first but, many times before, Wei WuXian wished he had been able to hang on to a few of them instead of pushing them aside until they faded.

“May we ask you about a few things?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Oh, yes,” Gao Yan said, blinking at them like he’d forgotten, “A-Yu, why don’t you go to your room?”

Xu Biyu acquiesced and left. Hua Cheng was still frowning.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Wei WuXian decided, “When was the last time you saw anyone from the Xu family?”

“Oh, at a party the day before the fire,” Gao Yan said, slumping in his chair, “I saw all of them. A bunch of us from the capital came by and Master Xu hosted us. We spent the night drinking, arguing over poems and indulging in Madam Xu’s cooking. Many of us, including myself, had come up to get Master Xu’s opinions on our poems. Some others in the neighbourhood had also been invited. Master Xu was looking over our poems and talking with all of us. Madam Xu was being the perfect hostess. Their older daughter, Xu Baoli, had been playing the guzheng. A-Yu had been underfoot before Madam Xu put her to bed early. We all left late. I was one of the last to leave with a few others. Most of us spent the next day getting rid of hangovers. I was out late the night of the fire; I find it better to walk off thoughts and inspirations before going to sleep. I saw smoke and saw commotion coming from the direction of Master Xu’s house. I ran there, meeting up with my fellows from the capital. Seeing the house on fire like that…”

For a moment Gao Yan just stared into space, reminiscing. After a moment he shook himself out of it.

“Honestly, it took some time for anyone to notice A-Yu. If it weren’t for that cat yowling the way it was, it would have taken much longer. She was so small in the snow and everyone was trying to put out the fire. She was easily overlooked,” Gao Yan sighed, rubbing his temples.

“How did you become her caretaker?” Hua Cheng asked.

“I was there helping A-Yu through the recovery process, helping with her medicine and just sitting with her. A-Yu’s aunt tried to become her caretaker but no-one sane would help with allowing a girl live in… well, a place like that. Plus, the woman kept arguing with the healers and Master Gu. Master Gu was in charge of Master Xu’s finances, the selling of his books and the like. By the time A-Yu was relatively lucid, they felt I was the best option. By that time, I was the only one left. All my fellow students had returned to the capital.”

“Why didn’t you return?” Wei WuXian asked.

“How could I? A-Yu was so young and had lost so much. Besides, I owe a debt to Master Xu I could not possibly repay. I am not highborn the way my fellows are. I made my way to where I am through my poetry. Master Xu mentored me and recommended me which opened so many doors. I would not be where I am without him. I couldn’t leave his precious daughter out in the cold. What kind of man would I be then?”

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“But, now that Xu Biyu is healed: why haven’t you returned to the capital? Considering your philosophy of forgetting, I would have thought you wouldn’t want Xu Biyu nearby the place that gives her so many bad memories,” Hua Cheng asked. Something in his voice made Wei WuXian think of hidden fangs. Hua Cheng was really against the idea of forgetting.

“We tried,” Gao Yan said, running a hand through his hair, “But every time something would happen. The wheels would break or the like. I thought it was bad luck at first. Then I thought Xu Biyu was sabotaging the move. She didn’t seem to mind going to the capital. In fact, she was almost eager for it. But, she was upset that her cat wasn’t coming with us. I kept telling her, the cat was bad luck. It was the reason for the fire and it kept disrupting her healing process and trying to scratch some of the doctors.”

“‘Disrupting the healing process’?” Wei WuXian inquired.

Gao Yan had sounded exhausted at the beginning of this conversation and only sounded more tired the longer it went on.

“While A-Yu was unconscious, it would break in and try and settle on her chest, hissing and scratching at everybody who would come near. It was very disruptive and injured many people, including myself. It was horrible. It was a feral wild thing. Clearly unsafe. Unfortunately, A-Yu is irrationally attached to it,” Gao Yan shook his head in disbelief.

Wei WuXian’s eyebrows flew up. That didn’t sound like the tabby cat they’d seen. It had been quite affectionate to Wei WuXian, in fact. How strange. Usually, it was the other way around. Jiang Cheng was the one that was good with animals.

“I wouldn’t say it’s irrational,” Hua Cheng said, “From what Xu Biyu has said, she credits the cat for saving her life that day.”

Gao Yan looked doubtful, “I don’t really believe that, but then, I didn’t really believe in ghosts before all this.”

“You didn’t?” Wei WuXian asked in surprise. Hua Cheng smirked, looking highly amused.

“Oh walking corpses and the like are well-known and documented,” Gao Yan said waving a hand, “But, ghosts? I knew of no hard evidence for that. I’m still not sure I believe it. But last week, we were arguing – ah, myself, A-Yu, the spokesman, A-Yu’s disreputable aunt and Master Gu were arguing about A-Yu’s welfare. She’d wandered off again and was found near the brothel practically insensate. Mumbling about how they’d all been eaten and that she had to find someone and stop something. Not a single one of us had any clue what she was talking about and she barely seemed to notice that we were there. We were arguing about what to do for her, especially as we found out that she’d thrown something at a respectable gentleman on her way there and injured him. She was just sitting there, unresponsive when the table suddenly broke into splinters. None of us had been close to touching it. It had just… combusted, almost. Almost everyone had to pull out splinters.”

That… was interesting.

Wei WuXian wasn’t entirely sure what was going on with Xu Biyu. Before, he’d written everything off as the overactive imagination of a traumatised child. Now, he wasn’t so sure. What happened with the table was more familiar. Wei WuXian made a mental not to talk to this aunt. He had a feeling she saw things happening very differently.

Hua Cheng nudged Wei WuXian and tilted his head. Following the other man’s direction, Wei WuXian saw ghost ward-offs. Blinking, Wei WuXian looked around again. Some were blended in
or buried among the clutter, but Wei WuXian could see various ghost ward-offs. Some were useless, things bought from charlatans. Others were actually useful, things non-cultivators came up with that actually worked and at least one talisman that probably came from someone with actual cultivation. The ghost ward-offs raised Hua Cheng in his estimation.

“Well, that does sound like ghosts,” Wei WuXian said aloud, “Do you remember what was said before the table broke?”

“I believe it was another argument with Madame Lin, A-Yu’s aunt, about A-Yu’s living status. Madame Lin was objecting to A-Yu moving to the capital with me,” Gao Yan explained.

So, the Xu family didn’t want Xu Biyu to go the capital? It was possible that that wasn’t the only conclusion to draw, but it was the most straightforward one at the moment. Was it possible that, if the Xu family had, indeed, been murdered instead of dying in an accident, the person responsible was currently in the capital?

Wei WuXian nodded thoughtfully. The next stop would be to visit Madame Lin at her brothel. But first…

Wei WuXian didn’t even get a chance to finish his thought. Suddenly, the hair on the back of Wei WuXian’s neck stood up and he could feel a breeze that didn’t belong inside. A wisp of resentful energy was nearby. Hua Cheng went rigid. As one, both Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng’s eyes snapped to the hearth fire just in time to see it burst into a wilder flame. The pot of water that was steadily coming to a boil, blackened and nearly came off the hook from the burst of hot air beneath it. Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng both leapt up and moved away from the wild tongues of flame. Absently, Wei WuXian grabbed a startled Gao Yan by the collar and moved him away from the fire. The blaze died down quickly, becoming little more than embers. The ward-offs were weakening the ghosts’ power.

Gao Yan stared at the fire pit in shock.

“Is this the first time this has happened?” Hua Cheng asked, sounding unconcerned.

“The… the fire has never done that before,” Gao Yan said, “Usually the fire goes out. It’s never grown before.”

Wei WuXian nodded, mentally cataloguing the resentful energy he sensed. Right. Madame Lin, then they’d head to the site of the fire. After they talked to Xu Biyu again.

“Is there anything else you think might be relevant to us?” Wei WuXian asked.

Gao Yan hesitated, clearly thinking, before shaking his head. He still seemed pale and unwilling to go near the fire.

“We want to talk to Xu Biyu again in private and then we’ll head out,” Wei WuXian told him.

“It’s late. Do you have a place to stay?” Gao Yan asked.

Wei WuXian glanced at Hua Cheng and shrugged. Wei WuXian had never intended to use his money on an inn. He wanted to save it and didn’t mind ‘sleeping rough’. Or simply not sleeping. Even before he started going on night-hunts or became a Demonic Cultivator, he felt more awake at night. Hua Cheng seemed to shrug back. Despite the signs of wealth, he didn’t seem to mind not knowing where or when they’ll sleep.

“We’ll figure it out later,” Wei WuXian said. Giving an absent wave, he started to head where he
saw Xu Biyu go. Between two full grown men, who aren’t bulky but still tall and take up a lot of space (the sword Hua Cheng carries doesn’t help), the bed Xu Biyu is sitting on and Xu Biyu herself, there’s not a lot of space. Wei WuXian could totally do with more space.

“Hello again. Do you need something?” Xu Biyu asked.

“Two things. Actually three, if you don’t mind,” Wei WuXian said, awkwardly leaning against the window. It felt like Hua Cheng was both next to him and pressed up against the door on the other side of the room.

“Of course not! How can I help?” Xu Biyu straightened up and looked at them in a way that almost made Wei WuXian go *Aww*. Li Ying Yue would get along with her, he thought.

“First of all, the forgetting painful memories thing. Can you explain that to us please?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Oh, that,” Xu Biyu looked down and fiddled with her rabbit, “My memories hurt. They’re so painful, I didn’t know what to do with them anymore. Gao Yan says that the only way to stop the pain is to forget them entirely. If I forget, I won’t feel pain. Gao Yan has been helping me. We’ve been having hypnotism sessions.”

Wei WuXian did not like the sound of hypnotism sessions.

“But you don’t want to forget, do you?” Hua Cheng pointed out, “That’s why you’re so concerned for Chai Jun. That’s why you were so determined to get your rabbit back.”

“I…” Xu Biyu looked fragile, “I don’t know.”

“I also have painful memories,” Hua Cheng said, “But, even through the pain, I still wish to remember.”

“Why?”

“Because they include the memories of someone very precious to me. I hate remembering the suffering and humiliation that person goes through. I hate remembering the pain I went through to meet that person. But I won’t ever forget, because I cherish any memory of that precious person more than anything else. Even if the memories hurt, not having those memories – forgetting them – would be a suffering worse than the pain from those memories,” Hua Cheng said. He placed a hand over his heart. The way he looked in that moment, was the most open and sincere Wei WuXian had ever seen him. There was no denying that Hua Cheng was earnest in his words and the sincerity impacted upon Xu Biyu, who teared up.

“Xu Biyu, I… have an absolutely terrible memory,” Wei WuXian said quietly, “And there have been times when that has bothered me. I lost my parents when I was a little younger than you. After they died, I didn’t have the time or safety to deal with that pain so I pushed it, and my memories of them, away. By the time I was in a safe place to mourn, it was too late. I barely remember them. And I wish I did. We simply wish that you don’t make a decision you might regret in the future.”

Xu Biyu wiped her tears away and nodded, “I know. After the last session… I couldn’t stand it. The sessions weren’t working. Something’s going wrong in my head. I yelled at Gao Yan and ran away. I… I don’t really remember much but my aunt found me later near the warehouses. They say I was mumbling nonsense. Everyone was arguing and I was trying to figure out what to do when the table was destroyed suddenly. I’ve refused sessions since and now I’m trying to remember again. It’s just so hard.”
Xu Biyu started crying. Wei WuXian panicked a little. He hated it when people cried and it was worse when it was a little girl who was doing her best to be strong and succeeding more often or not. Hua Cheng looked like he was caught off-guard, so Wei WuXian tried to manoeuvre so that he was sitting on Xu Biyu’s bed to give her someone to cry on.

“Something’s wrong, everyone said so, but I haven’t even seen some of my friends since they helped me after the fire. They say something’s wrong and I’ve got to stop it or fix it, but I don’t even know what it is!”

“You’re friends?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xu Biyu stiffened. Her eyes skittered away from the two of them.

“I…”

It was clear that she was very unwilling to answer. In fact she was starting to look a little panicked. Wei WuXian debated for a moment then let it go. For now, at least.

“The second thing: we forgot to ask but, do you remember what was happening when the ghosts acted up?” Wei WuXian asked. Xu Biyu was visibly relieved at the change of subject.

“I wasn’t actually there a lot of the time. Despite what everyone thinks, I honestly didn’t even notice it. I would just get told off for breaking things and I would protest that I hadn’t been near it or that it had been fine when I last saw it. But no-one ever believed me. Even now that everyone knows that there are ghosts, no one’s apologised for all the scolding and punishments. It’s really rude.”

For a moment, Xu Biyu looked her age as she pouted.

“But… leaving for the capital. The hypnotising sessions, I think. When others blame me for the fire or that time I got upset that everyone was blaming Chai Jun. Actually, I think it happens when I get really upset as well. Apparently there used to be a lot of accidents when I was healing as well, but the medicine made that time all blurry. I’m sorry, that’s all I can think of right now.”

“That’s ok. That was really helpful,” Wei WuXian reassured. So, it looked like the Xu family were being protective over their last family member more than anything else. They don’t like it when others upset Xu Biyu or blame her for the fire. It was likely that they were also upset that she was forgetting them. Anybody would be upset over being purposely forgotten and ghosts weren’t always very rational. Possibly they also acted up when they thought something was dangerous.

But why when she was healing? Because their deaths had been so new that they occasionally lashed out? Had their murderer visited Xu Biyu?

Wei WuXian set that aside for his mind to chew over in the background.

“Xu Biyu? May I use my energy to check your energy system?” Wei WuXian asked. Wei WuXian had learned how to navigate another person’s spiritual energy and meridians when he learned how to key people into his tokens. It had taken him and Wei Qing a long time to figure out. It was similar to something Wei Qing did when she checked up on people. In fact, it was such a standard procedure, that she did it automatically now.

“My energy system? I’m not a cultivator,” Xu Biyu said, confused.

“Everyone has an energy system,” Wei WuXian explained, “Non-cultivators simply have much smaller, almost unnoticeable ones. With cultivators, their energy shines and is warm so their pathways are easy to find. For a non-cultivator, it’s like trying to find and trace an engraving in the
“Will this help with my family?” Xu Biyu asked.

“More like it’ll help me to know the effect the hypnotherapy sessions have on you. You don’t like them right? And you want to remember now?”

“Yes,” Xu Biyu admitted, looking almost shame-faced. She took a deep breath and looked up at him, “What do I have to do?”

“Just give me your left hand and I’ll do the rest,” Wei WuXian said, “Because you aren’t a cultivator, it might take a while. Feel free to talk to Hua Cheng here. Just don’t move my hands. Ready?”

Xu Biyu nodded and Wei WuXian placed one hand on her pulse point at her wrist and one palm on her forehead. He closed his eyes and carefully – very carefully – moved his energy to investigate Xu Biyu’s small body.

One thing was easily noticeable: while Xu Biyu did have the spiritual veins of a non-cultivator, she also had something entirely new to his senses. It wasn’t the same energy as Wei WuXian used or the same energy as a cultivator. Not like Wei Qing’s or Jin ZiXuan’s normal spiritual veins or like Jiang Cheng’s slightly altered set or even like Jiang Yanli’s weak and underused spread.

The energy seemed to focus around her head and felt a bit different. It was also, Wei WuXian noticed, blocked in some places, like a clot. Familiar with blockages like this from his time soothing the Burial Mounds, Wei WuXian went to helping smooth out the spiritual flow. It was much more difficult than helping the Burial Mounds. Mostly because Xu Biyu didn’t have resentful energy and as Wei WuXian had discovered: resentful energy flowed very differently than spiritual energy. With his home, Wei WuXian was able to utilise his own energy to guide the energy in the mountain to a smoother, calmer area instead of clumping together in a thorny, painful burr.

The strange energy flowed a bit differently than spiritual energy. Spiritual energy was like a flowing river. Resentful energy was like a shadow or wisps of air. Xu Biyu’s energy was in a closed circuit inside her head, affecting her eyes and brain the most. It pulsed in time with her heartbeat. A small fluttering beat that reminded him of butterfly wings. As Wei WuXian examined the blockages, he realised it also flowed, but slowly, steadily, almost unnoticeable compared to the faster soft beat of the pulse. For some reason Wei WuXian was reminded of the slow rise of a lotus flower. How it had taken so long for a single bud to bloom after it had finally risen from the water. Yet it must have taken so much to gather enough energy to bloom.

But despite Wei WuXian’s vastly different energy, that doesn’t mean he couldn’t do anything. In fact, he and Wei Qing had actually managed to figure out a way resentful energy could be used to help in these situations. It was one of the only breakthroughs they had in using resentful energy to heal. They had used this method to help Shen Shuyi with her damaged meridians.

Spiritual energy purified. Resentful energy ate. As long as Wei WuXian was careful not to leave any resentful energy inside Xu Biyu, he could use it to chip away at the unnatural blockages. And unnatural they were. It seemed that some kind of strange energy had entered the ‘veins’ the Xu Biyu’s energy was using. Xu Biyu’s energy had attacked the foreign energy, but had only succeeded in making it bigger rather than chipping away at it, causing blockages. It really was like a blood clot. Wei WuXian sent in his own wispy energy to target the other foreign energy in Xu Biyu’s head.

His energy was subtle enough that it wasn’t until he had to get past Xu Biyu’s energy to attack that Xu Biyu’s energy noticed he was there. The attacks were ineffectual against his wisp-like energy and weakened by a prolonged self-defence attack on the foreign energy. Merging his wispy energy into a
needle, Wei WuXian drove into the centre of the foreign energy Xu Biyu’s had been trying to destroy. It broke apart into smaller pieces that Xu Biyu’s defence system immediately attacked and crumbled into pieces until it had been assimilated and Xu Biyu’s natural energy began to flow correctly again.

Wei WuXian did this again and again, leaving the biggest, most problematic ones for last. Xu Biyu’s odd energy had appeared to figure out his energy wasn’t harmful and let him through to help destroy the clumps of damaging foreign energy.

*This must be the effects of the hypnotism. Only, instead of attacking the memories to erase them or blocking the connections to them, it’s been blocking this strange energy and hurting Xu Biyu!*

Was Gao Yan an amateur hypnotist? Did he simply not realise he was doing more harm than good? This strange energy of Xu Biyu’s wasn’t something he’d ever heard of before, it was possible that Gao Yan hadn’t realised.

It was when Wei WuXian targeted the second-largest clump that seemed to be clinging to part of Xu Biyu’s energy network that things began to go wrong. Wei WuXian formed a slightly thicker needle of energy and speared the clump in a way that wouldn’t hit or disrupt the energy veins in Xu Biyu’s head when the foreign energy began to act aggressively and try to absorb his resentful energy needle. This wouldn’t have been too bad. Wei WuXian’s energy needle was too dense for it to work. But Xu Biyu’s energy had rushed the clump as soon as Wei WuXian’s needle had pierced it. The energy rush disoriented Wei WuXian, who had never encountered such a thing and he lost his concentration. Before Wei WuXian could get a grip, he lost all sense of the energy network and felt the sensation of falling from a great height.

Xu Biyu like Master Wei and Master Hua. Both were very kind even if they looked intimidating and were very scary. They’d not forced her to do anything and had helped her with Master Gu. They didn’t believe she had started the fire and they believed her when she told them that Chai Jun hadn’t started it either.

They’d been the first ones she’d told about the hypnotism sessions and that she didn’t want them anymore. At first she’d been hesitant, but everything had been so painful that she’d stopped resisting. But that appeared to be a mistake. Her White Rabbit was probably dead and something had happened to her other friends and…

Xu Biyu didn’t really know what was going on with her friends. Chai Jun was no help, only dispensing with snarky commentary and warnings about that infernal contraption.

She felt bad about deceiving Master Wei and Master Hua when they were being so helpful. Not that she had lied to them. But, somehow, they thought she was simply a normal grieving girl with an active imagination.

Xu Biyu knew she wasn’t normal. Normal girls didn’t see things others didn’t. Only her beloved jiejie had ever believed her. Jiejie had helped her come up with solutions to her friends’ problems or helping her with gift ideas. Even her parents had appeared confused at times with her ‘imaginary’ friends. But even when her parents had never understood, they’d done their best to be supportive of her. They’d tried to understand. It simply hadn’t fitted in to their logical world.
Her friends were real. Chai Jun and the occasional gifts (or occasional injuries) proved that.

Although… no one heard Chai Jun when he talked to her.

After the fire and the confusion of her medicine and the pain of her memories, Xu Biyu thought, maybe she had gone mad. She’d shut out everyone, even Chai Jun. Only the appearance of a new being – the Queen of Hearts – had pulled Xu Biyu out of her downward spiral. After knocking down the Red Queen, Xu Biyu resolved to live and heal.

But when the pain and confusion of her memories didn’t fade, she accepted Gao Yan’s offer to forget. Things had only gotten worse after that.

She couldn’t tell the two cultivators about Chai Jun talking or her other friends or even the Queen of Hearts, who turned out to be not so bad, just bitter and anguish and furious that Xu Biyu could save herself and wasn’t even trying. Xu Biyu had seen the Queen of Hearts break some things that everyone claimed was the work of her family’s ghosts. The Queen hadn’t been behind everything, so maybe her family hadn’t moved on like Xu Biyu was trying to.

That was why Xu Biyu had decided not to tell them. She wanted to find out what happened and help her family move on.

Trusting Wei WuXian to ‘check her energy system’ was terrifying. What if she made a mistake again, like the hypnotism sessions?

… What if he could help?

Xu Biyu felt like she had hit a wall doing this on her own. She needed a better approach. Chai Jun trusted them and, if there was one being that Xu Biyu could trust, it was Chai Jun Mao*.

So, Xu Biyu let him check her. To distract herself from her anxiety, she asked Hua Cheng if he could teach her to braid her hair like he did. Thankfully the man agreed. It was awkward with Master Wei’s hand on her forehead, but they managed. Xu Biyu was sad that they didn’t have anything to tie off the end with though.

Xu Biyu screwed up her eyes and grasped her head.

“Is something wrong?” Hua Cheng asked, frowning slightly.

“It just… feels strange,” Xu Biyu said. It was strange. When Gao Yan used hypnotism, it felt very different to this. Headaches and fuzziness, like she was taking medicine again. “This is like... my burn cream.”

“Burn cream?” Hua Cheng repeated in question. He raised one thin eyebrow.

“Yes, it hurts a little at first but then it becomes almost a soothing, healing sort of thing. 'Refreshing' might be the word,” Xu Biyu attempted to explain.

A loud meow cut off their conversation. Chai Jun had somehow managed to appear on the windowsill.

“Chai Jun!” Xu Biyu cried.

Chai Jun’s unsettlingly knowing eyes and constant cat smile settled on Xu Biyu and the motionless Wei WuXian.
“Seek and ye shall find they say,” the cat says in an unsettling sly voice, “But they don’t say what they’ll find.”

Hua Cheng frowns at the cat but gives no indication that he hears the cat speak. Chai Jun ignores him and leaps to Xu Biyu’s lap. The tabby tucks himself within the space between Xu Biyu and Master Wei.

“My, my,” Chai Jun drawled, “You’ve let someone else into our Wonderland? And this one’s helpful rather than destructive. Now come quickly, the caterpillar won’t stay still for long and you do tend to listen to him more than the rest of us.”

“Wait! What about…?” Xu Biyu couldn’t finish her sentence; her head became dizzy again and a familiar falling sensation began.

“Xu Biyu!” Hua Cheng leaned forward when Xu Biyu fainted. Unless it was his imagination, the cat looked almost smug. Staring at Hua Cheng’s single eye, the cat seemed to be smiling. Before Hua Cheng could withdraw his hands, reached to steady Xu Biyu and the unresponsive Wei WuXian, the cat swiped at him.

Hua Cheng hissed in surprise at the pain that erupted from the slashes. They were surprising deep. A rush of dizziness hit him, more surprising for having forgotten the sensation after all these years.

Hua Cheng’s back hit the wall and he slumped over, unable to prevent the loss of control over his body.

Before the sensation of falling took him, he saw the cat really was smiling.

Smiling far too wide to be natural.

“This,” Wei WuXian mused, looking around at the stone architecture and open red sky, “was not what I expected.”

Chapter End Notes

* Chai Jun Mao: Cheshire Cat. Yes, Chai Jun was literally just Chinese for Cheshire.

I had a different plan for this chapter but then I decided: 'how about a quick trip to Wonderland?' I might regret it later for stealing too many ideas from other people but I thought it might settle some things. Y’know. Next chapter. When I get round to writing it.

No headcanons today. Unfortunately I'm still a bit busy for a while to go on rants about
my thought processes. Sorry.
Chapter Notes

Hello!

So this is part two of three of the Xu Arc. I know some people haven't been happy with how things have gone regarding this arc and it has taken a darker turn than my previous chapters but that's because bad things do happen and they will happen in my story too. I have plans. But this arc is, admittedly, more of a sidetrack to set up a few things than a serious contribution to the plot so I can understand some people's views.

Next chapter will resolve the nighthunt and deal with a few other things like the Aftermath.

Wei WuXian was man enough to admit that he panicked. Although, that had more to do with why he panicked than anything else.

It wasn’t the location. Admittedly, Wei WuXian would think someone panicking because they had been inside in a cramped room one moment and then on a very high stone mountaintop the next instant was perfectly reasonable. The place wasn’t actually all that bad. The sky was an ominous red and when Wei WuXian looked down from his stone ledge, he couldn’t see the ground due to what was either mist or clouds. But the thin waterfall behind him was pretty and the ground was stable. In fact, he was standing on a path. Behind him was a cave and before him were stone stairs. It was simply a dead drop on both sides with the waterfall falling through the empty space on one side and nothing as far as the eye could see on the other.

When Wei WuXian looked down at himself to take inventory of what came with him, he unsurprised to note that he was in the same black robes he’d worn all day. The black robes with the red swirls were quickly becoming his trademark which everyone was pleased about as this would also eventually be his sect’s uniform. A quick check to his hair made him relieved to still find his token braided in. Chenqing was still tucked into his belt.

What did surprise him was Suibian, also tucked into his belt like it had been before the Wens had taken it from him. This was worrying because Wei WuXian distinctly remembered leaving it in his cave at home.

But even that wasn’t what made Wei WuXian panic. What made the feared Yiling Patriarch panic was the complete absence of the constant war-drums that normally sounded within his mind like an extra heartbeat. As Wei WuXian spun around on the spot, he realised he couldn’t even tell which direction the Burial Mounds was in. In fact, there was barely any resentful energy nearby.

What was happening?

Wei WuXian took a deep breath to calm himself down. He needed to find out what happened to the Burial Mounds. Where was he anyway? Last thing he remembered was trying to destroy that corruptive energy in Xu Biyu’s head. He couldn’t have left Xu Biyu’s room could he? What happened to Xu Biyu? What about Hua Cheng?
He didn’t think Hua Cheng had any malevolent thoughts towards him or Xu Biyu, but that doesn’t mean Hua Cheng still couldn’t have done something. Wei WuXian has been wrong about things before. Or something else had happened and Hua Cheng had nothing to do with this. Whatever this was.

For now, priority one was to reconnect with the Burial Mounds. Wei WuXian’s stomach rolled at the effects of losing his bond with the mountain. How was the spirit taking it? What would be happening at home right now? Would anyone notice that something was wrong?

Not only that, but Wei WuXian was being constantly distracted and agitated with the silence in his head. Once, the constant drumbeats had nearly driven him insane. But losing them was worse with the anxious hope that everything would be fine.

Right. Wei WuXian took another deep breath. As tempting as it was to just sit in a lotus position right then and there, he’d probably need a more defensible location. Preferably away from the sheer cliff.

Dismissing the cave behind him, Wei WuXian turned to the stairs instead. It took a few twists and turns through sheer, and surprisingly smooth, rock before it opened up before Wei WuXian. He paused and took a look around in surprise. He was definitely at the peak of the mountain. From looking around at the view, Wei WuXian figured he was on the tallest mountain around. He couldn’t see anything else around him. Most peculiarly, someone had decided to build a tall green and gold pagoda on top, its doors wide open.

It was the only building around and the only shelter up here, so Wei WuXian decided to head inside. Cautiously of course, though it would not look like it to other people.

Inside was a giant translucent statue. At first Wei WuXian had no clue what it was depicting until he realised it was a giant caterpillar holding an… Was that an opium pipe?

*Hookah.*

The word came to Wei WuXian’s mind, despite having never heard such a strange word before. Smoke was coming from the thing up through the holes in the roof.

Wei WuXian looked around, and finding nothing else in the building, examined it a little closer. It looked like something green was below the translucent material of the statue. Finding nothing to be alarmed about, Wei WuXian continued with his original plan. He sat, lotus-style, in front of the statue, facing the only door. He slid out Chenqing and Suibian from his belt and held them in his hands.

Then he meditated, searching for the war-drums.

Hua Cheng was unhappy. He didn’t like being caught off-guard and he didn’t like being transported to somewhere he didn’t know. E-Ming was in his hands, ready to shed some blood.

Hua Cheng was widely travelled. He’d seen many things and places.

This was, by far, the strangest.
Xu Biyu was nervous. Chai Jun said that Master Wei and Master Hua were here, and she’d need to find them on her way to Caterpillar. Caterpillar would know what to do with that infernal contraption running around and ruining her Wonderland.

She needed to move. From the wreck of her Vale, time was running out for her Wonderland.

And yet, Xu Biyu couldn’t help but notice how few Ruins, the corrupt sludge-like masses with their doll parts, there were running around her mind. Had Master Wei and his ‘checking’ helped her Wonderland? Had he helped purge the corruption lingering in her Wonderland from that infernal contraption?

Chai Jun implied that he had. That was why he had been brought here. The one controlling that infernal contraption had wanted to destroy Master Wei for helping her. Thankfully, her friends, scattered and in trouble as they were, had drawn him closer to where Caterpillar was holed up. Chai Jun claimed that Master Hua was somewhere in between.

She’d have to make her way over. Thankfully, the appearance of small versions of Caterpillar’s hookah meant she was heading in the right direction at least.

Finally, she reached what looked like a green anthill, surrounded by pottery. It was topped with a model pagoda which had opium smoke drifting from it. Some sort of fancy-looking incense burner, Xu Biyu would have assumed had she been anywhere else.

“Master Wei and Master Hua are on that?” Xu Biyu asked, frowning. She didn’t need to look to know that Chai Jun was with her.

“You are familiar with the saying that smoking stunts your growth?” Chai Jun’s sly voice appeared next to her.

“Adults assault children with the adage, usually while they’ve got a pipe stuck in their mouths,” Xu Biyu responded dryly. She thought of her former doctor’s assistant and the spokesman of the village among all the others.

“I won’t ask you to inhale,” Chai Jun assured. Whenever Chai Jun tried to be reassuring, it never sounded reassuring at all. Xu Biyu could feel his fur on her bare arms, but when she looked, there was nothing there at all.

“Let the smoke envelop you,” Chai Jun continued, sounding like he was moving off into the distance. The smoke from the pagoda-shaped incense burner enveloped her. Shrinking her down… and putting her at the bottom of the anthill. Which was now a mountain with a tall peak.

Sometimes, Xu Biyu wished she knew curse words strong enough for the things she was feeling. She probably would never utter them aloud, that would be terribly rude, but at least she’d be able to scream them inside of her own head. Usually directed at her beloved, and infuriating, familiar.
Hua Cheng was standing on a rock spire that was thankfully flat at the top. There were similar flat-topped rock spires around him, most too far to jump. A rocky mountain was in the distance, more debris floating in the air in between. There were also wooden drawers hanging, unaided, in the air. The sets of drawers were beautifully carven rich wood – and were bigger than Hua Cheng. There also, and Hua Cheng had to double-check this, mah-jong tiles in the air, large enough for two grown men to stand on without fear of falling off the side into the mist and distant ground beneath them. It was like he’d been reduced to the size of an ant. Or somebody had made objects for giants and phased them through a mountain for kicks and giggles.

To one side was a small blue and white inkpot blowing opium-scented steam high in the air. Stranger were the large blue and white glazed pottery embedded in rock, some of which were tilted to pour out sake. The entire place smelled like alcohol and opium smoke.

“Right,” Hua Cheng said to himself, looking around. Where should he go?

“Only fools believe that suffering is just wages for being different,” a voice drawled next to Hua Cheng’s ear.

Hua Cheng spun around cautiously, E-Ming glinting in the odd light. E-Ming’s red eye looked around for the intruder like its master’s single black one was doing. There was no one there.

“Rude,” the voice said again, not sounding offended in the slightest. This time it was coming from near the painted porcelain statue of some god or goddess Hua Cheng had dismissed as unimportant. The air seemed to bend, and a skeletal cat appeared. It was atrociously thin, noticeable even more as it was significantly larger than a normal cat. Sitting, its long ears (one of which had a golden hoop pierced through it) reached Hua Cheng’s waist. The most unsettling thing was its smile. It took up most of the face. Combined with the unblinking, glowing yellow-green eyes, it seemed like it was leering mockingly at him. The smile was the first thing Hua Cheng had seen when it appeared.

Hua Cheng had seen that smile before.

“Chai Jun?” Hua Cheng inquired.

“I am Chai Jun Mao,” the grinning cat confirmed smugly.

Ok, the cat was talking. That wasn’t nearly as strange as everything else, including that smile.

“May I ask where we are?” Hua Cheng said politely, still holding E-Ming in a defensive position.

“Hmm,” the smiling cat considered him, “I could say that we’re in the Oriental Grove, but that would mean nothing to you. I could say ‘we’re in Biyu’s Wonderland’ but you still wouldn’t comprehend. To put it bluntly, we are in the world that exists within Biyu’s mind.”

“So, none of this is real?” Hua Cheng asked, looking around.

“Of course, it’s real. Didn’t I just say it exists? Just because you can’t normally see it or access it, doesn’t mean it’s not real. This is Biyu’s mind. Her world. The world she has offered to us, her dear friends. The world that is steadily being destroyed. That infernal contraption has been running roughshod over all her memories. Especially certain memories,” Chai Jun’s eyes glowed. His tail flicked behind his head.

“‘Infernal contraption’?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Oh, you won’t find it here,” Chai Jun said airily, “This is only a small area of Biyu’s mind. If it
helps, Biyu is on her way here. Over there,” Chai Jun indicated with his tail, “is a part of Biyu’s memories. Hidden away in case Biyu wanted them back with the pain that comes with them as a complement to the main event. Wait there for Biyu.”

Hua Cheng frowned. Chai Jun’s drawling way of talking was annoying.

“What about Wei WuXian?” Hua Cheng asked, recalling the confusing, strange man who had been motionless before all this happened. Hua Cheng still wasn’t sure what to think of the man. There were many confusing things about him.

“He is at our destination. Once Biyu accesses that memory and has retrieved yourself, the two of you can go find him,” Chai Jun said. He sounded uninterested now, already looking past Hua Cheng in hopes of something more interesting.

“How do I get off of this rock?” Hua Cheng asked, finally sheathing E-Ming and crossing his arms.

Chai Jun shrugged, an interesting motion in a cat.

“Not my problem. In the meantime, maybe you should try the sake?” the cat said, indicating the small waterfall of alcohol next to the statue.

Hua Cheng gave an unimpressed look. Chai Jun didn’t react, but he started fading away. The overly wide grin he hadn’t dropped once during their entire interaction faded last.

Well, fine.

Hua Cheng walked over to the direction Chai Jun had indicated the memory was in. There was a platform nearby with a purple flower sprouting from the stone. Hua Cheng took a running jump, just managing to clear the distance. Nothing. Frowning, Hua Cheng went back to where he was. Trying to look around the rock with the pouring blue and white sake jug, he could see platforms in the distance. How would Biyu make it there?

Well, it was her mind they were trapped in, Hua Cheng reasoned to himself. Perhaps she could alter it?

One thing was for sure, Hua Cheng would have to be careful not to damage anything. Who knew what the effects would be on Xu Biyu?

That was definitely the direction that Chai Jun had indicated. Hua Cheng considered his options for a moment, then shrugged.

At this point he was pretty sure he wasn’t any weirder than his two companions. What was the point of acting ‘normal’?

With naught but a thought, he burst into a great swarm of silver butterflies.

The Burial Mounds was just out of Wei WuXian’s reach. He could feel it. He wasn’t sure of what direction though. It seemed like there was a veil across his senses, preventing him from contacting his home or getting anything more than a vague feeling.

Wei WuXian didn’t like it.
Thankfully, while upset, the Burial Mounds wasn’t panicking or overly agitated. If anything, what Wei WuXian was getting through their muted connection was more of an upset pout, like the mountain spirit was sulking.

“Threats, promises and good intentions don’t amount to action,” a sly voice interrupted.

Wei WuXian’s eyes snapped open, and his grip tightened on Chenqing and Suibian. Sitting in front of him was a tall skeletal cat, a golden hoop in one ear and most of its face taken up by a wide and very toothy grin. The cat looked vaguely familiar, like it was a caricature of another cat Wei WuXian had seen recently.

Wei WuXian considered the words he assumed the cat had said.

“Regardless of what you say or intend to do, it won’t matter if you don’t actually do something?” Wei WuXian guessed.

“That’s one interpretation,” the cat purred (so it was the cat!).

“Is this Xu Biyu’s mindscape?” Wei WuXian asked. It was the only thing he could think of to explain his situation.

“It’s called Wonderland,” the cat said, still smiling too wide.

That was a confirmation. Wei WuXian withheld his sigh of relief. That meant that his connection to the Burial Mounds was still intact. It was just blocked by being inside someone else’s mind. Once he left, it should return to normal. He just had to deal with the silence in the meantime. Easier said than done, but tolerable in the short-term.

“So, where’s Xu Biyu?” he asked.

“On her way. With Hua Cheng,” the cat said, “Tell me Master Wei, you appear to have a powerful, if young and damaged, friend of your own. Where on earth did you get it, let alone invite it in?”

Wei WuXian ran the words through his mind again, but still couldn’t figure out what the cat was talking about.

“You might have to use simpler language with me,” Wei WuXian said.

For a moment the cat simply stared at him with that unchanging, too wide grin. In all honesty, he looked like he was deciding whether Wei WuXian was worth eating.

“You know of yao, correct? Biyu can see them and their world. She offers some of us refuge in her own world. Too kind. Some have taken advantage and must be taught otherwise,” the cat said blithely, “I guide her in such perilous places and in her own mind. I was the first and most treasured, far better than any of the others. I stay with her, even outside in the so-called ‘real’ world,” the cat said, tail flicking back and forth.

Yao were creatures, plant life, objects or even just places that had absorbed mass amounts of energy and become alive. In other words, they were spirits. Like the Burial Mounds, Wei WuXian realised.

“Why do you care about Xu Biyu so much? Because she treasures you?” Wei WuXian asked.

“She is mine. Or, I am hers. We are the same. Of her, in a way, but not Xu Biyu herself. No,” the cat mused, sounding unconcerned about the matter.
That was… not really an adequate answer. But Wei WuXian mused that he wouldn’t have trusted any answer that was given without proof anyway. Yao weren’t easily dealt with. Sometimes it was hard to even tell what was under a yao’s influence. The best thing was to find the anchor to the real world, or, the ‘real’ world, as the cat had put it, and either figure out what was wrong so it could be fixed, or destroy it – and hopefully the yao with it.

So, it wasn’t an overactive imagination at all, Wei WuXian belatedly realised. Xu Biyu could see spirits – yao – without any training or anyone else able to see what she can. That was what the strange energy was: reality-bending energy produced by yao. Xu Biyu must have thought something was wrong with her to have such an ability. No one would have ever believed her. She hadn’t even tried to tell him or Hua Cheng.

Worse, Wei WuXian knew that not all yao particularly liked humans. Even when a yao wasn’t malicious, it could still hurt someone. Just look at what the Burial Mounds had been like. They didn’t have the same morals or reasoning ability as a human did. It was very likely that Xu Biyu had been in danger – without anybody to help or even notice.

“So, your friend?” the cat prodded.

“The spirit of a mountain known as the Burial Mounds,” Wei WuXian said, “Our connection was unintentional, but I don’t regret it. Do you know if it’s alright?”

“Oh, it should be fine,” the cat said airily, clearly uncaring, “Shouldn’t you be more worried about yourself?”

“You said Xu Biyu is on her way with Hua Cheng,” Wei WuXian pointed out, “You’re clearly invested in Xu Biyu’s health and well-being and I would like to help her rather than hinder. As long as I can get out of here, I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about the fact that I couldn’t get all of the corruption.”

The cat observed him with its wide smile and sly, knowing eyes.

“Biyu must meet with the Caterpillar,” the cat said, “He is very wise and is one of the few who can get Biyu to listen to something she doesn’t want to hear. The Hell Train must be dealt with by Biyu. You have helped, more than you know. But there are some things that must be accomplished by oneself or it means nothing.”

Wei WuXian frowned at that, but grudgingly nodded. He could see what the cat meant.

“I can help by investigating the fire and finding out the real reason her family died,” Wei WuXian told the cat.

The cat nodded.

“A gift then, and some clues,” the cat decided. He then faded away. His main body faded first, leaving Wei WuXian to see his stripes and head before those faded. For a second, all Wei WuXian could see was the cat’s glowing eyes and wide smile. Eventually the eyes faded, leaving a toothy grin to hang in the air before the cat finally disappeared altogether.

In the cat’s place was a shiny, transparent house.

For a moment, Wei WuXian hesitated. Then he reached and grasped the house. It shattered like glass under his touch. Whatever Wei WuXian had expected, it didn’t happen. He didn’t feel any different. His surroundings didn’t change. Only a young woman’s voice sounded in his head.
“When Papa grounded me, I climbed down the side of the house. The tree branch makes a bridge, but it’s not much of a drop. Keep our secret, meimei*, or we’re not sisters.”

A second’s pause wasn’t enough for Wei WuXian to gain his bearings before a man’s voice sounded next.

“Fire, Biyu! Fire!”

Then a woman’s:

“Save yourself! Wake up, Baoli. Baoli! Open the door!”

“The key, Baoli! Unlock the door! You’ll burn!”

A moment’s pause. The girl’s voice came back, discomfited by something but trying to put up a brave front.

“Claimed I’d stolen his heart. Trifling with his affections. Creepy sort. Touching me. Told Papa never to invite him for tea again.”

“A locked room is little more than a cage. A prison by another name. I despise concealment of any kind.”

“His hand was slimy, meimei. Like an eel.”

“I’m no toy. He wanted me to do things I didn’t want to do.”

Wei WuXian was stunned. No other voices came. But if that was a clue then…

Well, good thing he had a lot of time on his hands.

Xu Baoli didn’t lock her door. Xu Biyu had told them that. She considered a locked room a cage, from that memory. Yet, also from the memories (of Xu Biyu’s parent’s last moments; trying to save their daughters), and from what the spokesman said: Xu Baoli’s door had been locked the day of the fire. In that memory fragment, she hadn’t responded to her parents. Why?

What had happened to Xu Baoli the night of the fire? What did those other comments have to do with it?

A man with intentions. Touching without Xu Baoli’s consent…

Wei WuXian didn’t like the picture he was forming.

Wei WuXian pulled together what he knew about Xu Baoli. Considered an elegant sort, followed her mother in becoming the perfect hostess. Played the guzheng which was not an easy instrument to learn. Judging by the memory fragments of her sneaking out of punishment, a bit of a mischievous streak. The Xu patriarch had educated her too. From the voice, Wei WuXian had heard in the memory fragments, she spoke in a refined elegant way. Her voice was confident, pleasing to the ear and Wei WuXian could see her walking and talking with her head held high, unashamed of anything that she was.

If she looked like Xu Biyu then she’d have been a pretty young lady too. Only Xu Biyu’s clearly not entirely healthy appearance kept her from being considered so.

He wished he could go see the burnt-out shell of the Xu family house right away. Wei WuXian leapt up and started pacing with a near growl. Or even talk to Madame Lin, the Xu girls’ aunt. Perhaps…
Suddenly, Wei WuXian remembered something the spokesman of this village had said. The parents’ corpses had been found charred and burned. Part of the upper floor – the part with the master bedroom – had fallen or been burned away and the parents’ corpses had tumbled down below. Xu Baoli’s body had been found still in her bed – and unburned. They believed she’d died from the smoke.

What if she hadn’t? What if she’d died before the fire had even started?

Hua Cheng had found something very unusual. Though, considering his surroundings, ‘very unusual’ was the norm.

But this didn’t exactly match the rest of the décor.

It was a door. It was standing there in the middle of nothing. It was attached to no wall. Hua Cheng could just walk around to the other side. Yet rice paper reflected flames from the other side. The wood was charred black. When Hua Cheng drew close, he could feel some heat coming off it. Carved into the wooden frame on a plaque were characters. It took a bit for Hua Cheng to decipher it. It was done artistically, in a flowing way that Hua Cheng could admit was aesthetically pleasing. It almost made him ashamed of his own handwriting. But it did make it hard to decipher, not helped by the blackened wood.

Xu Family.

Was this the door to the Xu family’s home?

When Hua Cheng walked around to the other side, he saw that it was the exact same as the other side. A mirror image.

This must be the memory piece that the cat had spoken of. It was in an inconvenient place to find or get to. And Hua Cheng had cheated; flying about in his butterfly swarm form. He had discovered that there were invisible platforms this way – by hitting them head on with some of his butterflies.

Well, he was at his destination. Now he simply had to wait for Xu Biyu to show up.

Bored and wishing he had some art supplies or something, he sat nearby and resigned himself to a long wait.

It turned out not to be an overly long wait. The appearance of a small girl naturally made Hua Cheng relieved to know his period of boredom was finally over. The appearance of said girl made Hua Cheng stop and raise a thin eyebrow.

It was Xu Biyu. But this version had longer hair, she looked healthier overall with some black kohl and pink powder around her eyes instead of the bags that had been there in real life. Her dress was reminiscent of hanfu. Dark blue silk patterned with blue, pink, white and teal flowers and a few butterflies. For some reason, a blue-lined white apron hung from the waist and had two symbols Hua Cheng recognised as being vaguely familiar with on the bottom. The collar was edged in ruffles and resembled clothing Hua Cheng had seen in the far east. A jade pendant hung around her neck. Pink and white arm-warmers were on her forearms. Strangely enough the skirt flared out into a circle ending at her knees. The rest of her legs were covered in black and white striped leggings and black leather boots with silver buckle that ran up her calves that Hua Cheng honestly rather liked. The sash
around her waist was tied in a bow with a green despairing ogre mask.

“Interesting outfit,” Hua Cheng said, announcing himself. Xu Biyu spun and settled in a battle-ready stance. A gleaming blade had appeared, making a noise as she swiped, illustrating just how sharp it was. If Hua Cheng had been standing closer, he would have a very deep gash across his chest from that.

Xu Biyu’s expression brightened upon seeing him.

“Master Hua!” She looked him up and down and breathed a sigh of relief, “I’m glad you’re alright. Have you seen Master Wei?”

“I haven’t,” Hua Cheng said, “But I did have an interesting conversation with your cat.”

“Blasted feline,” Xu Biyu grumbled, “Only helpful when you don’t want him to be.”

Hua Cheng quirked his lips in something that could pass as a smile to more observant people.

“Shall we?” Hua Cheng asked, gesturing to the door.

Xu Biyu hesitated, “You don’t have to enter, Master Hua. It’s not pleasant viewing.”

“There is little that would disturb me,” Hua Cheng assured, “I have seen many things. And I would prefer to stay with you. We might lose each other otherwise. I don’t think you want me wandering around here forever.”

“Well, yes, that does make sense,” Xu Biyu said, fidgeting. She took a deep breath and marched to the door. Hua Cheng followed her.

“Let’s go,” Xu Biyu said, opening the door.

A library filled with books and loose paper. The fireplace, previously lifeless, burst into flame. Xu Biyu in her bed, only a year earlier but looking so much younger. She wakes suddenly.

“Chai Jun saved my life.”

The suspicious cat leaping off the bed where it had woken Xu Biyu. It leapt to the windowsill and stared back. Its eyes were luminous in the dark.

“I survived because... he showed me how to escape. I didn’t leave the candle in the library...”

The flickering candle in the hallway beside a door marked ‘Xu Baoli’.

“... and Chai Jun didn’t knock it over. The candle and Chai Jun were upstairs when I went to bed. Chai Jun was in the room with me when the fire started.”

Chai Jun turned and leapt out of the window.
“Finally!” Wei WuXian shouted. Hua Cheng gave the man a glare. It was, Wei WuXian could admit, a very terrifying glare. And, were he anyone else, he may have been the slightest bit affected by it.

“Nice dress, Xu Biyu. Bit high cut in the skirt, I would think. But you’re not revealing anything so it’s all ok,” Wei WuXian continued when they reached the stairs and he could take in Xu Biyu’s appearance. He was perhaps a bit manic. But he’d been sitting there going crazy with the silence and the thoughts over the clues he had been given by the cat.

“I’m glad you’re ok Master Wei,” Xu Biyu said in relief.

“Sorry about all this,” Wei WuXian said, a bit more serious, “There was some foreign energy in your head. I was trying to get rid of it, but something went wrong and I was brought into your mind instead. Sorry; your Wonderland.”

“That’s ok, Master Wei,” Xu Biyu said, “Thank you for trying. I did notice less enemies on my way.”

“Really?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xu Biyu nodded, “The wasps aren’t because of that Infernal Contraption. They just took advantage of the destruction it’s leaving behind.”

“I hear you have to talk to a caterpillar?” Wei WuXian said, idly.

“Yes,” Xu Biyu walked up the stairs. Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow at Hua Cheng, and they followed.

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Wei WuXian had an uncomfortable and odd feeling of falling upwards instead of the usual down before jolting awake. He looked around. Hua Cheng was standing up from where he had been sprawled on what little floor there existed in this small room. Xu Biyu looked woozy next to Wei WuXian, but awake.

“Was that real? Or a hallucination?” Xu Biyu asked.

“If it was a hallucination then we all had the same one,” Wei WuXian said.

“The Queen of Hearts… will you be alright to find her?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Oh, yes,” Xu Biyu replied, “But she’s one of the ones I’ve seen outside Wonderland. She’s never stopped to talk though. I must make her talk to me. I’ll go to Queensland inside Wonderland.”

“Yes,” Wei WuXian said thoughtfully, “It would be best if you took care of yourself as priority.”

“You appear to be best suited for that,” Hua Cheng said drily.

“Along with your cat. He seems to be doing a good job,” Wei WuXian said, having a staring contest with said cat. Unless it was Wei WuXian’s imagination, he could see the very same grin as he could in Wonderland.
“What will you be doing?” Xu Biyu asked, “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“A chat with your Aunt, Madam Lin,” Wei WuXian said thoughtfully, “Then a look at your old house.”

Wei WuXian gave a glance at Hua Cheng to see if he had any input, but the other man simply nodded in agreement.

“Take care of yourself, Xu Biyu,” Hua Cheng said.

“And your Wonderland,” Wei WuXian added, “We’ll see you again soon.”

Chapter End Notes

*Meimei: Little Sister

I skipped the parts from the game that aren't important to the actual investigation. While Wifi and Huahua go and talk to Madame Lin, Xu Biyu will go to Queensland and meet with the Queen of Hearts.

Cheshire Cat's way of talking was so unique that I had to figure out a way of portraying that. Hope it worked.
Chapter Notes

Well, this is the end of the arc, though we'll have details on the aftermath next chapter and the return of someone we've all been waiting for.

Disclaimer: I stole some dialogue from Alice: Madness Returns. I couldn't resist. Some of the lines were too good. I feel sad that I couldn't put in that line about 'some bruiser will make you his sweetheart'. Oh, well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madame Lin was a big woman with more skin showing than is usual. Not enough to be scandalous ‘must avert your eyes’, but noticeably more than the average woman. She looked at them with shrewd eyes. Here was a woman hardened by life but still striding forward with grim determination.

“Good evening, Madame Lin. We’re here to ask about Xu Biyu?” Wei WuXian asked politely.

Madame Lin looked at the two men suspiciously. Wei WuXian immediately pinned her as someone who wouldn’t let any bullshit get past her.

“If you’re here because you think A-Yu started that fire, you can get out of here, right now,” Madame Lin said, pointing at the door.

Hua Cheng who, to Wei WuXian’s surprise, didn’t seem to mind setting foot in a brothel (unlike most men who either frequented and paid or felt they were above such things and behaved accordingly, at least in public), shook his head in response.

“She was not the one who set that fire,” Hua Cheng said.

Madame Lin raised plucked eyebrows and gave them both a deeper, more assessing look.

“All right,” she said finally, jerking her head to indicate going further inside than the entranceway to the brothel where they were standing.

“Let’s take this somewhere where we can sit. I’ll make tea.”

They were shown to an office space. Madame Lin bustled in with steaming cups painted in pretty colours.

“So,” she said, eyeing them through the steam of her tea, “you don’t think A-Yu had anything to do with the fire?”

“Her only guilt is surviving and trying to forget,” Wei WuXian said.

“We believe the fire was purposely set however,” Hua Cheng said.

“What?” Madame Lin seemed to stare at them for a moment before realising that they weren’t joking, “You mean my sister and everyone were murdered?”
“That would be why they aren’t at rest, Madame Lin,” Wei WuXian said, “They’re worried about Xu Biyu as their murderer is probably nearby.”

“Who? Who would…? Everyone loved my sister and her family! Everyone respected that poet she married and her daughters were highly thought of! Even though A-Yu was considered a highly imaginative and eccentric child, she was still considered fondly. It was only when she started acting erratically during the healing process and afterwards that people began to whisper.”

“She’s not as highly imaginative as you might think, Madame Lin,” Wei WuXian said, “She simply has an unfortunate ability to see things that most cannot. That’s all.”

“Regardless,” Hua Cheng continued while Madame Lin stared, “she managed to recall with certainty that the only candle was upstairs in the hall. The cat always sleeps with Xu Biyu and couldn’t have been downstairs. Finally, Xu Baoli’s death was the most suspicious.”

“Wasn’t it smoke? I saw the body while helping with the final rites. It was completely unmarked. She looked as if she were sleeping,” Madame Lin said. She looked like she was keeping her grief at bay with her considerable willpower.

“We intend to check the house after this,” Wei WuXian said, “but wasn’t Xu Baoli’s room next to Xu Biyu’s? If the smoke was that bad then wouldn’t Xu Biyu have more smoke damage? The only reason Xu Biyu was as injured as she was, was because she ran out into the hallway to find her parents and sister. Her sister’s room was locked and Xu Baoli hadn’t responded to anyone calling her. It was only when the fire grew too great that Xu Biyu finally went back to her room and out the window.”

“I always did wonder about A-Li’s locked door,” Madame Lin admitted, “That girl hated locked rooms. Hated being in places she couldn’t get out of. Terrible at playing hide and seek because of it. And we never found the key to her room either.”

“Plus, Xu Biyu remembered a conversation about when Xu Baoli was meant to be confined to the house as punishment and escaped out of her bedroom window to go play instead.” Hua Cheng added.

Madame Lin let out a chuckle at that. Her eyes were shiny.

“Oh, yes,” she said reminiscing, “My sister’s daughters might behave all proper and elegant but they were a mischievous duo.”

She took another sip of her tea, composing herself.

“Well, you appear to have quite a bit of knowledge. I don’t know how I could help. If anyone wanted to kill my sister’s family, I never had an inkling.”

Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng looked at each other then. They’d conversed on their way here, updating each other and getting each other’s perspectives.

“We think someone broke into the house, killed or otherwise incapacitated Xu Baoli, locked her door and used the hallway candle to set the fire to cover their crime,” Wei WuXian said. It was the conclusion they had both come to. They were worried about how Xu Biyu would take the news. Especially when it came to the reason Xu Baoli had been targeted.

“Xu Biyu recalls hearing strange noises the night of the fire. She thought it was a nightmare,” Hua Cheng said.
Madame Lin stared at them, “Why Xu Baoli? She was loved by everyone! Elegant, witty, played the guzheng… a very pretty and accomplished young woman. Everyone thought she’d marry a noble one day and be among the court in the capital.”

Despite Madame Lin’s job, it was still uncomfortable to spell it out for her.

“Xu Biyu also remembered conversations with her sister about a man who’d previously been invited over for tea. He’d been touching her and making her uncomfortable. Xu Baoli had said he was creepy and that his hand was ‘like an eel’. Apparently this man had claimed to Xu Baoli that she was trifling with his affections. We wanted to know if you knew anything about this,” Wei WuXian said.

Madame Lin nearly dropped her teacup. She paled, setting the cup gently back on the table. She clutched at her hands, knuckles turning white.

“That is the conclusion we’ve come to,” Wei WuXian said quietly.

Madame Lin breathed heavily, staring at something beyond them. Her previously pale face had become quite flushed now. Her hands were now gripping the chair hard enough to make the wood creak.

“Are you saying,” Madame Lin started in a quiet voice filled with horrified rage, “that some… entitled man came and… hurt my A-Li, killed her when he was done and then burned my sister and brother-in-law alive in their house to cover up their crime? Tried to make A-Yu have the same death? And now A-Yu still isn’t safe either?”

“Madame Lin, do you remember anyone who was… too interested in Xu Baoli? Or if she gave any indication to disliking someone? Avoidance or disgust or anything?” Wei WuXian asked.

Madame Lin opened her mouth and then paused, eyes unfocused.

“Are most men really like that?” Wei WuXian muttered to himself.

“Usually if they feel entitled and think the other person is inferior, then it is the norm,” Hua Cheng said to him, “People of Madame Lin’s occupation are not usually treated well.”

“It’s not the worst job,” Madame Lin said, clearly trying to distract herself, “At least I’m earning my own money and I can spend my free time however I want. Worst thing is when the ‘owner’ comes around checking up on the place and demanding his due. As if he does anything but barge in demanding things once every couple of months.”

“Sounds like it’d be better if you owned the place instead,” Wei WuXian said.

Madame Lin laughed, “You jest surely. A woman would never be allowed to own any type of establishment.”

She stopped laughing at the frown on Wei WuXian’s face and the interested look on Hua Cheng’s.

“You’re not joking?”

“It does sound like a good idea, as long as you can still get customers. I have a feeling you’d know
best how to run a place like this. You’d just need to hire someone to protect yourself and your people,” Hua Cheng said.

“Are you offering?” Madame Lin asked, looking intrigued.

“I travel too much I’m afraid,” Hua Cheng said politely.

Madame Lin still looked thoughtful for a moment. She sighed and leaned back looking tired and worn.

“Is that everything you need of me?” she asked.

“No,” Wei WuXian said, “Some time ago an argument took place between yourself and multiple others including the spokesman and Gao Yan. Xu Biyu was present but she couldn’t remember what the argument was about. During that argument a table had been smashed to pieces by ghosts. What was the argument about?”

“Oh, that Gao Yan wanted to take A-Yu back to the capital with him,” Madame Lin said bitterly, “I objected. I didn’t like the idea of some strange man taking A-Yu so far away with no one to rely on but him. A-Yu is far too young. I would never have heard from her again! They all started arguing with me. I know full well why I can’t take A-Yu in! The life I’ve got is not a suitable one for a young girl like that. But why can’t someone else take her in? A respectable woman in the local community could sponsor her. Her inheritance should cover any costs, no matter what that Master Gu says. And if it doesn’t, I’ll pay. I’ve got a little tucked away. But they said no one around here wants a girl whose head’s not screwed on right. They said that only Gao Yan was nice enough to take care of a girl like that. ‘Practically taking advantage of a kind young man’, they said. That’s when the table exploded.”

“That fits with what we’ve figured out,” Hua Cheng said thoughtfully, “The Xu family don’t want Xu Biyu taken to the capital. I believe they were on your side in that argument.”

“While that makes me feel better, it doesn’t change the situation,” Madame Lin said, “Gao Yan is determined to retreat to the capital. Believes that the ghosts will get weaker the further away from their corpses and their death sites.”

“For some that’s true, but not always,” Hua Cheng said.

“They’ll also be stronger around Xu Biyu and their murderer,” Wei WuXian said, “If they’re determined to protect Xu Biyu then they won’t get any weaker. That’s most likely the main reason they haven’t passed on. They want to protect Xu Biyu.”

“Considering she’s our best, and only, witness to these things, it would be to the murderer’s advantage to remove her,” Hua Cheng said.

“Madame Lin, final question: did any of the people who came from the capital to visit Master Xu stick out to you?” Wei WuXian asked, “Such a group of strangers would be hot gossip around here and I don’t doubt some of them were patrons of this establishment.”

“Oh, yes,” Madame Lin said, derisively, “Took the back door and everything like it would get back to their wives in the capital. None of them seemed to stand out. They were all foolish young men who thought themselves clever and with pockets full of coin they flashed about like it made them important. Fawned over my brother-in-law trying to gain favour. My sister told me stories of how ridiculous they could be. Both my nieces joined in by acting them out. That’s why they moved back up here, you see. They wanted a quiet place to themselves. Gao Yan did tend to stand out though.
Didn’t pay for services here himself. He only came to retrieve his fellows. Turned his nose up at us, like he was too good for whores.”

Madame Lin snorted to himself and sipped her tea.

“The emperor himself and his sons visit establishments like this. Just ‘cause we’re not as fancy as the ones in the capital doesn’t mean we’re not good at what we do. But I get the feeling he turned his nose up at the entire profession. Not out of a false sense of purity like some others. Pretty sure he felt it below himself to pay actual coin for our services. He’s one of the ones without a wife too. Some people just have a puffed up sense of importance,” Madame Lin grumbled.

Hua Cheng and Wei WuXian looked at each other at that.

“Why do you think he took in Xu Biyu?” Hua Cheng asked, eyes narrowed in thoughtful suspicion.

“Oh, probably to make himself look good. ‘Oh, look at me! I’m so wonderful and caring. Taking in this poor girl touched in the head. Pity me and admire me. I am morally superior to all the rest of you’. That kind of thing,” Madame Lin said, scowling, “Like that’s what my niece needs.”

Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng finished their tea. Wei WuXian couldn’t help but be slightly surprised that Hua Cheng actually drank his.

“Thank you Madame Lin,” Wei WuXian said, “Hopefully we’ll get to the bottom of this soon.”

“That would be appreciated,” Madame Lin said, standing to show them out.

“You’re a strange man, Wei WuXian,” Hua Cheng said idly as they walked through the forest. The forest debris crunched under their boots. The moonlight was minimal undercover of the trees. Neither of them had a light. Neither of them needed one and they hadn’t bothered pretending otherwise.

“Why does everybody keep saying that?” Wei WuXian wondered. He cast a side eye to his companion, “Besides, you’re not exactly an average being either.”

Hua Cheng paused slightly at that.

“‘Being’?” he asked, faux casually.

“You must know I have resentful energy by now,” Wei WuXian said. He was looking idly around the trees so the tensing and wary Hua Cheng would realise that Wei WuXian had no intention of attacking him, “And I can sense that you have quite a lot. Considering how easily you pass for a living human, you must be quite skilled in addition to being powerful. Not your average ghost by far.”

Hua Cheng was silent. Not even his boots made a sound. Yet Wei WuXian didn’t need his eyes or ears to tell that Hua Cheng was only step to the side and behind him. The resentful energy, no, the yin energy coming off the dead man was dense and controlled. Wei WuXian could sense it and where it was. It shifted now in Wei WuXian’s senses, betraying some sort of emotion that Wei WuXian wasn’t practiced enough to determine. Though, considering the circumstances, he could guess.
“Yet, you aren’t doing anything about it? You’re a cultivator.” Hua Cheng said finally. There was an edge in his voice like he would make sure Wei WuXian wouldn’t be able to do anything by any means necessary.

“Why?” Wei WuXian asked, “Most ghosts I encounter aren’t as... ah, how do I put it? Solid? Steady?” Wei WuXian shrugged even though Hua Cheng may not see it in the dark, “You aren’t threatening anyone. You’ve been actively helpful with Xu Biyu and I really appreciate things like that. I don’t know why you’re still here instead of passing on, or why you take such effort to appear like a living human. But you appear to have enough restraint that I’m not really worried you’ll go berserk or anything. So why should I do anything? You’re not hurting anyone.”

“I have a bit of a reputation that says otherwise,” Hua Cheng said darkly.

“So do I. Want to compare notes?” Wei WuXian asked lightly.

Wei WuXian could practically tell Hua Cheng was considering and re-evaluating him through the dark.

“I’ve actually done the things they tell about me,” Hua Cheng said, “and I don’t regret them either.”

“I’ve also done the things they use as horror stories to tell children to scare them. The only thing they lie about is why or that I would do it again. As for regret...” Wei WuXian shrugged again, “That’s hard to say. It was war. After the war... Well, maybe I was impulsive, but I don’t regret helping those people, even if it meant killing my way out.”

Silence. The trees were thinning a little, like some had been chopped down for firewood. Wei WuXian peered through the darkness. Looks like they were coming up to the house. Wei WuXian stretched. He would never be able to articulate how grateful he was to have the war drums beating at the back of his mind again like a secondary heartbeat. Once he had left Xu Biyu’s mind, he had spent a few good moments dazed and reassuring a grumpy possessive mountain spirit that he was back and not intending to leave it. Even now, Wei WuXian could still feel the Burial Mounds aggressively sulking, curled up closer to Wei WuXian’s spirit like a possessive overgrown and spiky cat.

My human. Come closer and get clawed, Wei WuXian mused.

The Burial Mounds was reminding him more and more of some large cat. Or a toddler – and not an easy-going sweet-natured toddler like A-Yuan either.

Wonder what Chang Ting and Xie Shijing’s children are going to be like, Wei WuXian thought with humour. Chang Ting, normally a sweet-tempered lady, was surprisingly irritable while pregnant.

“How do you have the energy ghosts use?” Hua Cheng asked, “You’re still alive, yet you have energy that matches mine or some of the other powerful ghosts.”

“Ah, now that’s a story,” Wei WuXian said, stalling to figure out the best way to tell it. They’d come to a clearing and they could see the silhouette of a burned out husk of a house against the starry sky. The former garden had grown wild, breaking loose from their flowerbeds or had died without care. Closer to the house was a barren area, burned away by the flames.

“Long story short: at the start of the war I had made the youngest heir of the enemy sect look foolish. He sought revenge on me. He destroyed my entire sect. Killed everyone except my adopted sister, who was away at the time, and my adopted brother. I left my brother to be healed and encountered Wen Chao. He caught me and, after I threatened to kill him even if I had to become a ghost, he grew
scared and... well, have you ever heard of the Burial Mounds?”

“Yes,” Hua Cheng said. There was something in his tone that Wei WuXian couldn’t quite parse out, “I heard an army of heaven came to earth and did battle there. They were all slaughtered. Now, it is considered cursed. The gods do not like to remember it and so forbade any mention of the battle and declared the mountain a no-go zone. That’s the extent of my knowledge however.”

For a moment, Wei WuXian just had to breathe.

Those...!

The gods should know better! They should know yao and what creates them. They should have known about the spirit of the Burial Mounds! And to disguise their own incompetence, their own unrighteous and unjustified actions, the embarrassment of what had occurred so long ago, they turned their eyes away, turned everyone’s eyes away and abandoned the army they had sent there to die for their own pride.

Ignoring the young yao that had been born from such energy to exist in pained, abandoned torment.

How could they?

“The whole story is a bit more than that,” Wei WuXian said, peering through blackened wood to find a way through the burned remains. He told the ghost the same story he had told to his shishu not so long ago.

All the while, he burned with rage. He kept the stirred up energy close to himself, aware that Hua Cheng could tell what he was doing and how agitated he was. Unless it was his imagination, he could see better through the dark than he could before.

If those kinds of actions were what it meant to achieve the final level of cultivation, Wei WuXian could almost be glad he wasn’t capable of it anymore.

On a hunch, Wei WuXian performed a trick he’d already figured out. He turned his eyes to the same glowing red that so many feared. As he thought, it made his night vision as good as his normal sight in daylight.

Convenient.

Yin energy was of the dark. It figured that it allowed him to live in it so comfortably.

After the story was finished, Hua Cheng noted that it sounded typical of the gods, allowing Wei WuXian to figure out what trigged him earlier.

Someone is holding a grudge against the gods.

Yet, it didn’t seem to be from something done against Hua Cheng himself specifically. He could have been burned by the gods’ ideas of conduct. But Wei WuXian had a hunch that it hadn’t been Hua Cheng who had been burned by the gods.

And a grudge on someone else’s behalf is much more complicated, Wei Wuxian thought ruefully. Jin ZiXuan was a good example.

“That still does not explain your energy,” Hua Cheng said, picking his through what looked like the entranceway.
Wei WuXian ‘hmm’ed peering to the wreckage to their right. It looked like the roof had caved in. A path had been cleared however. The whole place looked a lot more blackened and eaten away by the fire.

“The library, do you think?” Wei WuXian asked.

Hua Cheng nodded. He cast his – normal, non-glowing – eyes up to where the roof would be. Wei WuXian wondered why Hua Cheng didn’t have the same glow-y eyes he did.

“Madame Lin said the master bedroom had caved in and the parents’ bodies were found below,” Hua Cheng muttered.

Wei WuXian agreed, “No one ever found Xu Baoli’s room key did they?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“Among the Wen clan was a man whose skill was destroying golden cores,” Wei WuXian admitted. The two of them were picking their way carefully through the fragile boards. Ghost or not, Hua Cheng still had weight and neither or them wanted to disturb anything. They could both feel the prickling of resentful energy. The energy of two people trapped and dying by fire and smoke. Of parents afraid for each other, themselves and, most of all, for their daughters. And of Xu Baoli…

“I was thrown in with no golden core and injured. I was only of a mind to survive. But there was a natural barrier of resentful energy around the mountain. You could get in, but not out. I somehow figured out what is now called demonic cultivation. I absorbed resentful energy.”

Hua Cheng gave him a sharp look at that.

“That should have driven you insane,” he said bluntly, “If it hadn’t torn your body apart.”

“I’m stubborn,” Wei WuXian said ruefully, “I managed to wrangle the energy into something my body could tolerate. Even so, the process was… not fun.”

The memories and emotions of the dead producing the resentful energy, the sharp twisting agony of the yao… there were times during those three long months when Wei WuXian had nearly forgotten who he was. The more physical pain of the jagged broken glass-like energy absorbed into his body had almost been a relief in comparison. It had kept him grounded in the here and now. It hadn’t helped that Wei WuXian had nearly been out of his mind with desperation to escape. Thoughts of Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli had fuelled him. So, he had thrust all notion of safety out the window and absorbed resentful energy much faster and in larger quantities than he should have.

Wei WuXian had been shocked to find out that it had been only three months when he finally escaped. He had honestly thought he’d been trapped for years. Decades would not have surprised him much either.

He still had no idea how he managed to survive absorbing that much energy in so little time.

There was a safer process now. A refined process that Wei WuXian would be teaching to A-Yuan, A-Ying and hopefully others. One that wouldn’t be so agonising. The acclimatisation from the food grown on the Burial Mounds would help greatly in a much smoother absorption process.

“I needed to be more powerful than the barrier around the mountain so I could escape,” Wei WuXian said. Which meant he had absorbed the majority of the energy the Burial Mounds had contained. When he walked out of there, he walked out a being with as much resentful energy as the place ranked number one as containing the most resentful energy.
Was it any wonder he had too much power to contain?

The two men made their way up the fire-damaged stairs. There were safer supports in place. So the villagers could retrieve Xu Baoli’s body, Wei WuXian guessed.

“I’m… impressed,” Hua Cheng admitted softly. Wei WuXian could guess that that didn’t happen often.

“Thanks.”

Hua Cheng cursed suddenly. Wei WuXian froze when he felt something brush his legs. But there was nothing there…

“Do hurry,” a familiar drawling voice said, “It’s not polite to keep the hostess waiting.”

Ahead of them, before a door was a toothy grin hanging in mid-air with nothing attached to it. As they approached, glowing eyes then stripes faded into existence.

The door, they noticed, had Xu Baoli written on it in elegant calligraphy.

“How’s Xu Biyu?” Wei WuXian asked Chai Jun. Hua Cheng stared at the door, then the knocked over table beside it, between Xu Baoli’s door and what must be Xu Biyu’s.

“Getting there. She has just finished her own talk with the Queen of Hearts. Now it your turn while Biyu finds her way through the dollhouse someone has been building for her,” Chai Jun purred, tail lashing. His eyes stared unblinking at them.

“Dollhouse?” Wei WuXian muttered.

“Why can we see you as you are and understand you outside of Xu Biyu’s Wonderland?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Sometimes, things stick with you,” Chai Jun purred disappearing the same way he had appeared.

They looked at each other before Hua Cheng shrugged and opened the door. The lock had been broken, likely by the villagers retrieving Xu Baoli’s body for burial.

Wei WuXian, very carefully, did not jump. The figure inside was not a ghost, though wearing white and red. She was small and staring at the bed, back turned to them. Hua Cheng finally lit the lamp they had brought with them, leaving it on a surprisingly intact table.

The girl turned to them. Sadness gripped Wei WuXian when he looked at her.

She looks like Xu Biyu. Older, tall for fourteen, but still only fourteen. Her hair was cut short like Xu Biyu’s, a gold and red crown resting on top. Her hands were no longer human. They were giant and red, like the skin had been burned off, ending in claws. In one monster-like hand was a queen’s staff topped with a large red jewel in the shape of heart. Not a true heart, but the shape children drew to indicate love. The same shape was a theme in her queenly raiment.

Her pretty face, suited for elegance, once glinted with mischief. Now it was twisted in bitterness and all the helpless anger of someone who did not understand why they had been murdered before they had gotten the chance to live.

“Xu Baoli,” Wei WuXian greeted.

“A name for the human I once was. She’s dead,” the girl-queen said. Her voice was an
exaggeratedly girlish pitch yet she still managed to get her bitter anger across quite well. The high note on her last word was impressive.

“What would you like us to call you?” Hua Cheng asked.

“I am the Queen of Hearts,” the yao said. For she was a yao now. More than a ghost. Her death had twisted her to abandoning her humanity.

“You live in your sister’s Wonderland now,” Hua Cheng said carefully.

“Hmph!” the Queen looked almost disdainfully down her nose at them, “My little sister. No one else ever believed her about the yao. But I did. The times when she came back, injured by nothing we could rationalise! I wanted to help her, back then. I can now. Starting with that terrible wretch who has done his best to destroy her mind! Benefiting from her ‘madness’!”

Wei WuXian bit back a curse as his suspicion was all but confirmed.

“He’s the one who killed you and set the fire, isn’t he?” he asked.

“That’s not all he did,” the Queen said, shaking her head.

Unwilling, both men looked at the bed.

“He’s after Xu Biyu?” Wei WuXian asked. He didn’t want to see, hear or feel it. The resentful energy in the room could do that, he knew. But Wei WuXian had seen so many terrible things. He didn’t want to see anymore. This crime had thankfully been one that he has never known in that way, despite close calls. He really would prefer to keep it that way.

“He was too quick with me,” the Queen hissed, “He seeks something more lasting. She is young now, but he believes that way she can be moulded. Taken apart and reshaped by his sweaty hands. Turned into a pretty doll to service him and parrot him.”

Her eyes reflected the lamplight, highlighting her fury.

Wei WuXian swallowed.

“Gao Yan?” he guessed.

The Queen’s lips drew back revealing a normal set of teeth.

“The hot, stinking breath and unyielding attentions of potent, unreasoning, unfeeling hellraiser!” she snarled, not sounding entirely human and sounding rather deranged, “I will not let him have her!”

“We won’t let him,” Hua Cheng said firmly. Wei WuXian nodded, just as unyielding.

The Queen looked at them.

“He keeps my room key with him,” she said suddenly, “his trophy.”

She raised a hand, palm flat. Above, an image of a golden key appeared. Its handle was shaped in an intricately stylised heart.

Then, suddenly, she screamed. It was a scream of rage and pain. All the fury of a wild, beautiful thing caged too tightly.

Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng clapped their hands over their ears. They looked up when the
screaming stopped, but the Queen of Hearts had disappeared.

“I think we need to find Xu Biyu,” Hua Cheng said. He looked like an executioner who is going to be grimly satisfied with his work.

“Or her ‘guardian’,” Wei WuXian agreed darkly.

Suspicious were one thing. They were confirmed now.

Time to go hunting.

The moonlight was a lot brighter in the heart of the village. By this time most people were asleep. Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng kept a steady pace as they made their way through deserted streets. A snort greeted them, and Hua Cheng glanced over to see Wei WuXian’s horse trot to join them.

“By the way, about that horse…?” Hua Cheng asked.

“This is Khan,” Wei WuXian said, huffing in amusement, “He’s a divine horse that died on the Burial Mounds in that battle. I brought him back as a fierce corpse. In case you were wondering, he didn’t agree with the gods about that battle either.”

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything for a moment, “What made you say that?”

“You don’t like the gods, right?”

“I am a devout worshipper… of one god. The rest are less than air to me,” Hua Cheng announced.

Wei WuXian wondered what that god had done to get such loyalty from such a ghost like Hua Cheng. Ahead, a small figure darted out in front of them.

“Xu Biyu!” Wei WuXian called. The girl didn’t seem to hear him, intent on reaching her goal. Without exchanging a word, Hua Cheng and Wei WuXian sped up to follow her. Khan kept pace behind them.

In front of Gao Yan’s residence was a cart with a pair of horses ready to pull it wherever it may go. Gao Yan himself was struggling to tie something to the back.

“You!” Xu Biyu sounded furious.

Did she find out what happened to her sister?

Gao Yan whirled around. He didn’t seem to have noticed the two men or the dead warhorse in the shadows of the nearby building.

“Ah, there you are, A-Yu,” Gao Yan said. His tone was of a man determined not to seem like he was flustered or aggrieved by something, “Do hurry. We’re leaving.”

“Do you really expect me to go anywhere with you?” Xu Biyu said, outraged, “You oozing sore of depravity!”

Wei WuXian made a note of that one.
“Finally figured it out, have you? Try it. No one will believe a poor little mad girl like you. You’re powerless to go against me,” Gao Yan said. His mask torn away, revealing the arrogant, self-intitled, depraved man underneath. “I’ve made certain of that.”

“You’ve failed in destroying memories or my Wonderland!”

“No, you wouldn’t let go of your fantasies. You’re mad! Like your sister,” the ending was said in a sly knowing tone that infuriated everyone present. The two men in the shadows nearly stepped out at that. But Xu Biyu knew what happened now. She’d been living with the man; dependant upon the abuser and murderer of family. She deserved the right to confront him.

“Don’t speak of her! You didn’t know her,” Xu Biyu’s voice trembled slightly at the last sentence.

“Your sister was a tease! Pretended to despise me! She got what she wanted – in the end.”

If the words and the way the repulsive man said them wasn’t enough, he brought out a chain. On the end was Xu Baoli’s room key, swinging in the night breeze.

“She did despise you. Xu Baoli had wanted nothing to do with you,” Wei WuXian said coldly. He stepped out of the shadows, knowing from the way Gao Yan paled that his eyes were red once more.

“Of course, she would despise you. You are a rather despicable human that Xu Baoli and Xu Biyu have better sense than to associate with,” Hua Cheng said, a touch more slyly, “You’re rather beneath them.”

Gao Yan’s face twisted in affronted fury.

“Master Wei… Master Hua…” Xu Biyu’s eyes looked very big in the moonlight.

“You can’t do anything to me,” Gao Yan said boldly, “No one will believe a lunatic like A-Yu and they’ll just think you were taken in by her nonsense stories. I’m too respected in both this tiny town and the capital!”

“Oh?” Wei WuXian said, smile reminiscent of a snake.

“Now, why would you think that?” Hua Cheng said, smiling more like a cat who’d thought up a wonderful game to play with a mouse.

Khan whinnied aggressively and circled the group so that he was behind Gao Yan. With the cart on Gao Yan’s left, Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng on his left and Xu Biyu in front, he was quite trapped.

“Of course! I scarcely believe it myself!” Despite his words and smug tone, the man had the whites of his eyes showing as he flicked them around looking for an escape.

Unknown to the man or his would-be victim, the Xu parents’ ghosts had filtered from where they had nearly been trapped amongst Gao Yan’s ghost-traps to linger by their youngest daughter. Wei WuXian, Hua Cheng and Khan could feel them there, ready to defend their only living child by any means. Hopefully it would not be necessary. They were clearly weakened.

Gao Yan narrowed his eyes at what he perceived to be the weak link.

“Now A-Yu, is this really worth the trouble of remembering? Get in the cart!” He reached up to put Xu Baoli’s key away.

Xu Biyu straightened up. She walked confidently over to Gao Yan. For a moment everyone was
startled. Surely it would not be that easy to convince her to go with Gao Yan?

Instead, she snatched the key out of the started murderer’s hand, turned and strode the same way back to her former position.

Gao Yan’s expression darkened. He tried to reach for Xu Biyu, but Hua Cheng grabbed his wrist. From the way Gao Yan immediately grimaced, Hua Cheng was not being gentle. But bones hadn’t been crushed yet.

“Do not touch her,” Hua Cheng hissed.

“You won’t like us if you do,” Wei WuXian said. The horses attached to the cart shifted agitatedly. They could tell from the yin energy that there were predators here. Only there bonds kept them from fleeing.

Xu Biyu hadn’t reacted to the attempt or to its cessation. She stood with her back to Gao Yan for a moment. She turned on one heel.

Gao Yan gasped.

Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng couldn’t help feeling a bit shocked. Xu Biyu had reverted to the healthier, more vibrant version they had seen her as in Wonderland. Only now she was dressed in blue with a white, straight-cut – and blood-splattered – apron. The white bow had a screaming skull as its centre. Her necklace was now made of silver.

Hua Cheng let go of Gao Yan and stepped back, eyeing her. Wei WuXian hesitated, but did not interfere.

Khan, who had not encountered this, reared in surprise.

Xu Biyu narrowed her eyes. She walked forward, back to Gao Yan, with purpose. Gao Yan, still stunned by the change and disturbed by the look in her eyes stepped back. Khan reared again, this time with purpose. Gao Yan would not escape!

Xu Biyu, before anyone realised her intent, pushed Gao Yan.

His skull made a distinct crunch when Khan’s hooves smacked into it.

Well, I wasn’t quite expecting that to happen, Wei WuXian mused. Khan snorted in irritation at the blood and brain matter on his hooves.

Xu Biyu stared at the corpse for a moment. She opened her hand to stare at the key. Her face screwed up and Xu Biyu finally began to bawl.

“Jiejie!” she sobbed, sinking to her knees, her dress returning to normal, “Jiejie…”

Hua Cheng looked helplessly at her. Wei WuXian, drawing on the same instinct he had when his sister cried, knelt down and drew the brave little girl into a hug.

Both Wei WuXian and Hua Cheng watched as the shades of a scholar and his elegant wife passed on, satisfied that their murderer could no longer harm their youngest beloved daughter.

Chapter End Notes
Xu Biyu is eight years old in this situation. She deserves a good cry over what happened to her family.

Headcanons:

Wei WuXian and regrets: In canon, Wifi had a lot of regrets. Starting with Jin ZiXuan’s accidental death to the Wen siblings going off to die to his final mental breakdown that led to the massacre and everything after it. But, in my AU none of that has happened so the list of Wifi’s regrets are a lot smaller. He feels regret over ‘intruding’ on the Jiang family and inadvertently overshadowing Jiang Cheng. He regrets leading the Wen clan to YunmengJiang and, most of all, he regrets breaking his promise to Jiang Cheng. There are smaller ones too, like missing Jiang Yanli’s wedding and being able to support her in her pregnancy. But, overall, he’s not nearly as filled with regrets as his canon self who had a very long trauma conga line that led to his death.

Absorbing Resentful Energy: I’ve been wanting to talk about this! Expanding my theories of resentful energy… I’ve already mentioned that resentful energy is absorbed and implied that it is stored for use rather than ‘cultivated’ like the traditional method. This is interesting because, in my headcanon, resentful/yin energy carries the emotions that created it. That means that when Wifi absorbed the resentful energy from the BM he relived everything that led up to the deaths of almost everyone that had either died or been dumped on that mountain. It’s no wonder he had no sense of time when he finally left and was disassociating a little when he hunted down Wen Chao.

This would not have been good for the average person’s sanity. If anything, having a target he could get some not-so-misplaced aggression out on probably helped him a lot along with the Jiang siblings acting as emotional anchors.

Ghosts, like Hua Cheng, and fierce corpses, like Wei Ning, produce their own energy. I’ll get to WN’s situation later in my story, but HC is used to it, it grew with him. At this point he’s spent way more time as ghost than a living human anyway.

My theory for why no one could escape the BM until Wifi left is simple. The BM’s resentful energy grew too much for a baby yao to control or handle. The entire mountain was saturated, and it coalesced into a barrier around the mountain. People could get in, but they couldn’t leave. The resentful energy was too aggressive. But Wifi is stubborn and when he was thrown in, rather single-minded in that he would not die here. As we know, he drew on his old theories about controlling resentful energy. All he had to do was figure out how to use it. Once he did, he realised he needed more. He needed to become stronger than the barrier. So, he did. He continued absorbing resentful energy, working through the mental anguish of reliving other people’s deaths and the physical damage of his injuries and forcing his body to accept energy that it instinctively saw as bad for him. Eventually he absorbed the majority of the mountain’s power allowing him to overpower the barrier and walk out of the BM.

Does that make sense?
“She’s a stubborn thing, isn’t she?” Hua Cheng murmured to his temporary companion. Wei WuXian just sighed. They were on their way back to the Burial Mounds. After extensive talks with Madame Lin, it was decided that Xu Biyu would become one of Wei WuXian’s disciples. They packed the numb girl’s meagre possessions and left.

“You’re right about one thing,” Madame Lin had admitted, “I don’t know anything about yao or what to do with A-Yu’s ability. No one here does.”

However an eight year old girl, no matter how plucky, couldn’t keep up with the long legs and faster pace of the two men with her for too long. By himself, or with Hua Cheng, Wei WuXian would have arrived back by now. But Xu Biyu needed rest. So they had found an inn nearby and payed for a night. Hua Cheng didn’t seem to have financial problems, Wei WuXian noted. He payed for a room just for Xu Biyu and her yao cat.

Now, it was late. They’d already had dinner and Wei WuXian had just made sure Xu Biyu went to bed. Hopefully she wouldn’t have nightmares.

Even if Xu Biyu wouldn’t regret it, she’d still murdered a man. He’d deserved it and if she hadn’t done it, Wei WuXian or Hua Cheng would have. But killing someone wasn’t easy. Wei WuXian would have some long talks with her in the future. Hopefully with someone else to help. Wei WuXian had already mentally summoned Mulan and then sent her off again with a letter for Wei Qing. Hopefully, preparations were underway for Xu Biyu’s arrival.

There was a bottle of sake and two cups on the table and Wei WuXian gratefully sipped his. Hua Cheng picked up the dice. He’d taught Xu Biyu and Wei WuXian the game and soundly defeated both with ease every time.

“Can you do something with your hair?” Wei WuXian asked. He frowned as Hua Cheng won again.

“What do you mean?” Hua Cheng asked warily.

“You want to pass as a living human, right? Having your hair in one big sheet like that isn’t helpful. If you can make it into individual strands, you wouldn’t be able to tell you’re a ghost even if one looked closely,” Wei WuXian explained.

Hua Cheng frowned. He grabbed a part of his hair. The portion split cleanly. It was now two black masses that passed for hair if one did not look closely. Hua Cheng’s brow furrowed and he almost stared at the ‘hair’ in his hand. Wei WuXian picked up the dice and watched as the hair slowly split into thick strands. Hua Cheng let out a huff and let go, letting his hair go back to being a shining black sheet down his back.

“I’ll practice,” he said. A shrewd look was cast at Wei WuXian, “Aren’t you going to ask?”
“Ask what?” Wei WuXian asked, distracted by his abysmal roll.

“Why I’m wondering around the human world,” Hua Cheng said, rolling another winning roll.

“If you want to tell me, you can. If not, you don’t have to,” Wei WuXian said shrugging, “But if you could tell me how you always manage to win at this game, I’d be grateful. I’m starting to suspect you cheat.”

“I’ve had great luck since a long time ago,” Hua Cheng said smiling in amusement. He was silent for a moment as Hua Cheng won most of their games and Wei WuXian drunk most of the alcohol.

“Have you ever heard of the Crown Prince of Xian Le?” Hua Cheng asked suddenly.

Sensing that this was an important question to the ghost, Wei WuXian glanced at him over his cup.

“I haven’t,” Wei WuXian said, “Who was he?”

“A prince most beloved by his people. He became a martial god at seventeen. When war broke out in his kingdom, he defied the Jade Emperor and descended from the heavens to fight. He was punished cruelly for trying to help and Xian Le was destroyed anyway. Nowadays he is considered a god of misfortune among other terrible things. As he was cast out of heaven, he now wanders the earth. I hope to meet him again someday,” Hua Cheng said. His eyes were faraway. There was longing in his entire body language, not just his face.

“You’ve met him before?” Wei WuXian asked carefully. This was clearly a sensitive topic.

“I was a citizen of Xian Le when I was alive. The Crown Prince was a very kind person. He, perhaps would not remember someone like me, but the kindness he offered to me when I was at my lowest meant more than he could know. He never deserved what happened to him. If I could help him or, even just stay with him as his companion, I would be happy,” Hua Cheng admitted. He dug out a carefully rolled scroll from his robe and handed it to Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian took it gingerly and unrolled it. It was a gorgeous panting of a pretty young man in courtly regalia with a sword in one hand and flowers in the other. The man was smiling gently. The entire thing was painted with so much care and attention to detail that it was impressive and probably very expensive. Yet…

“Did you paint this?” Wei WuXian said in awe. Wei WuXian liked to think of himself as a fair artist, but he couldn’t hold a candle to something like this.

“Yes, I didn’t want to forget what he looked like,” Hua Cheng said, “You can keep it. I made many like it. If you ever see him, could you contact me? Roll these dice and you can come to my residence in the Ghost City.”

Hua Cheng gave him a different pair of dice that looked like they were made of carved bone. Wei WuXian nodded. It was the least he could do.

Wei WuXian stared at the wall as he turned all this over. Hua Cheng was rolling the original dice in his fingers now, clearly a subconscious thing to help him think. That level of devotion was truly something. Ghosts tended to be obsessive about things. But, Wei WuXian had a feeling this devotion had not been much different when the man had been alive. But something the ghost said niggled at him for some reason.

So, Wei WuXian turned it around. Putting himself in another’s shoes required a bit of imagination and self-awareness, both of which Wei WuXian had in spades. Who would Wei WuXian like to be a
constant companion to – that just being around them made Wei WuXian happy?

His first thought was his siblings or his son. But memory flashed of white sleeves ghosting over instrument strings, a beautiful calm face looking at him with pale yellow eyes.

Wei WuXian’s heart sped up at the memory. Lan Zhan under starlight, playing at Wei WuXian’s pleading even though his sect’s rules said no noise after whatever time. It was from when they had been travelling from the Nightless City to the Burial Mounds to start that investigation.

“You,” Wei WuXian asked hesitantly, “sound like you love him.”

“I do,” Hua Cheng said simply.

“No, I mean, you sound like you’re in love with him,” Wei WuXian continued.

“I am,” Hua Cheng said, smiling softly. It was a new expression on him, “Are you surprised?”

“Just that you can admit it so easily,” Wei WuXian said weakly. He was feeling like his usual confident and laidback demeanour was being taken away leaving someone much more uncertain and awkward.

“You aren’t going to go on about how a man loving another man is wrong?” Hua Cheng asked.

“I’d be a hypocrite if I did,” Wei WuXian muttered. Realising what he admitted, Wei WuXian looked away and covered his flushed face with his refilled cup, “Besides, I’m the school of thought that if it isn’t harming anyone than it’s not wrong.”

“You love another man?” Hua Cheng asked, staring curiously.

“No!” Wei WuXian said defensively, “Well, yes, maybe. It’s complicated.”

Hua Cheng stared at him expectantly. Wei WuXian deflated.

“He’s the complete opposite of me and probably doesn’t like me very much. I think I annoy him,” Wei WuXian muttered.

“I’m a powerful ghost known for being unpredictably violent and disliking most gods who’s in love with one of the kindest gods in existence,” Hua Cheng said flatly.

That was easy for him to say. But, even though the Shen’s and his sister had forced him to realise his feelings, Wei WuXian had never admitted them out loud, let alone talked about them.

“His name’s Lan Zhan; courtesy Wangji,” Wei WuXian said, quietly, “He’s very kind, even though his social skills suck and his face is completely expressionless and he thinks following rules is one of the most important things which is stupid. His entire sect is crazy about rules too. I used to tease him a lot because it was fun to watch his composure crumble. If I was lucky, he would actually show some expression. His blunt short responses and reactions are hilarious to me. He’s a very steady, reliable person too. He always does what he considers the right thing, not just what people expect. Oh! He’s really skilled too. He’s really talented at playing the *guqin*. He’s even composed his own songs. And he’s one of the only people who could keep up with me back when I was a normal cultivator. I don’t really know how we’ll match up now. He’s not very happy with my demonic cultivation and…”

Wei WuXian trailed off in embarrassment. He was rambling about Lan Zhan to Hua Cheng! Who was looking entirely entertained. The bastard.
Wei WuXian groaned and put his head down on the table, covering himself with his arms. Hua Cheng laughed.

“Sounds like you really like him,” Hua Cheng said, voice still filled with mirth. Wei WuXian muttered dire things about Hua Cheng into the table.

“How long have you known him?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Since we were fifteen,” Wei WuXian muttered.

“How old are you?”

Wei WuXian had to stop and think about that, “Twenty-two? Yeah, twenty-two.”

“You’re young,” Hua Cheng said in surprise. Wei WuXian grunted. It didn’t feel like he was young.

“And without your normal cultivation… You’re aging.”

Yes, thank you for pointing that out Hua Cheng.

“Admittedly, I’m not sure how I would work with a living body, but there is a reason most of the more powerful ghosts are shapeshifters. It might help you with your aging problem,” Hua Cheng said. He looked thoughtful.

Wei WuXian lifted his head up in hope. Aging was one of the things that had concerned him the most. With his former cultivation level, Wei WuXian should have stopped aging by now. Jiang Cheng might get distracted by competition or his anger at times, but he wasn’t blind. Jiang Yanli certainly wasn’t either. The Jiang siblings were very perceptive, especially when it came to family. Lan Wangji was very observant, too. Sooner or later, if Wei WuXian continued to interact with them, they’d notice that Wei WuXian was aging. You couldn’t hide wrinkles or grey hair.

Wei WuXian really didn’t want to tell them he was missing a golden core. They’d probably treat him like he was crippled or something. Jiang Cheng would blame himself. Even if Wei WuXian told him that Wen Zhuliu had destroyed his core when he was captured by the Wen clan (and Wei WuXian was pretty sure Wen Zhuliu had tried), Jiang Cheng would still blame himself for his ‘trip’ to ‘Baoshan Sanren’.

The truth, of course, was completely out of the question.

“What is it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“It’s hard to describe,” Hua Cheng admitted. He looked thoughtful for a moment, “Here.”

He held out a hand. His nails could look like claws or simply well-manicured depending on your perception, Wei WuXian noted.

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow.

“You can sense the energy, right? I’ll show you how I do it, then you could copy it in your own living body,” Hua Cheng explained.

That made sense, so Wei WuXian nodded and took Hua Cheng’s hand. They both closed their eyes and Wei WuXian opened himself up to the energy flowing within him. The first thing he noticed was that the Burial Mounds was still a bit sulky. Carefully, unsure of what he’d find he tried to narrow his focus on the mass of yin energy beside him.
Hua Cheng’s yin energy was interesting. As Hua Cheng no longer had a physical body, his yin energy wasn’t stored the way Wei WuXian’s was. Instead, Hua Cheng’s body was made of yin energy. The yin energy in Hua Cheng was extraordinarily dense, dense enough to make him solid. This explained why weaker ghosts were barely corporeal. They didn’t have enough yin energy to give them form. But how would this help Wei WuXian?

As Wei WuXian thought this, the energy started moving. Hua Cheng was shifting it to change his form into something else. Wei WuXian almost opened his eyes to look at the physical changes, but realised he didn’t have to. With his senses he could tell that the body shape had changed to a girl’s.

“Isn’t that strange?” Wei WuXian murmured. He couldn’t imagine changing sex like that.

“I don’t like doing it for too long,” a more feminine voice agreed, “It feels too strange and even though it’s still my body, it feels uncomfortable somehow.”

Slowly, Wei WuXian could feel Hua Cheng moving his energy around so he could return to his more comfortable male form. He frowned. Wei WuXian still wasn’t sure how this could stop himself from aging. His body was not made up entirely of energy.

But, now that he thought about it: how did normal spiritual energy stop one from aging? It seemed perfectly normal to everyone that, at a certain stage of golden core development, you stopped aging. No one really knew why.

Perhaps if he investigated that, with Wei Qing’s help, and if he looked into Wei Ning… there had to be a reason he wasn’t decomposing any more that could help… After all, Wei Ning was now a ‘creature’ of yin energy but with a physical body… With that knowledge and what Hua Cheng had just demonstrated, perhaps there was a way to mimic the halting of age other cultivators did.

“Wei Ying,” a voice said, cutting through Wei WuXian’s concentration and thoughts. Only one person called him ‘Wei Ying’.

Wei WuXian jumped in his seat, eyes flying open. In front of their table for two was Lan Wangji, staring down at the demonic cultivator and ghost companion. Or rather, staring at…

Wei WuXian followed that yellow gaze to his hand still holding on to Hua Cheng’s. They both let go.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian said, grinning. He was determined to ignore what just happened. Hua Cheng, Wei WuXian noticed out of the corner of eye, was leaning back in his chair looking amused again. Wei WuXian resisted the urge to kick him under their table.

“What are you doing here?” Wei WuXian continued, “Come, take a seat! Where’s another chair?”

Wei WuXian looked around but couldn’t see any. There was a small clack from Hua Cheng’s dice.

“No need,” Lan Wangji said shortly.

“Indeed,” Hua Cheng agreed, standing, “You must be Lan Wangji. Wei WuXian has spoken of you. I need to leave anyway, so please take my seat.”

Hua Cheng turned to Wei WuXian who was inwardly flustered over what Hua Cheng mentioning that Wei WuXian had spoken of Lan Wangji. He nodded to the bone dice beside Wei WuXian’s drink.
“Please come and visit me regardless of the matter we spoke of. Bring Xu Biyu, I would like to know how she’ll be doing and to see her again,” Hua Cheng said.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian said. Hua Cheng gave a polite salute to Lan Wangji who returned it stiffly.

“You are leaving? It is well past dark,” Lan Wangji said.

“I’m more of a night-person anyway,” Hua Cheng said blithely, “I’ll see you again Wei WuXian.”

“See you again,” Wei WuXian echoed. Unlike Lan Wangji, who didn’t seem to realise what Hua Cheng was, he wasn’t concerned. There was nothing more dangerous than Hua Cheng in the area.

“Lan Zhan! Aren’t you going to sit?” Wei WuXian asked, merrily, “Hua Cheng gave you his seat and, here, he didn’t take a single sip of the drink I poured for him, so you can drink it instead.”

Lan Wangji stared at him.

“No alcohol.”

Wei WuXian clucked his tongue, “You’re not in Cloud Recesses. You don’t need to obey their rules. Drink with me! That dratted Hua Cheng distracted me.”

Deftly, Wei WuXian scooped up the bone die, feeling the resentful energy at the touch, and tucked them away in his sleeves.

Lan Wangji’s expression may not change, but Wei WuXian still got the idea that he was disapproving.

“So, what are you doing around here?” Wei WuXian asked, pouring himself another drink, “Another night hunt?”

Lan Wangji nodded, “A village nearby with reports of ghosts.”

“From a house burning down?” Wei WuXian guessed. He continued when Lan Wangji nodded again, “Ah, Hua Cheng and myself just finished that night-hunt yesterday. Would you like to hear about it?”

For a moment Lan Wangji just stared at him. Unnoticed to Wei WuXian, Lan Wangji’s knuckles were white. He nodded for the third time.

Wei WuXian threw himself into regaling Lan Wangji the tale. He left out the bits about yao, implying that the image of Xu Baoli had been her ghost instead, and that Hua Cheng was a ghost himself. He made sure to mention any time demonic cultivation had been remotely helpful. He may have also implied that the villain responsible had died of his own stupidity. He didn’t embellish the story however, or leave out the unsavoury bits. So, it wasn’t that heavily edited.

Much.

“I wish I had known you were coming though,” Wei WuXian said, “It would be nice to go on a night-hunt together. We worked well before, didn’t we?”

“When?”

“With the XuanWu of course!” Wei WuXian exclaimed, “Don’t you remember? I have a terrible memory; if I remember than you definitely must remember. It was hardly a forgettable experience.”
“It did not go well,” Lan Wangji said.

“Didn’t it? We’re both alive, are we not? And we defeated the creature even if that had not been our intent at the beginning. Well, you defeated it, but I like to think I helped.”

“You defeated it.”

“Jiang Cheng said you said that. You gave the killing blow; you defeated it.”

“You did most of the work.”

“Who held on to strangle it for how many hours?”

“You did the more dangerous task and also had to hold on for all those hours.”

Wei WuXian laughed, “You are too modest, Lan Zhan! Very well, we defeated it, but I will tell anyone that asks who should take the most credit.”

Lan Wangji looked stubborn but mollified for the moment. Wei WuXian laughed again, struck by a thought.

“Ah! Now I am trying to think of your reaction to having to meet the good Madam Lin in a brothel,” Wei WuXian exclaimed. In truth, Wei WuXian didn’t think Lan Wangji would turn his nose up or be rude in any way. Rather, Wei WuXian just felt that Lan Wangji would be very embarrassed to be in such a place. He certainly would not have been as unmoved as Hua Cheng.

Lan Wangji appeared to be staring at his reflection in the untouched drink in front of him. Wei WuXian paused, his own cup part way to his lips. He tilted his head, baffled. Even though Wei WuXian liked Lan Wangji, he still couldn’t claim that he knew him well enough to understand many of his actions. Right now, he could not understand this body language of Lan Wangji’s and it frustrated him.

_How could I say I have feelings for him when I cannot tell what he is thinking or feeling right now?_”

“Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji blinked and looked back up at Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian contemplated about what to say.

“Drink with me,” he said. Drunk people revealed many things about themselves. If Lan Wangji truly had never had alcohol before than his tolerance would be very low. Wei WuXian had been around many drunk people. As someone who almost never got drunk no matter how much alcohol he consumed, he was often designated as a carer of his drunken fellows, usually Jiang Cheng. It would be very interesting for him to see what Lan Wangji was like when he wasn’t so guarded.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not as much fun drinking alone,” Wei WuXian said.

“No.”

“Eh? Then why ask ‘why’?”

Lan Wangji stubbornly looked away. Wei WuXian rested his head on his hand in a pout. As much as he wanted to continue cajoling, Wei WuXian didn’t want to cross a line and pressure him. If someone really didn’t want to then they didn’t have to. It would just generate bad feelings to
continue. Usually Wei WuXian only tried to convince someone a little at a time then shrugged it off. He’d never had so much interest in making someone drink before.

Not only did Wei WuXian not want to cross a line, but there was a memory that soured the idea of continuing to press. Wei WuXian had only entered the banquet hall a little before that Jin annoyance trapped the Lan brothers into drinking via social manners despite their repeated and polite refusals. He had already been anxious and worried over Wen Ning. The sight of that annoyance pestering the two far-too-polite brothers and puffing himself up with the praise over his own rudeness had driven Wei WuXian straight to irritation for reasons he was only now unravelling.

A clink distracted Wei WuXian from his increasingly sour thoughts. He blinked up in surprise. Lan Wangji had picked up the cup and was now holding it like he was about to drink.

“Eh? You’re drinking now?” Wei WuXian said. He felt blindsided. What had changed Lan Wangji’s mind?

“En.”

“You know I don’t actually mind if you don’t want to,” Wei WuXian said bemused, still caught up in thoughts of not forcing Lan Wangji into anything.

“You said ‘it is no fun drinking alone’.”

“Well, yeah. But we can order tea or something.”

At Lan Wangji’s stare, Wei WuXian gave a huff, “I’d like for you to drink with me, but I don’t want to make you think you have to or that you’ll regret it later. Of course, you will regret it if you have too much. The point is: it’s entirely up to you. If you want to drink: drink. If you don’t want to: don’t.”

Lan Wangji seemed to consider that.

“I have never drank alcohol before,” Lan Wangji confessed.

“Didn’t anyone sneak in alcohol to Cloud Recesses before?”

“Just you.”

Wei WuXian laughed at that, “Well, this stuff isn’t bad. But the best is Emperor’s Smile from Gusu. You’re in a convenient location for that.”

“I will drink,” Lan Wangji decided after a moment of contemplation.

Wait, really?

Wei WuXian nearly bit his tongue to keep the words from escaping his mouth. Instead he smiled, trying to seem as if everything was normal. His eyes locked onto Lan Wangji’s throat as the man drank.

Wei WuXian couldn’t help but stare, waiting for the alcohol to take effect in some way. A red flush perhaps?

But Lan Wangji’s face didn’t change. He stared calmly back at Wei WuXian.

Nothing? Nothing at all? What was with this composure?
Lan Wangji eyebrows furrowed, and he reached up to rub between them, taking his eyes off Wei WuXian. Then he rested his head on his hand the way Wei WuXian had done before and fell asleep.

Wei WuXian stared more blatantly now.

He was asleep?

He was asleep!

What? Did Lan Wangji just skip the fun part of getting drunk like acting silly and saying things you’d never normally say and just fall asleep? Was the dignity of Lan Wangji so powerful that it allowed him to avoid such things that embarrassed the common man?

This meant that Wei WuXian’s plan to subtly grill an intoxicated Lan Wangji about his true thoughts was completely avoided!

Wei WuXian, still partially in disbelief, waved a hand in front of Lan Wangji’s face. Nothing. He poked a white-clad shoulder. Nothing. Gathering his bravery, Wei WuXian reached up and gave Lan Wangji’s face a small pinch.

A reaction!

Lan Wangji’s nose wrinkled in discomfit. It was cute.

Wei WuXian buried his face in his arms, unsure on whether to laugh or groan in frustration. He sighed. Guess his plan was ruined.

A chuckle escaped him. Lan Wangji really couldn’t handle alcohol at all. Just fell straight asleep! At least he might be able to tease Lan Wangji in the morning. Musing on how to go about such things, he carefully picked up Lan Wangji, waving off the concerned innkeeper.

He carried Lan Wangji up to the room he had originally was going to share with Hua Cheng. After placing Lan Wangji on his bed, Wei WuXian removed his boots and the cultivational sword, Bichen. After a moment, rationalising that he’d never get another chance again, Wei WuXian crouched by Lan Wangji’s head and stared at his face.

Lan Wangji really was beautiful. That was one thing everybody agreed on and Wei WuXian was no different. But everybody always seemed to be put off by his expressionless face. Lan Wangji was still respected and admired, but he always seemed to be alone too. Wei WuXian was not put off by the lack of expressions. In fact, he found it amusing. But looking at Lan Wangji’s sleep-stilled face, he couldn’t help but wonder. He’d seen Lan Wangji in pain, hum and raise his voice, but what would Lan Wangji look like if he was really happy? What would he look like smiling?

Probably like his brother, Wei WuXian recalled ruefully. The two could pass for twins except for eye colour and expressions. Where Lan Wangji was always expressionless, Lan XiChen was always smiling. Something others found comforting, but Wei WuXian found it just as inscrutable. If not more so. Perhaps it’s because Wei WuXian had always gone out of his way to interact with Lan Wangji and had barely spent any time with Lan XiChen, but Wei WuXian thought he’d seen a wider variety of expressions in Lan Wangji than his smiling older brother.

Even so… Wei WuXian still wanted to see what Lan Wangji looked like smiling one day.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said loudly. Even though Lan Wangji hadn’t woken during the entire time Wei WuXian had manhandled him up the stairs, into bed and removed his boots and Bichen, Wei WuXian still wanted to try and wake him.
“Laaaaaaaaaaaaa Zhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan,” Wei WuXian said in his whiniest, most annoying voice, “Lan Zhan! Lan Wangji! Young master Lan! Wangji! Lan-er-gege! Ooh, I like that one. I’ll have to call you that in the future. Lan-er-gege, wake up and pay attention to me.”

Nothing. Wei WuXian pouted at the unconscious face in front of him.

Sighing, Wei WuXian stood up. He wasn’t tired yet. The night was still young. Wei WuXian decided to check on Xu Biyu.

He found the girl sleeping quietly, huddled under the blankets. The empty space beside her pillow had yellow eyes glowing attached to nothing. The eyes blinked at him. Wei WuXian nodded and silently closed the door.

Now what?

He could go back to his room, he guessed. Maybe take notes on the things Hua Cheng had shown him. Thus decided, he turned to go back to his room only to crash into something hard.

“What the…?” Wei WuXian looked up. He blinked, “Lan Zhan? You’re awake?”

Indeed, Lan Wangji stared at him as expressionless as always. His ears were red. Wei WuXian wondered if he was embarrassed that he had passed out so quickly.

“En.”

“That’s a surprise. I thought you’d be out for the rest of the night,” Wei WuXian said, trying to figure out how Lan Wangji was awake now when he hadn’t responded to any of Wei WuXian’s attempts to wake him before.

Wei WuXian expected some kind of response to that, but Lan Wangji just stared at him placidly, not moving from their spot in the hallway in front of a sleeping Xu Biyu’s room. They were, Wei WuXian noted, standing very close to each other.

“Uh, Lan Zhan?”

“Mm?”

“Are we going back to our room or something?” Wei WuXian said for lack of anything better.

Before Wei WuXian could realise what was happening, Lan Wangji grabbed his wrist and dragged him back to the room they were in before. The rumours about the Lan clan’s arm strength really were true. Even though Wei WuXian tried to resist and even tried to dig in his feet, Lan Wangji didn’t even seem to notice. He didn’t break stride even once.

Once they entered the room, Lan Wangji let go and turned to close the door. Still swept up in the motion of Lan Wangji’s stride, Wei WuXian stumbled for a moment. Once he righted himself, he stared at Lan Wangji in bafflement. Lan Wangji was not someone who invaded other's personal space or touched them without prompting. Yet he had just done so.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said slowly, just noticing something off about the other man’s appearance, “Are you drunk?”

“No.”

He seemed just as elegantly put together as usual. His facial expression hadn’t changed either. There
was no flush except in his ears which happened when he got embarrassed as Wei WuXian had been delighted to discover. There was no tell-tale sign that he was anything but sober. Except for one thing.

“Then why are your boots on the wrong feet?”

Lan Wangji looked down at his feet.

“No.”

“No?” Wei WuXian echoed, baffled, “‘No’ what?”

“Not on the wrong feet.”

But both boots were clearly on the wrong foot! The response was surprisingly childish. And stubborn, but Wei WuXian already knew Lan Wangji was stubborn.

“Alright then, how many fingers am I holding up? Wei WuXian asked, holding up two fingers.

Without a change in expression, Lan Wangji walked over in his wrong boots, raised both hands and curled each one around each of Wei WuXian’s fingers. Wei WuXian couldn’t help but laugh. Wei WuXian had seen many drunken people. But never before had he seen someone who slept before getting drunk. Usually it was ‘drunken antics’ then sleep.

Still chuckling, Wei WuXian removed his fingers. Lan Wangji kept his hands in the air in loose fists for a few moments before they dropped to his sides again.

Ah! This was Lan Wangji’s first time drunk! Wei WuXian was happy to know a side of Lan Wangji that no one had ever seen before – not even Lan Wangji himself.

“Even though you’re drunk your face doesn’t flush at all,” Wei WuXian observed, “No one would ever know you’re drunk. Why doesn’t it turn red?”

Wei WuXian hadn’t really been expecting an answer from Lan Wangji. But he wouldn’t have been surprised to get one. He was surprised at Lan Wangji’s response though.

Lan Wangji pulled Wei WuXian into his arms, tucking the man’s head under his chin. Wei WuXian froze.

Now his face was flushed red!

“The heartbeats,” Lan Wangji said.

“H-huh?” Wei WuXian stuttered out. He was distracted by the feeling of being in Lan Wangji’s arms and of the way his chest vibrated as he spoke. He felt like he might internally combust. What was happening?! Why was he suddenly in this position?!

“The face does not show anything,” Lan Wangji explained, “You must listen to the heartbeats.”

Unseen by Lan Wangji, Wei WuXian blinked. He moved his head, so his ear was better pressed to Lan Wangji’s chest. Sure enough, Wei WuXian could hear the beats of Lan Wangji’s heart going fast.

He lifted his head up so he could see Lan Wangji’s placid face again, “I won’t be able to tell from your face, so I have to listen for your heartbeats?”
Wei WuXian couldn’t help but burst into laughter at this. Lan Wangji really was an interesting person! Who else could do something like this?

Once Wei WuXian stopped laughing however, he became extremely aware that he was still encased in Lan Wangji’s arms and pressed to his chest. Praying that his face wasn’t red, he attempted to stand back. For a moment it felt as if Lan Wangji wasn’t going to let go. When Wei WuXian finally stood back and took in Lan Wangji, he wondered if he’d imagined the pressure.

“Right,” Wei WuXian said, deciding not to mention it as, going by his experience with other drunk people, he might not get a straight answer, “I’m going to get a bowl to wash our faces before bed. Wait here.”

After getting Lan Wangji’s acknowledgement and promise that he would not leave the room, Wei WuXian left to get the mentioned items. He did pause for a moment to wonder why the door was locked. Upon returning, Wei WuXian beheld Lan Wangji sitting on the bed from earlier, hunched over and peering at something in his hands. After putting the bowl of water down, Wei WuXian realised that Lan Wangji had removed his outer robe and the thing in his hands was his forehead ribbon.

A long time ago, Wei WuXian had accidentally removed Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon. It was the angriest he’d ever seen the other man and, to this day, Wei WuXian had no idea why. The Lan clan’s forehead ribbon was clearly important somehow, but Wei WuXian had never known how. This was the first time that he’d seen a member of the Lan clan without it.

“Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji peeked up at him through his bangs and the hair he had let drape around his face like a curtain. He didn’t seem to want to face Wei WuXian straight on. For some reason, the odd posture (not perfectly correct at all; very unlike Lan Wangji) niggled at Wei WuXian. He stared at the white-clad man for a moment trying to figure it out. Lan Wangji couldn’t seem to take the scrutiny and dropped his head again, obscuring his entire face from Wei WuXian’s gaze. Despite this, Wei WuXian could see that Lan Wangji’s ears were really red now and it clicked.

Was Lan Zhan being shy?

Wei WuXian almost wanted to burst out laughing again but managed to withhold himself. Lan Wangji would definitely take it the wrong way. He also had to restrain himself from hugging Lan Wangji. That would definitely be mortifying for the drunk man.

After making sure he had restrained himself properly, Wei WuXian stepped forward and reached out his hands. He had been intending to use them to guide Lan Wangji over to the bowl and was surprised when Lan Wangji reached out and dropped his forehead ribbon onto Wei WuXian’s palms. Wei WuXian froze in shock.

Lan Wangji glanced up at him then turned his face away, like he was embarrassed.

Did that just happen? Considering the reaction he received last time he had touched the object now given to him, few actions could have surprised Wei WuXian more.

And what was with Lan Wangji’s reaction?

Why did he feel like he had to tread carefully right now?
Wei WuXian, unsure of what to do next, examined the ribbon. It looked ordinary to him. Clean, well-kept with exquisitely embroidered blue clouds. Still, Wei WuXian knew it was important even if he didn’t know why, so he carefully folded it and put it in a safe area on Lan Wangji’s bedside table.

“Come on, let’s get your face washed. We can get you some water afterwards if you want,” Wei WuXian said, leading Lan Wangji over to the table and chair where he left the bowl and towel. Water would be a good idea. If Lan Wangji had never had alcohol then he would need it for the possible hangover.

Wei WuXian was diligent in washing Lan Wangji’s face at first. But upon realising just how docile the man was, he couldn’t resist some fun. He started gently pulling Lan Wangji’s face this way and that. Wei WuXian could easily find amusement in such simple entertainment. Eventually he stopped and tossed the towel back.

“Now for some water,” Wei WuXian mused to himself, standing and turning to find a pitcher when he heard a splash behind. Jumping and spinning back around, he saw Lan Wangji with his face in the bowl.

“Not that water!” Wei WuXian exclaimed as he lifted Lan Wangji’s head from the bowl. He hoped Lan Wangji hadn’t drunk any. He also hoped that Lan Wangji wouldn’t remember this in the morning. He might never show his face to Wei WuXian again!

Grabbing a drier towel, Wei WuXian wiped away the water from Lan Wangji’s face. Once more, Wei WuXian noticed that Lan Wangji appeared to be staring at him.

“Are you staring at me? Why? Do you think I’m good-looking?” Wei WuXian teased, tossing the towel aside again.

Lan Wangji nodded, “En.”

Wei WuXian froze, “Eh?”


Wei WuXian stared in shock, feeling his face go red. Objectively, Wei WuXian knew he was good-looking. He had been blessed with very good genetics and he had been told this most of his life. But never had the thought crossed his mind that Lan Wangji would admit it and add the word ‘very’!

He fervently hoped Lan Wangji wouldn’t remember this in the morning. Before, Wei WuXian had always been unfazed while he had ruined Lan Wangji’s composure. He didn’t think he could stand having to explain to Lan Wangji why his composure was so horrid tonight!

Although…

“Hey, Lan Zhan. Will you answer any of my questions?”

Lan Wangji nodded. He seemed to have gotten over his previous shyness.

“Alright,” Wei WuXian made a pose as if he was thinking of some deep meaningful thoughts. In reality he was just thinking of some silly questions, “Do you… like rabbits?”

“Yes.”

“Did you keep those two that I gave you?”
“Yes.”
Wei WuXian almost wanted to ask ‘really?’

“Did you like the alcohol?”
A shrug.

“Do you like… spicy food?”
Lan Wangji frowned.

“Have you ever violated the Lan clan rules?”

“Yes.”

“Really? Which ones?”

“No alcohol.”

Wei WuXian laughed at that, “You mean, just now?”

A nod.

“I’ve turned you into a rebel, Lan Zhan. Alright, how do you feel about… Nie Mingjue?”

An exasperated sigh.

“Jin GuangYao?”

Another shrug.

“Jiang Cheng?”

Annoyance.

Well done, Jiang Cheng, Wei WuXian congratulated mentally, You really do have the skill to annoy anyone, Gege’s taught you well.

“What about… this one?” This time, Wei WuXian pointed at himself.

“Mine.”

“…”

Lan Wangji stared at him more intently and enunciated clearly: “Mine.”

Blinking, Wei WuXian looked down at the finger he had all but pressed to his chest. Then he looked behind him even though he knew they were alone.

“…Eh?”

Lan Wangji stared at him as though waiting for comprehension to hit. It was not to be, however. Wei WuXian was completely confused.

“What do you mean ‘mine’?” he asked leaning into Lan Wangji’s space.
“’Mine’ means mine.”

“Thank you for that clarification,” Wei WuXian deadpanned unable to help himself, “Please use more words, Lan Zhan. I know you can do it.”

Lan Wangji seemed frustrated at having to explain himself. Then, without warning, his expression changed. He stood up, startling Wei WuXian. Before he could go back more than a step or two, Lan Wangji grabbed him and dragged him over to Lan Wangji’s bed.

This again?

“What?” Wei WuXian managed to get out.

“It is nine,” Lan Wangji said simply, “Time for bed.”

The Lan clan’s impeccable internal clock! The Lan rules dictated that sleep would be at nine and so now Lan Wangji was determined to follow – and to drag Wei WuXian along!

“No, no, no, no. It’s too early for sleep! Bedtime for any respectable Wei isn’t for another four hours!”

Lan Wangji ignored this and shoved Wei WuXian onto his bed.

“And even if it was bedtime, why am I in your bed?!”

“Sleep,” Lan Wangji said sternly.

“I have my own bed over there!” Wei WuXian tried to get up only for Lan Wangji to frown. In the ensuing struggle Lan Wangji managed to hit some kind of pressure point at the small of Wei WuXian’s back.

Immediately, the muscles above his waist seized and would not respond making Wei WuXian topple over to and in Lan Wangji’s arms.

What’s with this tactic?! Wei WuXian wanted to yell, but was too shocked by the dirty trick made by Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji tucked Wei WuXian into bed, arranging him in the corseleike sleeping position before joining him. This trapped him between the Lan and the wall. Wei WuXian had a feeling the wall would be easier to go through.

“Sleep.”

Wei WuXian stared at Lan Wangji in disbelief. Focussing his resentful energy on the spot Lan Wangji hit, he managed, with trial and error, to undo whatever paralysing technique had been done to him. It took some time which was annoying.

“You can be entirely unmovable, you know that?” Wei WuXian grumbled at the sleeping Lan, “If all your clan reacts like this to alcohol then you have good reason to be banned from drinking.”

After a moment of moving, as stealthily as possible, into a more comfortable position, Wei WuXian decided not to bother trying to escape. Like this, he’d be able to tease Lan Wangji in the morning. Mollified by the thought of Lan Wangji’s possible reactions to waking up next to Wei WuXian in the morning, he eventually drifted off to sleep.
*Wei WuXian is naturally referring to himself.

When Wei WuXian fought in a war, took responsibility for fifty people, killed a lot of people and died before he could legally drink in America. Younger than this author for sure. Also, the realisation that, to Wifi, he was reborn into a body that was older than he was when he died for all the descriptions of MXY’s youth.

I had to try and figure this out. 16 was when the war started. 17-18 when it ended. Another year passed before WQ came, so 18-19 when he retreated to the BM. Another two years after that is 21 when JL was said to have been born. Meaning that Wifi most likely died at 21 or 22. 23 if you’re padding extra time.

Lan Wangji doesn’t think defeating the XuanWu went well because Wei WuXian nearly died.

Basically that first chapter of Lan Wangji’s drunken antics but with shy Lan Wangji and obviously crushing Wei WuXian. LWJ is shy here because he hasn’t fully committed himself to Wifi the way his canon self had yet. He’s still uncertain and afraid of rejection and it slipped his alcohol-addled mind that Wifi doesn’t know the meaning of the ribbon. Plus, when you wear a certain piece every day for years, you feel naked without it. That was LWJ. Without his forehead ribbon, he felt naked and vulnerable. And he did this voluntarily.

As for why Wifi can get out of LWJ’s paralysing trick when his canon self can’t: he still has his yin-energy saturated body here plus he doesn’t care if LWJ finds out he’s using demonic cultivation. In canon, I believe that Wifi was a lot more cautious using demonic cultivation in front of anyone, even LWJ.

And yes, in case you missed it, Xu Biyu is a new resident and disciple of YilingWei.
Chapter Notes

Ahhh… long time no see?

Sorry, Life has been hard lately. First, I got sick. Then I had an exam. Then I got sick again. Now I’m preparing for a holiday home. I had intended to notify you all about a hiatus, but I got sick, so the hiatus began sooner than planned. Rest assured I haven’t abandoned the story. I’ve just hit by a whammy of real life.

Also, yes, I know the Xu Arc was not my normal way of writing this story. Rest assured, I'm back to the regularly scheduled original content (for a fanfic). I may rewrite that arc later so its not as much of a divergence.

I'm going home for Christmas so I probably won't get another chapter up for another three weeks or so. Hopefully, it won't be so much of a delay this time.

Thanks for your patience

Merry Christmas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wei WuXian was woken the next morning by movement in his bed and a thud.

“Wha?” he said groggily, not yet recalling the previous night.

“Good morning, Shizun. Are you aware that there was a strange man in your bed?”

“Biyu?” Wei WuXian asked, seeing the child standing in the doorway. He looked around and was treated by the sight of Lan Wangji looking stunned on the floor by the bed. The thud that Wei WuXian had heard was Lan Wangji falling from the bed after being woken by Xu Biyu’s knocks.

Xu Biyu had woken up early by virtue of both going to bed early and the natural inclination of all young children to rise earlier than their parents would like. Deciding to find her new master, she had gone to his room and knocked lightly. Lan Wangji, used to rising early, had just been on the verge of waking when the knocks had disturbed him. He had woken and, disoriented and confused, realised that the warm body next to him was a sleeping Wei WuXian.

Naturally, he panicked and flung himself away, landing on the floor. When Xu Biyu heard the sound, she had been concerned and opened the door where she beheld a strange man in white inner robes on the floor, one bed unslept in, no Hua Cheng and her new master sitting up groggy in the sole rumpled bed.

Before Wei WuXian could answer his new disciple, Lan Wangji, perceiving that he was missing something essential, spotted it on the nearby table and lunged toward it. He seemed very rushed to put on and tie his forehead ribbon. Wei WuXian had a feeling that he’d never moved in such an undignified way in his life.

“Yes, I was aware,” Wei WuXian responded to Xu Biyu, “How did you sleep?”
“Well, thank you,” Xu Biyu said, too polite to mention the strange man again, “Where is Master Hua?”

“He went home late last night. He did offer for us to visit him at some point in the future. So, we can be sure of meeting him again,” Wei WuXian said, yawning, “Have you had breakfast?”

“Not yet.”

“Have you brushed your hair?”

“Umm…”

“Go back to your room and brush your hair. When I’m finished, I’ll come and get you so we can all have breakfast together.”

“All of us?” Xu Biyu asked, looking at Lan Wangji’s back as he had not turned around since grabbing his forehead ribbon.

“Of course,” Wei WuXian said easily, “You’ll join us for breakfast, won’t you Lan Zhan?”

All he got for this petition was a wide-eyed side-look.

“See? He’ll join us and then you can get introduced to him properly. Close the door behind you.”

“Yes, Shizun.”

Silence rained after Xu Biyu left. Lan Wangji was frozen. He had woken up badly, appeared in front of a small child in a very undignified manner, had no memory of the night before and had apparently slept the night away in the very same bed as Wei Ying.

If Wei WuXian were a person of great compassion, mercy and consideration, he would have left Lan Wangji to regain his composure and dignity.

“So,” Wei WuXian said, his voice dropping an octave. He leaned forward, across the warm space Lan Wangji had just vacated and rested his head on his hand. He fluttered his eyelashes up at the frozen Lan, “Was last night as good for you as it was for me?”

Naturally, Wei WuXian could not boast of such attributes when such entertainment was before him.

Lan Wangji’s reaction was immediate. He appeared across the room, as far away from Wei WuXian as he could get, still looking wide-eyed, with one hand on his forehead ribbon as if he was afraid it would fall or disappear.

Wei WuXian busted a gut laughing. He was laughing so hard; he was all but rolling in the rumpled sheets they had both slept in the night before.

“What…?” Lan Wangji got out but unsure of how to continue. His agitated emotions and mortification robbed him of what command of speech he usually had.

“What do you remember from last night?” Wei WuXian asked when he had gotten his laughter under control. Not that it stopped the occasional shortles from escaping his mouth.

“I…” Lan Wangji paused, clearly trying to collect himself as much as try to remember, “Did… I have alcohol?”

“You did. Your very first time,” Wei WuXian snickered again, “Truly Lan Zhan, I am now aware of
why your clan forbids such things. It is not for deprivation or a sense of ‘sullying the body’. It is merely because you really cannot handle it.”

Wei WuXian laughed again, recalling the strange things Lan Wangji had done last night and how serious he had looked throughout the entire thing.

“Did…”

Lan Wangji’s voice was so characteristically small that Wei WuXian had not heard him at first, still laughing as he was.

“Did we…?”

“Hmm?” Wei WuXian blinked at Lan Wangji from where he was lying, comfortable in the sheets they had shared. Realising what Lan Wangji was trying to ask, Wei WuXian couldn’t help laughing again.

Recalling Lan Wangji’s response of ‘mine’ from last night, Wei WuXian couldn’t help but wonder about something.

“What do you think happened last night, Lan Zhan?”

From this distance Wei WuXian couldn’t tell if Lan Wangji was staring at him or the evidence of them sleeping together. Both was a possibility with Wei WuXian lying sprawled over the bed as he was, unwilling to give up the last of Lan Wangji’s warmth just yet.

“I… could not possibly know…” Lan Wangji said in stops and starts, unable to speak in the same regular tone as usual.

“What did you want to have happened?” Wei WuXian asked in a more serious tone.

Lan Wangji was struck speechless. He was pressed up against the wall like he was trying to put as much space as possible between him and Wei WuXian. His eyes were wide. Immediately, Wei WuXian felt regret. He went too far.

“Relax, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said in a gentler tone. He got out of the bed, revealing himself to be fully dressed, “When nine o’clock hit, you were determined to go to sleep and determined to make me go to sleep as well. So, in your drunken mind, you believed the best way was to make me sleep beside you. That’s all. Nothing untoward happened.”

Lan Wangji took a moment to absorb that. Wei WuXian decided he should try and make himself presentable while Lan Wangji regained his composure.

“And, before nine?”

“Nothing much,” Wei WuXian said easily, “As soon as you drank, you fell asleep,” he laughed again, “I was really shocked. I’ve seen a lot of drunk people but never someone who falls asleep and wakes up drunk. I thought you had simply passed out and took you up here. When you woke, I admit to not realising you were drunk at first. It was interesting.”

“What did I do?”

“Nothing much, like I said. I asked you a few questions. I didn’t realise you really kept those rabbits I had caught for you way back then.”
For some reason Lan Wangji turned his head away at that. Wei WuXian blinked and wondered what was wrong. Was it against one of the Lan Sect’s three thousand rules or something to keep rabbits as pets?

“My forehead ribbon…”

“Hmm?” Wei WuXian was raised from his thoughts, “Oh, that. We had to wash your face before bed. I put it away neatly, right? I mean, there’s nothing wrong with it, right?”

“…It is fine.”

Now, why did that sound like a lie?

“You took it off?”

“No. I went to get a bowl to wash your face and when I came back you had gotten ready for bed. You had taken your outer robes and forehead ribbon off. You were very shy about it,” Wei WuXian explained. He couldn’t understand why Lan Wangji was so hung up about the forehead ribbon. Out of all the things that had happened last night, that was one of the least interesting. Lan Wangji had been adorable when he’d been all shy and Wei WuXian was tempted to tell him. But the possibility of Lan Wangji finally having enough of Wei WuXian’s teasing and leaving without having breakfast together was very high at this moment and Wei WuXian didn’t want him to leave just yet.

“I… gave it to you.”

That didn’t sound like a question, but Wei WuXian answered positively anyway.

That seemed like the end of Lan Wangji’s curiosity in the subject as he turned away and tried to get ready for the day. The entire time he would not look at Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian got the feeling he was missing something.

“Lan Zhan… is there some kind of meaning behind your forehead ribbon?”

“Do not worry about it.”

Which meant both ‘yes’ and ‘I don’t want to talk to you about it’.

Wei WuXian pouted. Was it something that outsiders weren’t allowed to know or something? Maybe he could ask another Lan…

Like who? The likelihood of a ‘villain’ like Wei WuXian encountering the lauded head of the Lan Clan, Lan XiChen again was very small. Lan Qiren would be an even worse option. The old fuddy-duddy would probably just give a long and droning history of the glorious and righteous tradition rather than tell him what it meant.

“Who was that girl?” Lan Wangji asked.

“Xu Biyu,” Wei WuXian answered, preparing to leave the room, “She’s going to become my disciple.”

“You’re going to teach her demonic cultivation?”

Hearing something in Lan Wangji’s tone, Wei WuXian paused. He withheld a sigh.

And we had been getting on so well too… he lamented as he turned.
“I haven’t decided yet. I may or may not. And it will be up to Xu Biyu as well whether she wants to become a demonic cultivator or not. I will make sure she gets as much knowledge as I can give her about what it means to be a demonic cultivator.”

“What it means?”

Wei WuXian levelled Lan Wangji with a serious look. He gave a wry smile.

“Of course. To be a demonic cultivator is to be reviled throughout the world. It is to be considered a demon yourself. An evil that blights the world that no one can yet remove. The whole world is against you and all shall turn away from you. To be a demonic cultivator is to be a malevolent, unclean thing whose existence shall not be forgiven.”

Wei WuXian paused. There was some minute change of expression of body language in Lan Wangji that he could not quite interpret.

“Don’t worry about it, Lan Zhan. It’s too early in the day to speak of such grim topics. Come on down for breakfast. You can get to know her yourself,” Wei WuXian said, trying to change topics.

It seemed the topic of his cultivation would always be a source of contention between the two of them. Lan Wangji, born and raised as he was into such a rigid set of principles and rules, was taught not to accept any deviation to what was already determined to be right. He could not accept demonic cultivation and Wei WuXian could not give it up.

Even if he had his own golden core, Wei WuXian could not stop being a demonic cultivator. The energy was inside every cell in his body. It was a part of him now. Trying to extract it would be as painful and suffering as absorbing it in the first place had been. That’s not even accounting for the sheer sense of loss it would be. Lan Wangji may not have realised it but asking Wei WuXian to give up demonic cultivation was akin to asking a regular cultivator to give up their golden core.

Wei WuXian was willing to tell Lan Wangji these things – as he had also willingly told others like Jiang Cheng, Jiang Yanli, Wei Qing and Wei Ning. But their arguments over the topic always grew too heated to have a rational discussion. Faced against Lan Wangji’s immovable sense that demonic cultivation was ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ and having experience that Wei WuXian could not change the man’s mind on anything, Wei WuXian had simply given up. Unless Lan Wangji could convince Wei WuXian, he was willing to listen, Wei WuXian was simply going to try and avoid the inevitable argument as best as he could.

Feelings truly were surprising and irrational, Wei WuXian reflected. How could he have developed feelings for someone despite all this debris that blocked them from understanding one another?

“Do you really think that?” Lan Wangji’s low voice spoke.

“Me? No. But that is what the world has told me I am. They have said and shouted and screamed it to me as if trying to force it to be true. I am fortunate in being the kind of person to not care about what the general opinion of me is. But no matter what I do or tried; this is the world’s opinion of me. Of a demonic cultivator with powers they both envy and revile at the same time.”

This was not entirely true. As much as Wei WuXian really did not care about the public opinion, he could not deny that being called evil, of being accused of doing evil just because everyone said he was evil was uncomfortable. Uncomfortable and even hurtful. When the entire world told you something, even though you knew for a fact it was not true, it introduced doubt. If everyone was convinced of something, then surely it must be true?
Wei WuXian had himself wondered if others were right: that demonic cultivation had changed him for the worse. It was Jiang Yanli who continued to treat him as a little brother who helped. Jiang Cheng, who still mocked him and criticised him for showboating, who helped. Wei Qing, with her steady investigations and readiness to call him out on any bullshit, who helped. And it was Wei Ning, who, despite hating his death, was still grateful to be able to see his family and be useful to them even as a corpse, who helped. It was innocent A-Yuan who still saw him as a parent who helped.

Wei WuXian honestly wouldn’t know what it would be like without them.

“But, why is Lan Zhan asking?” Wei WuXian wondered. Lan Wangji had been the first critic of demonic cultivation after all. For a time, he had been the loudest critic.

“Doesn’t Lan Zhan also believe such things?”

Unwilling to hear the answer, Wei WuXian left to fetch Xu Biyu, leaving a stunned Lan Wangji behind.

No.

The word drifted through Lan Wangji’s mind, not falling from his frozen lips like it should.

No. You are not… You could never be…

All those descriptors Wei WuXian related of what people said of demonic cultivation floated through his mind again.

Reviled… demon… evil… blight… a malevolent, unclean thing whose existence shall not be forgiven.

But… that is not Wei Ying.

How could anyone think that of the kind, laughing Wei Ying?

… How could Wei Ying think Lan Wangji would think such things of him?

In that Lan Wangji recollected himself. How many times had Lan Wangji asked him to give up demonic cultivation? Wei WuXian had made the mistake of thinking that Lan Wangji’s thoughts towards that impure path meant he thought the same of the man.

But demonic cultivation had clearly changed the man. Lan Wangji could still remember the joy at seeing Wei WuXian alive after three months of no knowledge of what happened to him. But it was disturbed by seeing the corpses that trailed him like beasts looking for attention and treats. The realisation that it was Wei WuXian who had done those things to Wen Chao…

No matter how horrible Wen Chao was, no matter what he’d done, that was too much. Too cruel.

And the expression on Wei WuXian’s handsome face… cold, predatory amusement. Like a spider watching a fly struggle futilely in its web or a cat with a rat that had already been torn from previous play.

His systematic destruction and murder of every Wen stronghold their campaign led him to. The way he had furthered their torment by bringing back their parents, grandparents, siblings and other, older ancestors for the sake of using them to bring horror to their victims before they were killed.

It was too cruel, too vindictive of the free-spirited and caring young man that Lan Wangji had known
before his disappearance. Something had changed and one look at the black shadows, glowing red eyes and that smile like the edge of a saber told him what.

Even after the war there was the needless use of power with those salacious female corpses. The continued pursuit of resentful energy. Even Wen Ning’s revival had disturbed Lan Wangji, going against every natural law Lan Wangji could think of.

Resentful energy was not to be used. It was dangerous. It hurt you and it changed you – for the worse. A warped, twisted version of who you were.

At least, that was what Lan Wangji had thought.

Lan Wangji sagged against the wall, taking comfort in the momentary solitude.

Having dinner with Wei WuXian and Wen Yuan – as he had been back then – had been enjoyable until its disrupted conclusion and the reminder that Wei WuXian never sat still in anything, let alone figuring out unorthodox ways of doing something that would make Lan Wangji’s uncle scandalised or turn purple in anger.

But Wei Ning never seemed too bothered by the state of his existence even with the clear disadvantages. All the Wen’s – former Wen’s – on the Burial Mounds did not seem to be bothered by Wei WuXian’s experiments into resentful energy despite their history. After the destruction of the Stygian Tiger Seal and watching Wei WuXian experiment a little with resentful energy over a week, Lan Wangji had decided that he wasn’t going to argue with Wei WuXian about it anymore.

But Wei WuXian picked up on it somehow. Either he was more observant than even Lan Wangji knew, or Lan Wangji had shown more discomfort than he had intended.

As always, Wei WuXian made everything messed up and confusing, leaving Lan Wangji in the turbulent rush with no idea what to do or say.

But what Wei WuXian had just said…

The most anybody called Wei WuXian in Lan Wangji’s presence was ‘villain’, most used after Qiongqi Path the first time, when Wei WuXian had killed four of the overseers there.

To think that anybody really thought that about Wei WuXian was terrible.

Wei WuXian had done things, yes, but, under the influence of resentful energy or not, he didn’t deserve the words he had used to describe himself.

Now that Lan Wangji was thinking about it, he remembered the dark looks exchanged whenever Wei WuXian’s name came up. He also remembered the things Jin Guangyao said, both after the destruction of the seal and after the attack on Wei WuXian. Though intensely thankful for the man’s aid during Lan XiChen’s flight with as many books as he could save, Lan Wangji was mostly indifferent to his brother’s friend. But he couldn’t deny that Jin Guangyao was very personable, entirely unlike himself, and generally knew most of the current news and opinions everybody had.

Clearly, Lan Wangji had missed something that was very obvious to everybody else regarding Wei WuXian and he did not like it.

But what could he do about it?

Well, first he should probably go have breakfast with the man and his new disciple.
Already feeling tired from the inevitable curious stares and questions of the young girl, Lan Wangji rallied, made sure he was presentable and fortified himself before heading out the door.

For the eyes of Sect Leader Nie Mingjue of the QingheNie Sect of the Unclean Realm,

The attached is a full and in-depth report of the investigation into charges of neglect and abuse towards prisoners of war and their relations under the duty and care of the LanlingJin Sect of Koi Tower.

Investigators:

Leader: Nie Minsheng of the QingheNie Sect of the Unclean Realm,
Nie Huaisang of the QingheNie Sect of the Unclean Realm,
Lan Wangji of the GusuLan Sect of the Cloud Recesses,
Lan Qiren of the GusuLan Sect of the Cloud Recesses.

A summary of the report is as follows:

The investigation was launched roughly two years after the alleged crimes were first witnessed. As such, most evidence is missing or destroyed. Whether the means was time, negligence or obstruction is unclear. The majority of the hard evidence that could be gathered was from witness testimony (see enclosed). Any other evidence is either too uncertain or relied too much on conjecture. It should be important to note however, that almost all reports that were supposed to have been generated by the LanlingJin Sect regarding the care and guarding of the prisoners of war and the exonerated members of the QishanWen Sect formerly of the Nightless City were unable to be found.

Judging from witness testimony collected from the residents of the Burial Mounds and several people from small sects in the vicinity of Qishan and Lanling, there was indeed crimes inflicted against the prisoners of war and the remnants of QishanWen. From these testimonies, it can be reasonably concluded that the following crimes were committed:

Against the prisoners of war: slavery, permanent or severe physical harm, murder via significant purposely inflicted physical injury or overwork, lack of necessary sustenance, lack of basic medical attention, lack of basic hygiene, physical harm without sufficient cause, permanent branding, disposing of bodies incorrectly in shallow graves, moving bodies from shallow graves to locations unknown.

Against the QishanWen Sect: slavery, permanent or severe physical harm, murder via significant purposely inflicted physical injury or overwork, lack of necessary sustenance, lack of basic medical attention, lack of basic hygiene, physical harm without sufficient cause, permanent branding, disposing of bodies incorrectly in shallow graves, moving bodies from shallow graves to locations unknown, child abuse, child slavery, unnecessary removal of child or children from their parents, sexual abuse, taking prisoner without just cause or procedure.

In addition to the crimes listed above, this investigation also searched for any member of the QishanWen Clan or QishanWen Sect. We have found none. Any leads went cold or led to another QishanWen corpse. Apart from the residents of the Burial Mounds, who no longer use the name ‘Wen’, there are no descendants or followers of Wen Mao. As such, it was agreed to add the crime of genocide to the list.

Unfortunately, while we can prove that several LanlingJin disciples and cultivators from smaller
sects are guilty, the list of identified people is much smaller than the amount of people that are projected to be involved. Due to LanlingJin’s lack of paperwork and the distance of time, we cannot prove any specific person was involved. Jin Guangshan, Sect Leader of LanlingJin of Koi Tower claims innocence and ignorance as does his heir, Jin ZiXuan, and recognised bastard, Jin Guangyao. There is nothing to prove any connection to any of the crimes.

The list of people that are to be tried for crimes we can conclusively prove are…

On a separate note, in the same, if messier, handwriting:

Cousin,

As you might have read, I have found no evidence of any Wen save the ones Wei WuXian saved on the Burial Mounds. They have all disappeared and believed dead. The section of Qishan set aside is a ghost town. All the children, elderly, civilians…

I can only hope that some have gone to ground and changed their name as Wei WuXian’s people have. Especially the children.

The ones on the Burial Mounds believe that if no one has come to request sanctuary from Wei WuXian – who they call Wei-Laozu of all things – then there are none left. I am in doubt about this. The fear the Yiling Patriarch sent his allies such as you (don’t deny it) and me is meagre compared to those he did his worst against.

I know you hate the Wens, but even you can admit that a lot of those who were left didn’t deserve any of this. Many Wens were apparently against Wen Ruohan and his policies. It’s just that they kept silent out of fear. Considering what we found in that monster’s rooms and dungeons, I don’t blame them. And everyone notices noise before silence.

Cousin, I think, and it shames me to admit it, that we have unknowingly aided in genocide.

The letter continued but the recipient had stopped to stare out the window, normally angry features now completely blank.

He Jianyu was quite pleased with how things turned out recently, if very cautiously. For one thing, it was astonishing how much free time he now had. He’d never really realised how much time he had spent in finding food, money and shelter every day. He used up this obscene amount of free time by burying himself in the library.

He was still getting used to being dressed in gold though. It just wasn’t his colour.

Thankfully, he’d been mostly left alone after the obligatory meetings. The Sect Leader wanted results and didn’t care about anything else in the project enough to manage anything. He’d shunted all responsibility onto his illegitimate son, the one who’d recruited him. They’d been sworn to secrecy which some of the other recruits were a little smug about. It pinged on He Jianyu’s survival instincts though.

By all accounts, Wei WuXian was very dangerous and would most probably not like what LanlingJin was doing. Also, some restrictions and punishments had been levelled at LanlingJin recently due to some crimes the Sect had committed. He Jianyu had skulked around the place until he had found out exactly what those crimes had entailed and didn’t particularly like what he had heard.

Oh, well. It wasn’t like He Jianyu was invested in the place. Just in having a reliable source of food.
And the library.
He Jianyu really, really liked the library.

Morality was strange, He Jianyu mused. It was something he’d been contemplating for a while, since he realised how much free time he actually had now. Morality wasn’t He Jianyu had ever worried over. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ wasn’t something He Jianyu had the time and mental space for, not when he had to focus on more basic things like where he was going to sleep that night.

Yet, he observed many people being instructed in strange rules and had briefly spoken to a man in white who was a part of another cultivation clan that prized ‘righteousness’.

It was all a bit confusing to be honest.

But, like everything, He Jianyu learned. Morality and ethics were very interesting as it brought to light things, He Jianyu had only ever been peripherally aware of before yet saturated the sect-raised cultivators’ lives.

He Jianyu had always known some things he’d done were considered ‘wrong’, but it had never seemed important. It was wrong to take the food offerings left to the gods and the deceased, but he had needed the food more than they did. It was wrong to attack someone from behind or to slit their throat while they were sleeping, but if he hadn’t, they would have killed him.

So many things these privileged people declared ‘wrong’, He Jianyu had done with no hesitation because if he hadn’t things would have turned out so much worse for him.

Morality, He Jianyu believed, was a luxury. To the poor, weak or disadvantaged, they had to sacrifice doing what was right for what was necessary. To these wealthy, safe cultivators, they had the time and means to practice ‘righteousness’. In fact, if they didn’t, they would make it harder for the lives of anyone with lesser power or means.

This had interesting implications for He Jianyu as he now had that luxury as well.

It had always been a wistful wish of his that he could be somewhere safe without worrying about where food would come from. Somewhere where he could buy books and write notes and experiment. With sweets. Somewhere where he didn’t have to worry about doing what was necessary. Perhaps even where he could have the freedom to be able to choose to do what was right. It would be nice if necessity and ‘right’ could point the same way.

This place wasn’t safe. He Jianyu knew trouble would come to LanlingJin sooner or later. There was discord brewing and He Jianyu did not want to get caught up in it.

But… perhaps he could? Try, at least, to be a better, more moral, person? He Jianyu kind of wanted to see if he could.

Not that all the new disciples recruited from outside wanted to take advantage of this luxury. One, He Jianyu was certainly not going to go out of his way to meet even if they shared the same love of sweets. That one seemed to have become quick friends with their recruiter which proved that He Jianyu had been right not to trust Jin Guangyao. If the congenial man could get along so well with a man who cheerfully told the other recruits that if someone slapped him then he would cut off their hand so he could return the favour, well, it said a lot.

He Jianyu dodged around a cultivator walking the other way. Said cultivator gave him a suspicious look. He was wandering around the halls of the expansive Koi Tower while thinking and was currently in a residential area devoted to blood related LanlingJin Clan members. He Jianyu needed
to know the layout after all.

LanlingJin seemed to be divided into two fractions at first glance. Those who supported the current Sect Leader and those who supported his heir, Jin ZiXuan which included those who supported the valiant Madam Jin. But He Jianyu had seen a bit more. There were actually three fractions. The third supported Jin Guangyao. The only reason it wasn’t easily noticed was because Jin Guangyao supported his father, so his supporters were included in Sect Leader Jin’s. In reality, Sect Leader Jin didn’t have very many supporters. Most of them looked at Jin Guangyao for confirmation before carrying out anything their Sect Leader ordered. He Jianyu had no idea if the Sect Leader even noticed. Personally, He Jianyu doubted it. If he had, he might treat Jin Guangyao better. A man could only be pushed too far before he snapped and bit the hand of his abuser.

Of course, considering the way they dealt with Wei WuXian, maybe they didn’t realise how dangerous that was.

The surprising thing was that there was another bastard son in the Sect. Mo Xuanyu was so quiet that he clearly had little to do with the politics of the Sect. He Jianyu put him down as neutral leaning towards Jin ZiXuan. Mo Xuanyu apparently got along very well with both of his half-brothers but seemed to spend a bit more time with the heir and his wife.

He Jianyu was jerked out of his thoughts by screaming. He quickly found a shadowed alcove on instinct, listening intently. Raised voices… panicked cries… hurried footsteps… the noise level was rising as more people seemed to arrive. The cultivator that He Jianyu had passed came running back down the hall to the commotion.

After a bit of consideration, He Jianyu figured it was safe to go have a look at what was going on. There were a lot of people. He could get lost in the crowd. So, He Jianyu made his way cautiously over.

They were in a corridor crowded around an open door gawking at whatever was inside. A hysterical woman, a maid He Jianyu identified, was babbling.

“I just came to give the young master his lunch. He was just there. Like that! O, Goddess of Mercy…”

There were grumbles and dark looks, everyone looking grave.

He Jianyu shifted to edge his way in so he could take a look.

“Make way!” a voice called. A look revealed Jin ZiXuan trying to make his way to the door. The crowd did their best to part for him in the limited space. He Jianyu took the opportunity of the crowd moving to catch a glimpse before the Sect Heir blocked the view.

Another cultivator dressed in immaculate gold was hanging from the ceiling, a noose around his neck.

“Jin ZiXun…” Jin ZiXuan sighed, shoulders slumping.

“It’s because he didn’t want to die from the hundred holes curse,” one of He Jianyu’s neighbours muttered to the other.

Hundred holes curse? What was that?

“Yes, and no one found the caster,” the other one whispered, anxiously.
The first one scoffed softly, giving Jin ZiXuan’s back a bitter look, “You mean no one was able to bring him to justice. We all know it was the Yiling Patriarch.”

Really? That was interesting. He Jianyu’s fingers itched to examine the body. Was it something to do with resentful energy?

“It’s been making him bolder, since he knows no one will stop him,” the first one continued, “I heard he’s been kidnapping children. Goodness knows what he’s done to them.”

The other hushed his neighbour, eyeing a new arrival. This woman was done up very finely. In her hair was a hair pin made of gold with a lotus made of amethyst in the centre. That was strange. A lotus among the sect of peonies? Despite her fine clothes and makeup, she wasn’t particularly striking in appearance. He Jianyu, who had spent most of his time among peasants, found her very pretty. But cultivators, who had a higher standard of beauty, probably only saw her as plain-looking. She looked concerned.

“Husband?” she called softly. Jin ZiXuan turned to look at her and sighed.

“Jin ZiXun seems to have decided that he would rather die at his own hand,” he told her. The spectators all shifted at that. The woman, who He Jianyu realised must have been the young Madam Jin, Jin ZiXuan’s wide, made an ‘o’ with her mouth, hands up to cover it, looking saddened.

“As if she doesn’t know who was responsible!” the first gossip from before hissed, “We should have made Wei Ying…”

The gossip’s voice trailed off abruptly. Probably because of the suddenly sharp eyes from the young Madam Jin.

“Is there something you know about this, Jin Wu?” Young Madam Jin asked.

“He was just thinking that we might not have lost the young master if we had been able to make the one who cursed him reverse it,” Jin Wu’s neighbour said, stepping on the other man’s foot.

“Couldn’t you have convinced the Yiling Patriarch? You helped raise him as his shijie. Or do you think he wouldn’t have listened?” Jin Wu said, ignoring his neighbour’s pained face.

Wei WuXian’s shijie? He Jianyu thought in surprise. He hadn’t known about this. Suddenly he realised that the politics and the implications of project he was working on were more complicated than he thought.

“My younger brother did not curse Jin ZiXun,” Young Madam Jin said firmly, “He is not responsible for any of this. We have tried to find the one who curse Jin ZiXun. Just because we haven’t found that person does not mean A-Xian was responsible.”

She waited for a moment to see if they were going to say anything more.

“A-Li,” Jin ZiXuan said softly, “I’m sorry to cut our time short, but I have to…” he looked into the room and sighed.

“It’s alright,” she said, touching his arm, “I’ll see you tonight.”

She turned and left. After a second’s contemplation, He Jianyu went after her.

Wei WuXian was the only person who had ever figured out demonic cultivation. He was the only one that had ever tried.
Young Madam Jin was called his shijie, but she called him her younger brother. He Jianyu was no stranger to chosen families, he just hadn’t realised that had occurred even among the wealthy and privileged. He’d seen it most often among young children who were all alone but found someone they can trust – usually another child like them.

That Young Madam Jin was insistent on the terminology despite what other people said, said a lot about her. He Jianyu was fascinated.

He waited until they were further from the crowd before jogging to catch up to her.

“Excuse me? Young Madam Jin? Do you have a moment?”

She turned a bit looking surprised, “Oh, hello. I don’t think I’ve seen you around before. What’s your name?”

“Ah, He Jianyu,” he scratched the back of his head, “I’m kinda new and I’ll admit I’ve spent most of the time here in the library.”

“Oh, then you must’ve seen Mo Xuanyu,” young Madam Jin said, smiling and gesturing for him to walk alongside her, “He’s always in the library it seems.”

“I’m not sure,” He Jianyu admitted. He still tended to avoid people, “I’m not sure what he looks like.”

“Well, you can come meet him now,” Young Madam Jin offered, “He’s currently watching over my son.”

He Jianyu was surprised at that. Hmm. Perhaps she was too trusting? Coups happened after all…

“Actually, and feel free to tell me to leave if you like, I was wondering if you could answer a few questions I had about some of the gossip,” He Jianyu said. He found that offering a way out more often led to people answering than if he just straight up asked. He wasn’t sure how powerful the woman was in his new sect or how much influence she had with the feared Yiling Patriarch, but he didn’t want to get on her bad side.

Besides, it was rude.

“You mean about A-Xian,” Young Madam Jin said. She sounded amused almost which He Jianyu considered a good sign.

_She calls him…?_

Right. Moving on.

“Well, I’ve heard things about him. But the two of you are chosen siblings…?” He Jianyu shrugged a little, looking sheepish.

Young Madam Jin stopped and stared at him. He Jianyu thought he’d done something wrong when the woman broke out into her biggest smile yet. Her eyes looked a bit shiny.

“Thank you,” she said. The words were said with such gravity that it made He Jianyu very uncomfortable.

“For what?”

“You’re the first person that acknowledged that he’s my brother and not just my shidi… or implying
that my father was dishonourable,” she shook her head, “chosen siblings, huh?”

He Jianyu could admit that he wasn’t quite sure what to say in response about that. Young Madam Jin just giggled at him.

“So, what do you want to know?”

Chapter End Notes

So Wifi being Wifi. LWJ is slowly coming around. He has his reasons for disliking demonic cultivation. I hope I showed that right. He was being very difficult to write for that part.

Who forgot about the investigation? And that Lan Wangji was supposed to be on that investigation?

Finally, an update about what’s going on in Koi Tower!

Yep, Jin ZiXun committed suicide. I believe he would have preferred this to letting the hundred holes curse take him. I believe in canon, he died at the massacre in the Nightless City.

And He Jianyu has no idea how much support he gained by referring to JYL and Wifi as chosen siblings.

Also! Opinion Poll!

Hi! I wanted to ask you about my OC’s. I hate having nameless faceless disciples and I always intended for the ones in YilingWei to have their own stories and backstories. I wanted to know if you guys wanted their inclusion in the main story. As in, the full story of how they came to YilingWei would be included in among the other plot points. There shouldn’t be too many, but I do have a love of making characters. Or do you want to have their backstories put in with Extras? They would only be mentioned in a few lines in the main story. Only the ones with actual plot relevance to the main plot will be included in Cradle.

Which do you prefer?

Again,

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year everybody!

Works inspired by this one

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!