Fortunately
by deminni

Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人

You are the one fate has arranged for me.

--

Wu Ji has been searching for Zhao Min for nearly three years. When they unexpectedly meet again, he realizes they still have to work through the past before they can have any sort of future together.

Picks up two and a half years after Wu Ji leaves Ming Sect and everything else behind to look for Zhao Min in Mongolia. This is my rewrite/reinterpretation of the series' ending.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人
You are the one fate has arranged for me.

--

Sometimes, on the most discouraging of nights when the endless roads and vast horizons tire him to his core, Wu Ji wonders if the pain will ever end. He wonders if two years or even two more years or even two more years after that will yield anything at all.

Then he remembers his Tai Shi Fu’s words, and he optimistically bargains that he is young, that he has many years and even decades ahead of him to find her. Just the slightest anticipation of seeing her again wills him forward onto a path of renewed hope because that is how Wu Ji will always be. The fear of giving up and living with regret scares him more than an endless journey without hope. Without her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wu Ji blinks rapidly to avoid the gust of sand and dirt from hitting his tired eyes. The past few months have been particularly blistering with harsher winds than he has ever experienced out here. He has been traveling alone with only his horse as his sole companion for the past two and a half years. Wu Ji is suddenly grateful for Ping An 平安.

“I had originally wanted to sew the words 平安 on there, but your wu gong is so highly skilled that probably for you, staying safe will not be difficult.”

平安.

Her words still ring in his mind, and Wu Ji sighs as he tightens his hands around the silk handkerchief and Ping An’s harness. He digs his feet into the horse’s sides to move them both along a little quicker. The sun is setting soon.

Wu Ji cannot remember the last time he felt at peace.

--

Night falls and Wu Ji luckily finds a small abandoned house on the outskirts of the Mongolian desert.

“Hello, is anyone inside?”
He hears no response and approaches with his stead. From the outside, Wu Ji can tell the house has seen its fair share of history, but it is kempt. He notices his fingers have gone stiff from the cold as he ties Ping An to the fence out front. Wu Ji slowly pushes open the gate and calls out one more time to see if anyone is there.

He does not receive a response and proceeds further inside. Through the darkness, he can see that it is a rather old house, but is thankful to find a bed of sorts. On top of it sits a pillow and blanket folded neatly. There is a brief moment where Wu Ji wonders what made someone move out so fast that they did not even collect their bedding, but that thought is suddenly blown away by a swift gust of wind.

He quickly heads back outside to collect some twigs and tree branches to start a small fire.

Lying down on the first bed he has had in months, Wu Ji wonders if he has brought enough water for both him and Ping An during this part of the journey. There is no food tonight for either of them. They have mostly lived off of the land for months on end, and it was sustainable while they were still within China’s borders, but it was not as easy once he crossed into Mongolia.

He has had to resort to seeking shelter and food from local residents in exchange for his labor, and to his surprise, the Mongolian people warmed easily to him. He hopes that maybe now that the war is over, both sides can go back to living their peaceful lives again without hate and prejudice.

Wu Ji knows what he looks like. His plain Hanfu differentiates him and its simplicity leaves much to be desired in terms of first impressions, but he figures his sincerity and exchange for labor can help win them over. Besides, comfort is the most important thing when traveling and in these plain garbs, Wu Ji finally feels comfortable. He feels like himself again. The young man who entered Lu Liu Shan Zhang with his hair simply pulled into a bun, messy bangs in his face, and wearing humbled clothes is the man Wu Ji is happiest being.

The biggest obstacle Wu Ji currently faces is the unpredictability of the Mongolian deserts. Its climate has proven to be more challenging than Wu Ji had thought.

The desert in a sense consists of endless days and endless nights filled with a void that is irreplaceable. It’s a different type of loneliness, one that stretches far beyond his reach and all Wu Ji can grasp at, all that is tangible, are tiny specks of sand and dust. They cling to him like unwanted memories.

Everything else slips between his fingers.

He thinks about how the days here are scorching and nights are contrastingly cold. The heat of the desert is long gone, and nighttime brings an iciness that Wu Ji has never felt before.

Wu Ji has always liked the cold.

It reminds him of soft hands stroking his cheeks while a warm voice lulls him into deep slumber. He thinks of strong hands that hoisted him up on sturdy shoulders, and golden hair that pressed against his cheeks as he burrowed deeper into the embrace.

But this cold is different. The desert’s coldness chills his bones more than distant Northern Islands that once housed his small family ever could.

It is sterile and endless and empty. Aside from Ping An, Wu Ji has no one.

He has learned from a young age that people leave. They can love him and still leave and never come back.
His parents. Xiao Zhao. Zhi Ruo. His grandfather. His Yi Fu.

Wu Ji learned that he, too, could love someone and leave.

He could catch her in his arms and close his eyes and move closer inch by heart-pounding inch, merely centimeters apart from perfectly bowed lips and still recede back into the vastness of his heart like waves in the ocean.

He could stand there and hopelessly watch as she struggles to push a wooden boat almost as immovable as his heart; he says nothing when she pleads for them to stay and never go back to the Central Plains.

He could leave a farewell note and sneak off in the early mornings as to not have to confront a princess who continues to risk her life for him no matter the opponent; not a terrifyingly foreign group of Persians nor a band of beggars nor a group of righteous Wu Dang warriors could intimidate her.

He could let his arms dangle lifelessly as she wraps her delicate frame around his, push her off of him and gently set her small hands down, letting go of all the yearnings in his heart for the sake of loyalty and patriotism.

“Zhang Wu Ji! I can let go of everything for you. Why can’t you let go of everything for me? Why? Why?”

No, he couldn’t sacrifice the bigger picture for her. He had made promises to a fiancée and a Ming Sect and the whole goddamn Wu Lin and millions of Chinese civilians that could not be broken.

It did not matter that her words and her touch and her laughter and her tears could shake him to his core. It did not matter that for the first time in his life, the red he saw while crimson blossomed on her dress could make him want to tear apart a person with his bare hands. It did not matter that the thought of her drowning beneath icy waters and drifting all alone to shore twisted and shredded the knots inside his stomach. It did not matter.

He had needed to walk away for all of them. It was going to be less painful this way in the end.

Wu Ji interrupts his own thoughts with a short, bitter chuckle.

Promises. He had made so many of them, and in order to keep them, he had let her leave. Wu Ji tries not to think about what could have or would have happened had he left with her. As often as that thought comes to his mind, Wu Ji just as quickly buries it under the choices he cannot change.

In the end, he doesn’t even know what is less painful or more painful anymore. He just knows pain.

Sometimes, on the most discouraging of nights when the endless roads and vast horizons tire him to his core, Wu Ji wonders if the pain will ever end. He wonders if two years or even two more years or even two more years after that will yield anything at all.

Then he remembers his Tai Shi Fu’s words, and he optimistically bargains that he is young, that he has many years and even decades ahead of him to find her. Just the slightest anticipation of seeing her again wills him forward onto a path of renewed hope because that is how Wu Ji will always be. The fear of giving up and living with regret scares him more than an endless journey without hope. Without her.

He promised he was going to find her no matter what or how long it takes. He had made this promise to himself and to her.
Wu Ji always keeps his promises.

He closes his eyes and clutches firmly to the blue fabric as he pulls it close to his chest.

“In this current war-ridden world we live in, your responsibilities are substantial. The people around you are constantly talking, strategizing. If you want to stay on this righteous path, then you will have to be clear-minded.”

“I understand.”

Wu Ji had not understood. Not fully.

Not until he saw his Ming Sect soldiers burst out of the ground, piercing Ru Yang Wong’s once indestructible armor with arrows after arrows. Not until she clutched her father’s crimson body and profusely cried out apology after apology.

No, it wasn’t until he heard Fan Yao admit to knowing beforehand, to plotting with the men he called his blood brothers behind his back that he understood. They had all planned this in secret without him, a betrayal far more terrifying than he could have imagined. They had hurt him, yes. But Wu Ji’s pain was immaterial in the face of a daughter who had just lost one of the three people she loved most in this entire world.

By the time he understood, it was too late. He could only shoulder the blame for his people, could only watch as her eyes raged and warred while her hands slowly faltered as he stepped in front of her sword. As the metal pierced through aged wood high above the Ming Sect, Wu Ji understood. There was no going back.

He was going to have to watch her walk away this time. How ironic that when he finally realized how much she meant to him, he lost her.

His lashes have suddenly dampened.

He raises the hand on his chest to cover his eyes and thinks: this is going to be another long night.

Chapter End Notes

This mostly stemmed from my love for WJ/ZM (performed wonderfully by Joseph Zeng & Yukee Chen) and my imaginations of a more detailed and fleshed out ending for an adaptation that brought so much more life, love, passion, and angst to a storyline I thought I couldn't love anymore until I watched this version.

And also mostly because I want to see Wu Ji suffer a little bit more... (okay a lot more) don't hate me.

Also, please forgive any geographical, historical, or Chinese errors I have made/may make. I am not Chinese and am just trying to research and piece together everything as best I can. Many artistic liberties taken in this writing process. Thank you :)

More to come!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人
You are the one fate has arranged for me.

---

Wu Ji’s smile warms. For now, maybe he can push away the veil of haunted dreams and thinks the day might not be so bad after all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wu Ji is still. He can’t move. He doesn’t remember being immobilized by any Persians. But there she is again. Eyes fixated on him as she raises the hilt of Yi Tian Jian 倚天劍 above her head. Her eyes never leave him.

Wu Ji can’t move.

No.

He can’t speak either. He tries, to yell, to scream, to tell her to stop. This is dumbdumbdumb. She is the most intelligent person he knows. She can’t possibly—

No.

He is trying to activate the movements of nerves and meridians spread throughout his body; they’re on fire, but Wu Ji can’t move can’t think can’t be fast enough.

“NO!”

In one swift moment, the metal pierces through both women, and red stains Yi Tian Jian.

Wu Ji is released from the trappings of his own body and hot blood fills his eyeseveins. He rushes to her, Tu Long Dao 屠龍刀 gripped tightly, but as soon as he reaches out for her, as soon as she falls, all he can see are hurt eyes piercing his and she is gone.

No…

He blinks and nothing. Everything dissipates. Wu Ji looks around. Everyone is gone. It is so still.

A cold chill runs down his spine at the silence.

He blinks and a forest surrounds him. He is immobilized again.

Wu Ji sees red. Her Hanfu. She is kneeling.
He sees Ru Yang Wong, Wang Bao Bao, Xuan Ming Elders.

Wu Ji is still. He can’t move. Not again. Please.

No.

Her father raises his sword above his head.

No.

In one swift moment, the metal pierces through her.

NO!

Red stains her hands as she grips tightly to sharpened steel.

His eyes sting from tears and fury and hopelessness. He shuts them tight.

“NO!”

Wu Ji’s eyes fly open as he jolts up from the bed, awakening to a mix of cold sweat and the sound of Ping An neighing.

He takes a moment to catch his breath and wipes the perspiration from his face. He collects himself, evening out his inhalation as he tries to slow the rapid beating of his heart.

Once his hands stop shaking and he calms to a certain degree, Wu Ji pushes his tired body off the bed and walks outside. He shields his eyes. Judging from the sun’s position, he has probably only slept for a couple hours.

Ping An is restless as Wu Ji struggles with his harness and softly tries to calm him. The horse settles after a couple of tries, and suddenly Wu Ji realizes they are not alone. He swiftly turns around and spots the head of a young boy peeking out from behind an old tree about five yards away.

The boy’s eyes reflect his fears and curiosity.

Wu Ji stops for a second and after perceiving no danger, pets Ping An a couple of times on the nose and engages with the boy.

“I am Zhang Wu Ji. What is your name?”

The boy pauses, still hiding behind the tree, and softly answers, “I am Lin Shan. You can call me Ah Shan.”

“Ah Shan. That is my father’s name.” Wu Ji feels his lips curve upward slightly. “What are you doing out here by yourself, Ah Shan?”

“Playing. I wanted to play with your horse. I think I scared it.”

Wu Ji chuckles. The boy is hiding behind a tree yards away from his horse, and he thinks the horse is scared. “It’s okay, Ah Shan. It is not scared of you. It’s a really brave horse. Come.” He waves the boy over with a warm grin and continues to pet Ping An. “See? He is calm now.”

Ah Shan straightens up and fixes his Mongolian Garb, and Wu Ji can see the exact moment when the young boy musters up his courage, puffs out his chest, and slowly makes his way towards them.
“His name is Ping An. Do you want to pet him?”

Ah Shan nods. The boy first uses one hand to pat Ping An a couple of times on the nose, then both his hands are stroking Ping An’s face softly. “I really love horses. You have a really good horse. A little skinny, but I can tell it’s a good horse.”

Wu Ji feels a slight pang of guilt and jokes, “It is not easy finding food out here in the desert.”

This makes Ah Shan’s face light up. “I have food!” He adjusts the bag draped around his body and brings it to the front. Reaching in, the boy pulls out six mantous and offers them up to Wu Ji. “Here. You can have these.”

Wu Ji freezes, taken aback by the kind gesture. Wu Ji’s gratitude is probably expressed all over his face as he slowly takes the generous offering from the young boy.

“Don’t worry! I have plenty more at home. A hao jie jie made them for me.”

“If you call me hao jie jie, I will go save your Zhu Gu Niang for you.”

Wu Ji pauses, still shaken, but he puts on a smile for the boy. “Thank you so much, Ah Shan. Wu Ji Ge Ge truly appreciates you.” He saves four of them in his Hanfu for later, not quite hungry yet.

The boy continues to pet Ping An as the horse happily eats two back to back. “You’re welcome! Now Ge Ge and Ping An won’t be hungry anymore.”

Wu Ji’s smile warms. For now, maybe he can push away the veil of haunted dreams and thinks the day might not be so bad after all.

--

After spending most of the morning listening to Ah Shan talk, Wu Ji learns that the boy is eight years old, that his parents work outdoors herding sheep and cattle, and he often gets himself into all kinds of mischief when he is not helping them.

It is nice to have some company and conversation again, to get away from the confines of his own mind.

Wu Ji listens intently as Ah Shan recounts, in detail, his visit to his dad’s friend’s house. He describes it as an adventure over the desert, past all the sand dunes, and into an oasis of lush green grasslands beside crystal clear lakes. It was the first time they had taken a family trip together.

The way Ah Shan describes it makes it sound like the most beautiful place in this world. But Wu Ji knows better.

Nothing could compare to the majestic serenity of Wu Dang Mountains and the beautifully haunting snowfields of the Northern Islands, but he is happy to oblige and fancy the young boy’s tales. He would like to see what this place is all about. It would be a nice change of scenery, Wu Ji thinks as he continues to listen to Ah Shan.

As the day approaches high noon, Ah Shan is finishing up a story about his favorite cow giving birth to his now new favorite calf and how he got to name the calf.
Wu Ji chuckles and shakes his head. Ah Shan really does not tire. He looks up and realizes that if he doesn’t leave soon, he might not be able to find another shelter before it gets dark. He sadly tells Ah Shan as much and bids him farewell.

Wu Ji and Ah Shan wave goodbye to each other as Wu Ji rides off, feeling especially grateful and more fulfilled than he has in a while.

--

Ah Shan watches Wu Ji ge ge ride off into the distance and waves and waves until his arm starts burning. As the boy begins to walk back to his yurt, he smiles and is happy to have met Wu Ji. The man really is a nice person. No wonder that hao jie jie gave him extra mantous to give to Wu Ji ge ge.

--

The days are usually pretty standard for Wu Ji. After resting for a night, he and Ping An will head out and continue either north or west without any real directions to go off of. Wu Ji has learned that trying to find a person in the expanse of a region as large as Mongolia is like fishing a needle from the sea. In the Central Plains, he could essentially find anyone he needed with the network of people surrounding Ming Sect and their Jiang Hu comrades.

But out here, his Ming Sect’s connections would be rendered useless.

No, Wu Ji corrects, not his anymore. He had given that part of his life up. The choice to leave had come rather easily once they had successfully pushed Yuan forces out of China and back to the Eurasian Steppes.

His mind had been made up long before the battle at Shao Lin even began.

"Fighting this war and winning as a goal of mine has not changed. Marrying Zhao Gu Niang as a goal of mine will also not change."

Wu Ji had completed his duties and fulfilled his promise. Now, Ming Sect just needed to keep theirs.

For the past couple of years, Wu Ji has gathered information from people along the way that Zhu Yuan Zhang had become the de facto leader of Ming Sect and has collected an impressive résumé of conquests and talents alike. Currently, the power struggle between Zhu Yuan Zhang and Chou You Liang is at its most heated while Wang Bao Bao presides over Northern Yuan.

Wu Ji knows it is dangerous for him to have made it into her brother’s territory, but Wu Ji’s ability to evade and hide from anyone possibly out looking for him has only improved with time.

He enjoys the anonymity.

Out here, there is no Jiao Zhu. No Ming Sect. No Wu Lin. No would-be throne.

Out here, Wu Ji is no one.
He thinks it is laughable they would want him to be Emperor. It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about it. Her warnings continued to resonate long after she had left.

He had imagined a life of constant scheming and politics. Of struggling to trust even his most loyal friends and family just to secure a throne made of gold and dragons. These thoughts made his stomach churn. To him, an emperor’s throne was just a chair filled with burden. He had a taste as Ming Sect Jiao Zhu, leader of all of Wu Lin. Wu Ji did not care about any of that.

If they wanted it, they could have it.

All Wu Ji wants is one thing.

It is unquestionably worth more than any kingdom and chair and title combined.

He just wishes he knows where to find it.

Chapter End Notes

So initially, I thought this would be a quick and painless (well, not really for Wu Ji, but you know what I mean) story that was centered around a certain plot point I wanted, but the more I wrote, the more it grew into an introspective Wu Ji that I rather like. Maybe this is my coping mechanism to how angry I was at Wu Ji at the end of HSDS, so I hope those of you who felt the same way as me can seek a little solace through this.

Next chapter will be edited and updated tomorrow! :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

>You are the one fate has arranged for me.

---

Before long, one night has turned into eight days.

The days start early and the work is laborious, but Wu Ji feels like he is right at home, riding and training Ping An to do what dai ye’s horses can. He helps them milk cattle and goats, tend to the horses and chickens, work household chores, and at the end of the night, he and da ye come home to da shum’s freshly cooked meals.

Wu Ji is tired every day, but he thinks it is worth it.

Occasionally, Wu Ji will encounter residents who will shelter him.

His story is always the same.

They will ask, “Gong Zi, what has made you travel all this way by yourself?”

And Wu Ji will answer sheepishly, “I’m a traveling Da Fu. My wife was with me, but I did something to upset her, so she left. I have been trying to find her and bring her back for a long time now.”

Wu Ji will see the moment they take pity on him, and he will offer his help around the household for a temporary roof over his head and some spare food.
Today is no different. Ping An and Wu Ji have been sleeping outside for the last two nights until they happened upon a small dwelling consisting of four yurts. Three sit close by while the fourth is a little ways off in the distance.

The elderly couple, whom Wu Ji has learned are Yesun Da Ye and Dagasi Da Shum, had spotted Wu Ji and his horse and had waved him over.

“Gong Zi, we saw you coming from afar. Rarely anyone ever comes through here, and you are the first person we have seen in weeks. Why are you all by yourself?”

Wu Ji tells the couple his story, and they are more than happy to offer their abode to him. Wu Ji feels a bit guilty each time he recounts his half-lie, but he has learned to push it away and pay people back with chores and errands.

Da Shum takes Wu Ji’s hand and smiles kindly. “Heaven does not forsake those who try with all their heart. Zhang Da Fu, we know you will find her soon. A married couple can rarely hold grudges for long. Trust me.” She gives Wu Ji a long knowing look and he assumes it is because she has a lot of experience in the whole marriage business.

“In the meantime, I bet you are tired from all your travels. Here, come inside and have some water or goat’s milk. I just milked them this morning.”

Wu Ji apologizes for having intruded on them, but they quiet him with reassurances.

“It’s not a bother at all. We have lived here for so long with no one around that it is always nice to have visitors!”

He thanks them profusely and is uncertain on when he had become so fortunate.

--

Wu Ji sits down on the bed and takes in his surroundings. His belly is full and his bed is comfortable. He pats his stomach and feels the familiar indent of the hairpin tucked away in his waistband.

After dinner, in which Wu Ji ate grilled meats for the first time in a long time, he retreated to one of the yurts Da Shum prepared for him. Wu Ji can tell one yurt is for hosting dinners and possibly guests, one room was for him, so the third must be for the elderly couple. He had asked her what the fourth one off in the distance was for, and she told him it was just an empty room that houses junk and advised him not to go in there for its lack of order and cleanliness. Wu Ji nods and thanks her again for her hospitality.

Wu Ji also noted that da ye was coughing a bit during dinner. He will have to ask the older man again if he could thoroughly check his pulse tomorrow morning. He wonders if there are any herbs around he can pick for them.

The elderly couple, though they do not have much, have been more than hospitable towards him and even fed Ping An some of their lettuce and carrots. This is the least he can do for them.

He lies down and feels privileged for at least this much.

A bed beats the ground and he settles in for the night.
Wu Ji lets his mind drift like a steady boat in the vastness of an ocean he once knew. He is taken back to the inside of a wooden ship, the smell of sea and earth enclosing them in tight dark quarters.

The ship jolts and Wu Ji falls backwards, his head hitting the pillow with a thud.

He braces both of them and catches her arms as she falls into him, two sets of eyes flying wide open. They stare at each other and neither moves a muscle.

Wu Ji suddenly remembers had been fuming just two seconds ago. What was it about again?

All thoughts dissipate with the loud thump thump thump he feels bursting from his chest while blood rushes to his face. He must look as red as her lips right then.

They are so red.

Light hits her slender frame from the window at just the right angle, and Wu Ji absurdly muses that she is glowing.

He wishes he never caught the glimpse of a small mole peeking out from above her collar.

He doesn’t know what to do with his hands.

She is right there.

He gulps.

She swallows.

The air is thick and her weight settles deeper into him, eyes shyly turning away.

In the moment his eyes were about to flicker down to her lips, he spots movement through his peripheral. It seems she did, too, and they both stumble to sit upright, awkwardly fixing their attire.

Wu Ji has never been more thankful for Xiao Zhao walking in on them.

He absently strokes the two curved rows of small dents on his arm. The grooves are smooth to the touch after fresh skin healed over the bite she left behind.

“That’s why I have to bite you really hard! That way, in this life, you will always remember me!”

He lets out a soft laugh. She is the only person in this world who could come up with something this brazen.

He can still recall the initial shock and sting and her insufferable jest. She even had the audacity to put Shui Fu Shao Shi Cao on his wound to scar him.

Wu Ji remembers all the mixed feelings he could barely discern, some more prominent than others. Angry that she was so childish. Indignant of not having done anything to warrant getting bitten. Fear of what more she would be capable of doing to him.

And yet, he had ignored the little butterflies in his stomach when she gently wrapped his wound, how soft her hands were, and the flush on his cheeks as he turned away, only to admit that she hadn’t needed to bite him.

He was never going to forget her.
Wu Ji studies the marks like he hasn’t already memorized its exact indentations by heart.

He digs his nails into the ruts of the bite.

The pain is never the same.

--

The next morning, Wu Ji wakes up to the alluring smell of cooked meats and vegetables.

He leaves his yurt and goes to check on Ping An, who is tied to the fencing dividing his living quarters and the abandoned yurt.

Da Shum is so gracious as to provide a bucket of veggies and a few bales of hay nearby. Wu Ji grabs a carrot out of the pale and feeds it to the horse. As he looks up from his tending, he thinks he sees a shadow move inside the yurt.

Wu Ji’s cautionary senses start whirring and he approaches guardedly, careful not to alert the possible intruder.

His steps are measured as he looks to his surroundings for any other potential indicators of threat.

Wu Ji is three steps away from the yurt’s entrance and he is on high alert.

There is definitive movement inside.

He reaches out, hands poised to push the fabric divider away.

In that very moment, Da Shum comes rushing out of the yurt, breathing hard.

Wu Ji catches her, steadying the elderly woman.

“Zhang Da Fu!” She exclaims. “You scared me. What are you doing here?”

“Da Shum, is everything okay? I heard movement inside and thought it might be an intruder.”

She laughs and starts dusting her face and clothes off. “Oh no, no intruder here. It was just little old me trying to clean up in there, but it is so dusty I had to give up. Zhang Da Fu, I advise you to not go in there. It needs a proper cleaning and no guest of mine shall enter such a messy place. Understand?”

Wu Ji, still stunned, nods obediently.

“Good. Now come, I have made us breakfast. Do you like goat meat?”

Wu Ji does not even have a chance to answer before Da Shum takes his arm and whisks him away to the main quarters.

She reassures him the entire time, and once settled, Wu Ji is happy for no intruders and another delicious meal in his belly.
Wu Ji surprisingly stays with the elderly couple for longer than he had anticipated.

How could he not when they shower him with such open-heartedness, almost like he was their kin.

He had come back to his room one evening and found the clothes he had given Da Shum completely washed and cleaned. She even took it upon herself to patch up any holes he may have acquired, which was quite a few of them having collected over the past two and a half years.

Da Shum also cooks two meals for them every day, and Wu Ji can attest that it is some of the best food he has ever tasted.

During their meals, he notices she prepares more food than the three of them could ever finish, but Wu Ji thinks she will just save the food and serve them leftovers later. When there is a new dish at every meal, he figures she just serves the food to her animals. Da Shum truly is a generous person.

To repay the couple for their generosity, Wu Ji in turn helps Da Shum wash all the dishes and works with Da Ye away on the acreage, herding cattle and feeding the livestock for them.

Often, after they are done working for the day, Wu Ji listens to the man recite tales from his younger years. His long lineage of warriors includes his grandfather and his own father, both soldiers during their respective reigns. Da Ye himself had been fighting battles under Emperor Hui Zong of Yuan. His only son, Nagaya, had died in battle three years ago.

The man’s eyes reflect the sadness of a gray-haired parent who has had to bid farewell to his raven-haired son. “Zhang Da Fu, you two are very close in age. You really remind me of him. If he was still alive, you could be hao xiong dis.” The older man smiles wistfully. “I believe the Heavens brought you to us to alleviate some of our pain, and we are immensely thankful for it.”

Wu Ji is touched, yet he also feels a mix of worry and sympathy in his heart, praying to the Heavens he and their son had never crossed paths.

Before long, one night has turned into eight days.

The days start early and the work is laborious, but Wu Ji feels like he is right at home, riding and training Ping An to do what Da Ye’s horses can. He helps them milk cattle and goats, tend to the horses and chickens, work household chores, and at the end of the night, he and Da Ye come home to Da Shum’s freshly cooked meals.

Wu Ji is tired every day, but he thinks it is worth it.

Sometimes, Wu Ji will sneak glances at the elderly couple’s interactions and admire the simplistic intimacy of it all. Da Ye happily helps Da Shum in the kitchen even after a long day on the pastures, and Da Shum will cook the yummiest foods and always give Da Ye and Wu Ji the only two chicken drumsticks without any hesitancy.
Wu Ji yearns for this. He hopes they can have this one day.

Aside from the couple’s kindness, the other reason Wu Ji has not left yet is his concern towards Da Ye’s health. The man is approaching his fifties, but hardly ever rests. Wu Ji knows there is much to be done around the residence and watching Da Ye make several trips for daily supplies of water worries Wu Ji.

Da Ye’s cough has also worsened as the nights grow increasingly colder. They are coming into early autumn, and Wu Ji is concerned about their health and diminishing stock. There is no shortage of livestock, but firewood, water, and medicinal herbs are running low.

He thinks the least he can do is help them collect some essentials to prepare for the coming seasons before he sets out.

Wu Ji had experienced Mongolia’s winter shortly after leaving the Central Plains, but he thinks now that he is farther North, it will probably be even colder where they are.

He decides that tomorrow he will take some time to search for herbals.

Tonight, Wu Ji will go to bed dreaming of rice paddies near cozy cottages, her silhouette in the morning sun, and a warm bowl of congee prepared especially for him.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

妳便是我命運安排的人
You are the one fate has arranged for me.

“Would you continue to look for three more years? What if you never find her again?”

She is particularly inquisitive here, and Wu Ji can relate; he’s asked himself these questions often in the beginning. What if I find her and she doesn’t forgive me? What if I have to spend the rest of my life looking for her? What if all this is for nothing?

Wu Ji’s resolve has long been steeled.

Wu Ji gets up early just as the sun is peaking out from behind the desert hills on the horizon. The skies are a light wash of blue, and blue, as Wu Ji has become acquainted to, is his favorite color.

He ties the handkerchief around his wrist, concealing it beneath his top sleeve and puts on the rest of his thin cotton layers.

Wu Ji can smell Da Shum’s food as he steps out into the field. After he feeds Ping An, who unsurprisingly has taken well to having proper shelter, meals, and grassland to roam, Wu Ji is lured to the outdoor kitchen by the smell of delicious cooking.

Da Shum greets him with a big smile. “Zhang Da Fu, you are up early!”

Wu Ji stretches a bit as he says, “Da Shum, please call me Wu Ji. There is no need for formalities between us.”

She doesn’t look up from meticulously dicing the vegetables, but she conveys her sincerity through the gentleness of her voice. “I call you Zhang Da Fu out of respect because it has been so wonderful with you here. I know you have been hard at work not just on the fields, but also looking for herbals for us old folks, and we are so grateful for you.”

“No, it is Da Shum and Da Ye who have helped me so much since I’ve come. Wu Ji doesn’t know how I can repay your kindness.”

“You can repay me by eating all of this food!” She throws the vegetables into the sizzling wok. “Wu Ji ah, you are too thin. I can’t imagine it being easy traveling all by yourself. If Da Shum doesn’t fatten you up, your wife might come find me and make me pay for mistreating her husband!”

At this, Wu Ji chuckles ruefully and looks down at his hands. “She might still be so mad, she won’t care.”

He hears her put down the spatula and looks up to see Da Shum’s face soften. She is looking at him like she understands, and Wu Ji feels the need to avoid her eyes.
“Wh-what can I help you with today, Da Shum?” He picks up a daikon and holds it awkwardly.

Da Shum laughs kindly and takes the vegetable from him. “You can help me set the table. It is just us this morning.” She goes back to finish sautéing the veggies. “Your Da Ye is not feeling well and is sleeping in. You can take a break today, Wu Ji.”

“Sick? Is he okay? I can check his pulse and see what’s wrong.”

“No no, no need. It’s just old people things. You can check after we eat. Let him sleep. Now come.” She takes two plates of food into the main yurt and Wu Ji follows with two bowls of congee and utensils.

He takes the first sip of congee and is thankful for another day of Da Shum’s cooking. As he eats, Wu Ji can sense the weight of her eyes on him, glancing his way every other bite.

“Wu Ji, I notice you wear a blue handkerchief around your wrist. By any chance is it from your wife?”

He nods and glimpses at the fabric peeking out from beneath the layers.

“Before she left, she had embroidered it for me.”

He takes several more scoops of congee successively, suddenly anxious.

Da Shum is oddly contemplative, like she has many things to say and tell and ask.

“Wu Ji, I don’t mean to pry…” Wu Ji has a feeling he knows what she is about to ask. “…but to look for your wife for almost three years is no small feat. I know she is stubborn--" She pauses. "To not see you for three years must be tough for her, too. What had happened?"

“I—Da Shum…”

She puts her spoon down and earnestly waits for Wu Ji to continue. “Wu Ji ah, tell Da Shum and maybe this old lady can still be of help. If nothing else, it might be good to just talk about it instead of holding it all in.”

Wu Ji hesitates, not because he does not trust her, but because it has been so long. Ever since she left, ever since Wudang Mountains, he has not uttered a single word to anyone about her parting.

Fan Yao had been the only person who knew the full extent of the story having been in on and witnessing the plot come to fruition, and he was also the only person remotely concerned about her after the fact. But at that point, Wu Ji had resolved to absolutely not talking about it.

He was not going to share how he tried to plead for her to stay. Even when he knew that was impossible, he begged her to wait for him, hoping she would believe that he was going to fulfill the promises he had made to her.

“I’m asking you for the last time. Are you leaving or not?”

Wu Ji has never seen her look at him this way. She had been angry with him before, for not trusting her and for denying his feelings for her, but never like this. There was finality in her eyes that chilled him to the bones.

Wu Ji did not want to answer this question; he tried to explain to her the severity of the situation they were in, but he fell on deaf ears.
“And whose responsibility is this? Back when I had intruded on your wedding, I had wanted to gamble with myself. I wanted to bet that your heart was like mine, that you were going to be able to throw away everything to travel to the ends of the earth with me.”

Her eyes break away, and Wu Ji wants to scream.

Nothing can prepare Wu Ji for the tearful words that come next.

“But I accept that I have lost.”

There is no life in her eyes.

“I will not come bother Zhang Jiao Zhu anymore…”

He chokes out her name.

“And I hope Zhang Jiao Zhu will not bother to look for me.”

Wu Ji blinks away the tears clouding his vision, and he can only shake his head while trying to deny the words he hears. She always had other ideas.

“Back then, I was able to risk everything to follow you. Now, I am also able to do everything in my power to stay away from you. I, Min Min Temür, can do exactly as I say. The only thing I regret is that the price I had to pay was with my father’s life.”

Wu Ji remembers flashes of it now.

He catches the discarded hairpin. She walks past him and firmly does not turn back.

He had stood there for so long, watching as she and her father became little specks of indiscernible dust in the distance.

Wu Ji hadn’t returned to Ming Sect. It seemed his heart had a mind of its own. His feet unconsciously took him towards the direction she had left in, but he couldn't come with her. Not then. Wu Ji was lost at a crossroad.

He somehow ended up in the only place he knew that was as close to home as he could possibly remember.

Tai Shi Fu’s words never left him.

“The things that cause regret in this world are countless. But you are still young. Any regrettable situation can still be amended… A person’s heart can move even Heaven and Earth.”

Wu Ji’s right hand firmly clasps his scarf-tied wrist.

“Her father’s death,” he begins, eyes unfocused as he recounts a story he has tried to repress for years now.

“It was caused by people I called my brothers. Da Shum, Jiang Hu can be a dangerous place, but the rules are solidified, black and white. If you kill someone, you pay those dues with your own life. A debt owed in blood should thus be paid in blood. Even if I don’t agree, I can at least understand it. But war. War is even more treacherous than I could have ever imagined.”

Da Shum nods, and Wu Ji knows she would understand. Her son was also a casualty among the other millions of souls lost on the battlefield.
“I… Da Shum, I led my people to fight against the Yuan Army. I know that your son was probably one of the—”

“It’s all right, Wu Ji. I know what you’re going to say, but you don’t have to feel guilty towards me. I have watched my father, my husband…” She pauses and Wu Ji sees her melancholy smile turn to him. “…and my son all leave home to fight as patriots, not knowing if they were ever going to be able to return. No matter which side it is, I am sure the reasons are all the same. You were just doing what you had to do for the sake of your country.”

Wu Ji nods earnestly, grateful for her acceptance.

“Now tell me, what does the war have to do with her father?”

His sigh is nearly indiscernible. “Her father is Chaghan Temür, Prince of Ru Yang.”

Wu Ji can hear Da Shum’s sharp intake of breath. “And your wife…”

He nods and Da Shum’s hand goes to her mouth. “She was born to royalty, jade leaves on golden branches 金枝玉叶, but because of me, she had severed ties with her father and her homeland. She left everything behind for me, and I could only stand there and watch my men kill her father.”

“Wu Ji ah, did you know of their plans?”

“No. No, I did not know. They had purposely left me in the dark because they knew I would have never agreed to it.” He looks at Da Shum and silently pleads for her to believe him. “I would have never agreed to it. They knew how much she meant to me. Everyone knew.”

“Did she?”

Wu Ji’s eyes flicker in uncertainty at the question. She had to have known.

“I… I don’t know.” He pauses and considers the weight of this knowledge. “I’d promised her we would travel the world together. I fully intend to keep that promise, but she had asked me to leave with her then. After her father’s passing. I couldn’t. The war… I couldn’t just leave.”

His mouth is dry and Wu Ji finds it difficult to continue.

“You had your responsibilities to your people and your country.”

He nods again, forcing himself to finish. “I had made promises that were bigger than myself. In order to keep those promises, I couldn’t leave with her. She asked me not to bother looking for her, but here I am almost three years later.”

Da Shum contemplates to herself for a brief moment and asks, “Would you continue to look for three more years? What if you never find her again?”

She is particularly inquisitive here, and Wu Ji can relate; he’s asked himself these questions often in the beginning. What if I find her and she doesn’t forgive me? What if I have to spend the rest of my life looking for her? What if all this is for nothing?

Wu Ji’s resolve has long been steeled.

“Even if it’s an eternity, I won’t stop until I find her.”

It seems enough of a confirmation for the elder woman. Da Shum takes his hand and cups it in hers;
she is gleaming in a calm of motherly affection Wu Ji thought he’d never find again.

He suddenly feels small, transported back to a wintry oasis surrounded by three loving parents.

“Wu Ji ah, if I ever see her, I will tell her she is a very fortunate young lady.”

--

After checking up on Da Ye and being relieved that his cold is minor, Wu Ji mentally logs that he needs to gather citrus and aster for the older man’s formula. He can set out today and stock up on everything they need. He asks Da Shum to borrow one of the ox carts and heads to a small forest seven lis east as directed.

Wu Ji first scavenges for herbals, and then proceeds with the task of gathering firewood. He is poised in front of two trees and begins to cultivate his nei gong 内功, careful to appropriate the exact force needed to knock down two trees and not the entire forest.

Wu Ji has a fleeting thought of how absurd it must be to the previous generations of Ming Sect Jiao Zhus that he is using Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi 乾坤大挪移 to essentially chop down wood and stockpile them for an elderly couple in the middle of Mongolia.

He spends half a morning collecting as much lumber as could possibly fit on the oxcart and is proud of his assemblage.

As Wu Ji is loading the cart, his ears pick up the rustling of footsteps on fallen leaves. He freezes and listens.

He hears the footsteps hastening. There are two sets.

Suddenly, a figure bursts through the thick of the forestry a distance away and is rapidly moving past the landscape. Wu Ji is on vigilant watch as the second figure, a female donning all white and a veiled hat, uses qing gong 輕功 deftly to shadow the first.

It is a game of cat and mouse.

Both martial artists maneuver through the woodland swiftly and cleverly, fabric and leaves moving in unison with the wind. With their qing gong, the pair kick off from the trunks of trees to change directions as they glide across greenery in a chase that resembles dancing.

They are fast, but the female is relentless.

She takes one leap upwards high into to the canopy of the forest, then uses both feet to propel herself, spinning past the first figure in a perfect arch to stop squarely in front of him.

She lands with grace and finality, a swirl of white stark against the emerald backdrop, sword pulled and directed at the man. He halts, knowing he has been caught.

The pair is now only a few yards away from him, and Wu Ji ducks behind a tree, continuing to monitor the situation.

The female assailant abruptly thrusts fortified steel forward, but the man sidesteps her and barely has time to duck before she turns and swipes her sword horizontally, every move intending to kill. He
has no weapon and Wu Ji notes that he is oddly not retaliating with any offense of his own.

He continues to dodge attack after attack, feet working in a zig zag pattern as he glides backwards through the crackling of tumbled leaves, but with every swipe of her blade, Wu Ji knows the man is in more imminent danger of losing his life.

When the man slows, she takes the opportunity to strike, successfully slashing his arm, and a deep gash blooms bright red instantly. He falls to the ground. She does not delay her next move, and as her sword nears, Wu Ji’s body wills him forward.

He jumps out, surprising both of them, and uses his arm to block the hilt of her sword from coming down on the target. She looks at him through the snowy cloak, and though the thickness of the fabric obstructs him from her appearance, Wu Ji knows she is not happy that he has stepped in.

She tries to move past him, but Wu Ji is a secured force.

This time, her sword is turned on Wu Ji.

She lashes out, but Wu Ji can tell she is holding back. She uses her weapon to create just enough distance to push him back in order to get to the other man.

Wu Ji easily avoids it and simultaneously grabs the man off the ground. They fly back a few feet and Wu Ji now stands between predator and prey.

The man is breathing hard, but no one says a word.

Wu Ji is the first to speak. His hands go up in the formality of fist to palm and slightly bows his head as a greeting. “Nu Ying Xiong 女英雄, I am Zhang Wu Ji.”

She says nothing, tightening her grip on sword and sheath and turns her back to him as an act of dismissal.

Wu Ji continues. “I apologize if I have caused offense today. I just could not stand by and watch an unarmed man be killed. Though I do not know what had transpired between you, I hope that my interference can save his life. Whatever it is, perhaps we can discuss and resolve it.”

The female fighter is silent for a few beats. Then with the retraction of metal into leather, she simply walks away.

Wu Ji doesn't understand why he has the sudden urge to stop her.

He doesn't.

He stands there watching her departure, and in the blink of an eye, she flies up and disappears through the forest in a haze of ethereal white.

Wu Ji is no stranger to highly skilled martial artists with eccentric characteristics and knows it is usually best to leave them be.

He turns to the man behind him. “Xiong Di, are you okay?”

“I am fine. Da Xia 大侠, please accept my gratitude.” He respectfully bows his head to Wu Ji, hand firmly pressed against his wound. “Goodbye.” The man abruptly turns and walks away, and Wu Ji is left bewildered.

He supposes it could have ended worse, and suddenly remembers that Da Shum and Da Ye are
expecting him to return soon. He should probably also head back before more trouble arises.

Wu Ji hurries to his cart, relieved that everything is still where it should be. He jumps on and prods the ox forward.

He muses that the last time he was on one, she was with him.

As he rides back, Wu Ji listens to the sound of wood on gravel, silently noting the absence of teasing and laughter.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人

You are the one fate has arranged for me.

---

He doesn’t remember how long they had stood there in each other’s embrace, but Wu Ji will never forget the immense blooming in his chest from the sheer amount of love he had felt for her, a feeling he knew that even a lifetime later will not wan despite any time or distance that may pass between them.

He also remembers that when she began sniffling and sneezing that night, Wu Ji had wished he were the sick one instead.

That night as Wu Ji gets ready for bed, he plays over the scene in the forest and still finds that something seemed amiss. He can’t pinpoint it, why there was an air of familiarity with the maiden in white. Her Mongolian outfit had similarities to his Hanfu, and her martial arts technique resembled honed skills curated from the Central Plains.

Wu Ji has a nagging feeling in his stomach that refuses to go away, so he tries to distract himself by cleaning.

He starts fiddling with the blanket on his bed then the pillow, and when that tires quickly, he switches to the other objects in the room.

As Wu Ji begins to sort through the clothes he had placed in a chest by the wall, he freezes when happening upon the outfit he had purposely hidden away deep in his baggage. It wasn’t supposed to be out of its concealed cloth.
Wu Ji hesitates, but eventually reaches for the robe threaded with silken gold on ivory cotton. The layering piece is of a light blue similar to the fabric wound tightly around his wrist.

He takes it out of the drawer, careful not to unravel the folded layers. His hand runs across the delicate surface as he recalls the days leading up to its conception.

She’d had a hand in its distinguished style, but not without much prior fanfare.

_Wu Ji hears her pacing around the room they share. He is in the middle of folding the thick comforter that has suitably served as his mock-bed during their extended stay. The wooden bench across the room would have been the more comfortable option, but Wu Ji had wanted to be as close to her bed as possible during the roughest parts of the past eight nights._

_Today, he finally feels at ease to start planning for their trip back to Ming Sect, even if just in his head._

_They had stayed longer than either of them had anticipated, but this time he wasn’t going to let her even step foot outside until he was certain she was healthy._

_Just as Wu Ji had worried, she did indeed catch a cold the very same night he returned from Shao Lin._

_From underneath his paper umbrella, he’d spotted her in the middle of the wet and crowded street, a solitary silhouette searching endless faces for him in the pouring rain. When she recognized him, the gratitude in her smile was luminous, but all Wu Ji could remember was feeling angry._

_He had just lost his Yi Fu to Buddha’s teachings, to a life of revenge and subsequent repentance. Now seeing her endure this storm when she had promised him to stay well and get better made him livid._

_Wu Ji couldn’t lose her, too._

_He sprinted towards her, not realizing when his heart had begun racing so fast. His voice matched his vehemence. “Why are you out here drenched in the rain?”_

_His unoccupied hand automatically came up to check on her. Wu Ji had to use the gravity of his touch to confirm that she was real and fine and well._

_His tone had been more severe than he intended for it to be, and he’d tried to make her understand, but even that came out abrasively amidst his apprehension. “You obviously know you haven’t recovered from your injuries yet; what are we supposed to do if you catch a cold!? Do you NOT want to live anymore!”_

_Blinking away the raindrops blinding her vision, she expressed her contrition through an apology._

_Her explanation left Wu Ji in astonishment. He had never heard her voice sound so uncertain. Scared. “I’m sorry… I’ve been standing in the same spot waiting for you. I was afraid that if I walked away for even a second, I’d miss you.”_

_Wu Ji realizes later that it was a stupidstupidstupid idea to throw away the umbrella when he had just scolded her for standing in the rain soaking wet._
But in that very moment, he had absolutely no grasp on logic or reason when she was looking at him with such vulnerable sincerity, with enough love to drown Wu Ji mercilessly beneath her watery gaze.

He pulled her into his arms, both of them trembling for different reasons. She was freezing and it only spurred him to hug her tighter.

All Wu Ji wanted was to hide her away forever and do everything in his power to shield her from rainstorms or potential dangers or anything that could possibly hurt her.

Wu Ji’s voice assuaged as he felt a lump in his throat. “You are so silly.”

Later, Wu Ji will think they both must have looked completely foolish hugging in the middle of a torrential downpour with no umbrella or awning to cover them.

Right then, he had only cared about pulling her in even closer to him.

He’d apologized and hoped she could forgive him for the harshness of his tone, clarifying that it had all derived from his concern for her.

She accepted it freely without blame. “I know you mean well.” Her voice was timid, shaky through the thickness of her tears. “It’s just, when I was sicker and couldn’t wait out here for you, I was so scared. I was scared that I’d never see you again.”

Wu Ji grinned and saccharinity flowered in his chest as he pulled away, needing her to recognize all of the affection he bore through just his eyes. “How can that be possible?”

Her hands were so small and so cold as he held them. “How could I not come back? I know you’re here waiting for me. Even if I’m at the end of the Heavens and the edge of the Seas, I will always return to your side.”

The smile that flourished on her face only deepened as he drew her back into him.

He doesn’t remember how long they had stood there in each other’s embrace, but Wu Ji will never forget the immense blooming in his chest from the sheer amount of love he had felt for her, a feeling he knew that even a lifetime later will not wan despite any time or distance that may pass between them.

He also remembers that when she began sniffling and sneezing that night, Wu Ji had wished he were the sick one instead.

He was on cold towel and hot medicine duties for almost five days before she regained any color back to her face. By the fourth night, the combination of residual internal damages, suffocating coughs, and looming pneumonia had Wu Ji nearly pleading to every deity he knew.

She had been a shivering, incomprehensible mess, but when she did have a moment of clarity, she was the one reassuring him.

Wu Ji didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or just scream.

Instead, he focused on nursing her back to health by staying up late and only catching a few
moments of shuteye, by barely doing or eating or focusing on anything else aside from the patient occupying his entire existence.

He had the medicine prepared and delivered to their room and the process of spoon-feeding a sick patient who barely stays awake long enough to open their mouth was a long and tedious one.

He had hardly left her side, couldn't let her out of his sight, and by the fifth day, Wu Ji was now the tired, dismal mess.

When he finally caught a glimpse of sleep, they were both stirred awake by her coughs.

Wu Ji was there to grab her hand and immediately recognized the warmth in them again. Then when he touched his hand to her forehead, he was elated that the burning fever had also subsided.

After that morning, Wu Ji had given her (and himself) three more days of vigilant observation, regular pulse checking, and to her dismay, mandatory bed rest to be completely convinced that she was well.

She had put up a small fight at first, but when noticing the dark, tired circles under Wu Ji’s eyes and the rough stubble littering his jaw, she knew she had lost.

Wu Ji can admit that maybe he went a little overboard within those following three days, but he had to make sure she was back to being one hundred percent before he could feel any sort of relief or normality again.

He absolutely couldn't lose her, too.

Today marks day nine, and Wu Ji is happy to be feeling like himself again as well. She, on the other hand, is going a little stir crazy. The pacing hasn’t stopped.

He sits down at the table in the center of the room and pours them two cups of tea.

"Wu Ji ah, what do you think about getting us some new clothes?"

He looks down at his attire, confused. “What do you mean? We just washed these.”

Head cocked, she crosses her arms and brings one hand up to her face, index finger beginning to tap her lips in way of deep thought. Wu Ji's eyes immediately follow her slim fingers up to said lips, mesmerized by the flush of deep color now that she has mostly recovered.

His own thoughts rush back to their kiss and he suddenly has the urge to taste.

She breaks his spell with her voice.

“I know they’re clean and new, and they were apt for when we were riding on oxcarts and harvesting rice fields... But—” She pause to spread out her arms and looks down at herself, those same lips forming a pout. Her eyes make it back up to him. “Don’t you think we should get something a little more appropriately formal to greet your Ming Sect?” The pout turns into a tiny smirk. “You are, after all, Zhang Jiao Zhu of Ming Sect, almost-leader of all Wu Lin.”

He maybe registers that she is teasing him, but he is stuck in a haze of red red lips and pretty doe eyes. Wu Ji doesn’t know why, but his enchantment by her doesn’t go away and he doesn’t think it
ever will.

There’s a slight lilt in her tone that implies he has no room for argument, and Wu Ji will comply, but right now, all he can think is, I think you look perfect.

“Wai, Zhang Wu Ji, are you listening to me?”

He snaps out of his fog and nods slowly in a repeated manner. “Uh, y-yeah. Yes. New clothes. Appropriate for Ming Sect.”

The smirk is gone, and she is now smiling at him fondly, knowingly.

Wu Ji knows he is a goner.

Shortly after, they arrive at a fabric store and Wu Ji is overwhelmed by the huge selection of textiles to choose from. There is an array of shades and hues and tones of colors that all look the same to him, but are definitely jade green and not emerald green according to the shopkeeper.

She soundly agrees with the salesman, and Wu Ji knows he is outnumbered.

He amusedly watches as she sifts through all the different rolls of linen and cotton and silk with care, discussing the history and production and quality of each one.

Her smile lights up the entire store. Wu Ji can’t get enough of when her eyes glisten like this, especially when they are directed at him.

“Wu Ji ah! What do you think of putting these colors together? I’ve already picked out the fabric for us.” He notes the giddiness in her voice and once again emphasizes his gratitude at the amount of progress her health has regained in the last few days.

“Feel how lightweight and smooth it is!”

She takes his hand, and Wu Ji’s heart skips a beat. Or two. Or ten.

The owner interrupts his thoughts. “It’s made from the finest silkworms in Chang An 長安 and will keep you warm in the winters and cool in the summers with the way the textile wicks.”

And when she haughtily tells him, “I know; that’s why I chose it,” Wu Ji remembers that he is dealing with a Jun Zhu 郡主 after all.

When she turns back to Wu Ji, the arrogance is gone and her smile turns shy. “I chose white with gold and light blue accents for you. It’s going to look great on you, Wu Ji ah.”

Her infectious smile reflects on Wu Ji’s face as he nods, eyes focused solely on her.

“Lao Ban, we will take these two rolls.” She pulls out the remaining banknotes she’d traded for with her jewelry and pays the shopkeeper. Upon seeing the stacks of paper money, the older man’s eyes perk up.

“Fu Ren, you have utmost taste. These are the best my store has to offer. Your husband is very lucky to have such a thoughtful and attentive wife such as yourself.”
At this, Wu Ji can feel blood rush to his face and when he peeks over, he sees that her cheeks are also flushed with a deeper pink. Their eyes meet, both pairs of lips graced with a shared smile, and he notes that neither of them corrects the shopkeeper.

Wu Ji hears her reprimand the owner for being nosey, and she states that he has a deadline of three days or they will come back to demand a full refund and tear his store sign down.

The older man immediately ushers them into different rooms to be measured by his tailors, and once their dimensions are taken down, the owner assures them his workers are the ablest workers in the whole city. Their orders will definitely be completed by the given timeframe.

Wu Ji listens as she meticulously recites and finalizes each and every detail with the shopkeeper, who hangs on to her every word and writes them all down with diligence.

He knows she is putting extra care into his attire, going over threading, embroidery, trim, and more things Wu Ji doesn’t really understand.

What Wu Ji does register is that he agrees with the shopkeeper. He is the luckiest man in the world.

In less than two days, the owner of the tailor shop completes their outfits and delivers the finished clothes directly to their inn.

Wu Ji is amazed at the style and quality of it all.

She is bursting with excitement beside him and hurriedly makes him change into his garbs first.

She leaves and Wu Ji is suddenly inside the room by himself.

He stares at the pile of neatly folded, newly sewn threads. Next to it is their pre-packed bags, prepared for when they are ready to head back to Ming Sect.

He knows she is waiting, so he tries to shake himself out of the forming haze enough to undress and put on the first layer. It is exactly as smooth and luxurious as she and the shopkeeper had described.

Silk. Wu Ji has heard of China’s impressive Silk Road, a network and crossroad of merchants infinitely seeking wealth and the powers it could bring them.

He glances back at the modest threads he had taken off, laid out neatly on the bed.

Wu Ji is unexpectedly apprehensive.

He gets flashes of Zhi Ruo and her enthusiasm from civilian chants, and the worry he’d felt about her insinuation of what she wanted from Wu Ji once they were married comes rushing back. He hears the words Emperor and Sect Leader and it makes his heart drop into his stomach. The burden these words entail make him anxious for a future he desperately wants to escape from.

Wu Ji knows of his obligations as Jiao Zhu, his debt to his country, but once his duty is complete and all the responsibilities on his shoulders are gone, he simply wants peace.

To Wu Ji, peace means finally being able to walk away. Peace means being with the girl he loves and finding their future together. Peace is freedom. 自由自在.
There is a knockknockknock that brings Wu Ji back from his thoughts. He hears her voice come through from the other side of the door and lets the calmness it brings wash over him.

“Wu Ji ah, what’s taking you so long? Can I help?”

She waits for him. She always does.

Wu Ji opens the wooden doors, and she lingers there with a curious look on her face. He doesn’t know how she can ask him if he is okay with just one look and a slight raise of her brow, but his nerves have settled enough to form a smile.

“Will you help me?”

Curiosity fades into concern, but Wu Ji hopes his smile can ease her, if only for just a bit.

She nods her head and steps inside the room, slowly closing the door behind her.

He forces the smile to remain on his face and stands there in the middle of the room with arms slightly spread out, beckoning for her assistance.

She doesn’t move, and Wu Ji starts to feel self-conscious. He realizes he only has his first layer on—no waistband, no adornment, no robe. He feels laid out and exposed under her perceptive gaze, like there is absolutely nothing he can hide behind that she won’t see through.

As he frets, she makes her first deliberate steps toward him and her uneasy expression morphs into a gentle determination.

She picks up the secondary layer of accented blues and without exchanging any words, puts the robe on Wu Ji. She slowly helps him one sleeve at a time, her hands smoothing out every wrinkle that forms.

Her touch is electric.

With his arms still up and away from his body, Wu Ji is patient while he waits for her to pick up the matching waistband. The dark leather is stark against the milky complexion of her hands, and he watches as she evenly spaces out her grip on the belt.

She inches close enough to where he can distinctly perceive notes of plum blossoms at full bloom, and Wu Ji closes his eyes to savor the quietness of their proximity.

She first wraps the belt around his front as her arms gradually come around to the back of his waist, forming a half-moon and mock-embrace. She is so close to him and Wu Ji breathes her in, trying to find his inner balance through her presence. When she wraps the band a second time, her hands meet and settle on his stomach, and she meticulously threads the end of the belt through the loop, fastening it on him.

“Wu Ji ah, it’s okay.” Her small hands work methodically and thoroughly. Wu Ji feels time slow with her words.

“If you don’t like it, we can wear our old clothes again.” She reaches up and cups his face with one hand, fingers tenderly caressing his cheek. She nearly whispers, “I just want you to be happy.”
Wu Ji is frozen by her acknowledgment. “I-I'm not—” He finds it difficult to formulate his thoughts, but it seems he doesn’t need to.

“I assure you, this doesn't change anything.”

Her gaze is soft under the midday sun peering in through the translucent windows. “Once you are done with what you need to do, we will leave together.”

She rests her head gently on his chest, eyes closing. “I won't let anyone make you wear anything it is you don't want to wear.” Her whisper is faint, but he catches the jest in her tone. “Only I get to do that.”

If Wu Ji could take her away with him in that very moment, he would. He feels an ache in his chest, a throbbing that stems from his inability to do just that.

The tension in his body releases and Wu Ji melds with the warmth of her embrace. She is moored to Wu Ji, an immovable anchor that grounds him in his present state of disquiet.

“Tell me. What do you want?”

Wu Ji is certain the future he envisions is right here in front of him. There is confidence in his voice when he answers, “I want to wear this.”

She pulls away and beams. “Good. Let me help you finish dressing.”

She puts the last layer on him, adding on the finishing touches to his outfit.

“In front of the whole world, you are Zhang Jiao Zhu.” He is in front of the mirror with her next to him, and Wu Ji knows he can get through anything if he has her. “But with me, you are simply my Wu Ji.”

He allows himself a few beats to take everything in. Her strength exudes through every pore in her body, and Wu Ji is lucky enough to be able to absorb it all in, feeding off of this addiction he had never before been able to identify.

What was it about her that had tantalized him from the start? That no matter how many times Wu Ji ran or tried to push her away, he could never succeed? He failed over and over again, even tried to marry someone else to forget about her, yet it was all for naught.

Of every woman Wu Ji has ever met, she was the most beautiful and ruthless... just like his mother had warned him.

She has the entire world against her and in everyone's eyes, she is an unforgivable demoness. A highly ranked mortal enemy of their cause.

Wu Ji is aware that there are easier choices, decisions he could make that would be deemed wise and suitable. The status that looms over him would be fortified with his marriage to the Leader of Er Mei Sect. They are Qing Mei Zhu Ma 青梅竹馬 by the measures of Wu Lin after all.

But maybe Wu Ji is too simple-minded. Maybe he is just too dumb to pick the choice that is considered right by everyone.
All his heart wants is Her.

This Mongolian Princess who now stands before him in humble clothes and open vulnerability, who had given up everything to be with him, and who understands Wu Ji through and through when even he can’t find his own reflection.

When Wu Ji’s internal and external demands become too much, she is his haven.

Wu Ji is smart enough to know this much.

“I love you.”

He sees the moment she freezes, lips slightly parted from his sudden confession.

“What?”

“I love you.” His voice and eyes do not waver. He is going to marry this girl.

Wu Ji is still surprised by how tender her eyes can get when she looks at him and only him. When the tears begin to form and silently roll down her cheeks, he kisses them away. He cups her face with both of his hands and tastes every single drop with his lips, gentle and sweet. She closes her eyes, lashes fanning out stark against her skin and his, as Wu Ji’s lips travel from the edges of her bottom lash, down her cheek, and finally stopping at her cupid’s bow.

It starts out as a small, soft peck at the tip of her upper lip and morphs into hands resting in her hair and at the nape of her neck, heads tilting to melt into an arousing kiss.

It is nothing like their first kiss with all of Wu Ji’s pent-up passion boiling to the surface with nowhere to escape but through her. The kiss was untamed, unrestrained, directed by a young man’s eagerness to finally be able to have what he had been denied for so long. What he had denied both of them.

Everything he had been running from had finally caught up to him. Everything Wu Ji had wanted, he was able to have.

But this. Wu Ji wants to savor this. He takes his time, caressing her lips with his as they move in provocative unison. The kiss is slow and heady, seconds feeling like hours as Wu Ji concentrates on her honied taste, the feel of her plump lips, and the touch of lips and teeth and tongue, her soft hair framed by the spread of his hands.

Wu Ji takes the opportunity to nibble lightly on her bottom lip.

When he hears her moan, Wu Ji’s heart nearly stops. He uses all of his willpower to pull away, afraid he will take it too far and devour all of her.

They both take several deep breaths, still merely centimeters apart. Wu Ji presses his forehead to hers and kisses her gently on the tip of the nose. She smiles even when her eyes are still closed and it prompts the one on Wu Ji’s face as well.

A contented sigh escapes from her lips and Wu Ji nearly goes in to taste them again. She stops him with one finger to his lips. “If we keep this up, we are never going to leave this place. I still need to change, Wu Ji ah.”
His sigh is less content and more exasperated, but he obliges. Wu Ji steals one last kiss on her cheek before leaving the room, most definitely not thinking about bare skin or red lips or the mole on her chest he had discovered on Snake Island.

After a few moments, Wu Ji is shaken out of his inappropriate thoughts when he hears the doors open.

When she steps out of the room, Wu Ji is, once again, awestruck by her beauty. She dons layers of sheer whites and ivories, face brushed with light makeup, and her hair is adorned with a simple pearl-encrusted hairpin.

Wu Ji truly doesn’t know what he has done to become so fortunate.

He puts out his hand, gaze blissfully fixed on hers. “Are you ready?”

Wu Ji remembers that with a nod and an upward curve of her lips, she’d laced her fingers through and curled them firmly around his, never once letting go as they made their journey back to Ming Sect together.

They hadn’t known what the future was going to hold for them, but they had walked towards it with hearts filled with hope.

Wu Ji still clings to that hope, his current path fueled by hope and hope alone.

He prays that that is enough.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人

You are the one fate has arranged for me.

He doesn’t know how long they must fight until one side or the other gives out, and Wu Ji doesn’t intend for it to be him. Besides, the longer the fight persists, the more people he will have to hurt. Wu Ji hasn’t felt this wash of imminent danger since he left Wu Lin, and he notes that he does not miss it at all.

Wu Ji decides today is the day he must go.

He has been a guest in Da Shum and Da Ye’s residence for a little under twenty days, and he has not seen any traces of other people besides the encounter in the forest.

Wu Ji has also slowly and successfully remedied Da Ye’s cough, and he has picked enough herbals for them along with penning a prescription that the elders can easily prepare. The animals are cared for, the couple’s supplies are stocked, and Wu Ji feels at ease that he is leaving them in a good place.

If he hopes to find her, he must go.

Da Shum and Da Ye are reluctant to let him leave, especially Da Shum who gives Wu Ji every reason under the sun on why he should stay: he has a roof over his head, there is a clean bed and washed clothes and he and Ping An are well-fed at every meal; most importantly, Wu Ji has some semblance of a life here where he has good people as company and daily routines that bring him a form of joy he hasn’t felt in a long time. If he leaves, he is back to being unaided with his horse in the middle of a foreign landscape that is both treacherous and lonely.

But Wu Ji doesn’t mind. As tempting as it may be, he still knows that even the most enticing of reasons won’t make him stay.

He only has one reason to leave, and that reason will always eclipse every other reason.

Wu Ji thanks them an innumerous amount of times and bids farewell to Da Ye and his teary-eyed Da Shum, who ply him with enough food, water, and a handmade coat that could last him for three winters. With a final wave, Wu Ji sets out northbound continuing his search with renewed vigor.

After the streak of good luck he’s had, Wu Ji thinks he might be on the right side of fortune.
Wu Ji makes it about ten lis with Ping An when an arrow appears from within the thickness of Birch and Poplar, flying straight for his chest.

He catches it with his hand before its sharpened end could do any damage, but he is now on high alert. Wu Ji and Ping An’s pace had not been slow, and he deduces the perpetrator must be a highly skilled marksman.

He pulls on Ping An’s harness to steady and calm the aggravated horse; the silence around them is eerie, but then Wu Ji picks up on the increasing footsteps and horse hooves rapidly approaching them. Whoever is coming has been lying in wait.

From the shadows of thick trees and brushes lining the trail Wu Ji has taken, armored men and horses rush forward, and Wu Ji makes the quick decision to jump off of Ping An and whip the horse in the direction they had just come from.

He hopes that like its name, Ping An can make it back to Da Shum and Da Ye in one piece.

Wu Ji takes an immediate right into the lushness of the forest, hoping to conceal himself from the people giving chase.

He has a feeling he knows exactly whose arrow it belongs to.

More ironclad arrows fly towards his direction, and as Wu Ji dodges and strikes each one, he knows there is no hiding from the opponent.

He uses qing gong to jump out into the clearing, hoping to shake them off, but more soldiers rapidly appear from behind lines of Birchwood.

They quickly form a circular line around Wu Ji, and as he looks around at the faces of these men, he notices the shift in the center of the formation, creating an opening for the stately man sauntering in proudly on his stallion.

The only heir to the Temür clan with his unsettling smirk pins Wu Ji down with piercing eyes. “Zhang Wu Ji, I’ve finally caught you.”

Wu Ji remains silent. He has tried his hardest for the last three years to stay out of Wang Bao Bao’s way, to lay low and not draw any attention to himself lest he tips off any of the General’s eyes and ears in Mongolia. When Wu Ji felt compromised, he fled. His goal wasn’t another fight, but it seems her brother has other plans.

“You have the audacity to set foot in Northern Yuan after what you did to us?” He taunts, eyes boring down on Wu Ji with a hatred that goes beyond war and country. For Wang Bao Bao, this is personal. “You may have evaded me for the last few years, but today your luck has run out.”

What ensues is another massive number of troops appearing from the brushes behind him and Wu Ji is surrounded and sorely outnumbered.

Wang Bao Bao’s smirk doesn’t leave his face.

Everything freezes for Wu Ji as the silence drags on in his consciousness. Wu Ji slows, taking long, measured breaths and concentrates on every movement in his line of sight.

Wang Bao Bao knows Wu Ji is highly skilled, and he has come prepared. He looks over to one of
his troops and the man notes the flicker in his General’s eyes.

“Release the arrows!” The Yuan Commander raises his hand in signal, and suddenly a line of twenty men come forward.

Their precision nearly awes Wu Ji when they kneel in formation, bows stretched and strings pulled taut from every direction.

The Prince’s men let go of their strings in unison, and the release is deafening as a rain of arrows lance through the air.

Wu Ji readies himself, feeling the energy swiftly build in the depths of his stomach, surging forward through every strand of nerves and veins in his body. The mix of adrenaline and internal energy releases with a blast, and everything in Wu Ji’s line of sight flies outward, creating a streamlined pathway straight for the Yuan soldiers. The energy discharges and a mix of bows and arrows and men fall to the ground.

This doesn’t impede them. More men continue to come forth, firing arrows after arrows that all militantly intend to take Wu Ji’s life.

Wu Ji hears the swoosh of metal brush directly past his ear. He blocks as many as he can before pushing off the ground in a spin aided by his qing gong, using the force of his internal energy to bend and break sharp steel and shaved wood.

He then focuses on gathering them with his bare hands, eyes laserimg in on every batch that comes his way. He grabs them easily like they are paintbrushes instead of arrows, then throws the sharp ends back in a circular path, knocking out the front row of men surrounding him. He repeats this until he is sure the men are tired and hesitant, worried they will end up like their brethren.

When it slows, Wu Ji breathes hard and takes in the field now littered with the remains of spearheads and men. Their blood dyes the brown of the earth with a dark crimson.

But Wang Bao Bao is determined to capture Wu Ji, dead or alive.

Wu Ji barely has a moment to catch his breath, then hears, “FIRE!”

The soldiers begin to use stealth daggers, hurling the deadly weapons straight at the lone fighter.

Wu Ji deflects the first round seamlessly and uses his nei gong 内功 to revert them back at his enemies. They drop to the ground writhing in pain.

He spins his body in the air and precisely catches the next series of blades with both hands, eyes sharp as he looks out at them mid-spin and launches the daggers at the next set of soldiers, injuring most and killing some.

Wu Ji lands solidly on the gravel, then leaps back up to avoid a third round of steel and iron as they narrowly miss him.

The General is livid. He looks around at his fallen men, but his fury bypasses the reality before him and all he wants is Wu Ji’s decapitated head to satisfy the hot, burning red in his gut.

“Zhang Wu Ji, you won’t be leaving here alive today.”

Wu Ji is silent as he steels himself, arms up and positioned much like his Tai Shi Fu as he focuses on Wang Bao Bao perched on top of his horse.
“You don’t want to do this.”

He scoffs menacingly, voice raw with pure hatred. “This has been everything I’ve wanted for the last three years. My arrows piercing through your worthless body. You'll die exactly how my father did. It should be an honor for you.”

His princely arrogance replaces the anger on his face as he turns to his men. “Kill him.”

There is another flurry of formation and Wu Ji begins to worry. He can defeat them one on one, but Wang Bao Bao is relentless and his troops are innumerable. Though Wu Ji knows he is capable, the amount of soldiers present is hundreds to one.

He doesn’t know how long they must fight until one side or the other gives out, and Wu Ji doesn’t intend for it to be him. Besides, the longer the fight persists, the more people he will have to hurt. Wu Ji hasn’t felt this wash of imminent danger since he left Wu Lin, and he notes that he does not miss it at all.

The men start charging towards him with swords and armor in a deathly flood, eager to kill the former leader of Ming Sect. As he is fending off the rush of people, the arrows join, too. Every skilled marksman has their eyes and weapons on him, and they are shooting at an even more rapid pace. He kicks away a group of arrows, then lands a palm strike on two more men charging at him.

The intensity of the fight grows with each passing second. Wu Ji accelerates his blows, using even more force than before to fight back. A group of soldiers come down on him at once, and Wu Ji crosses his arms to block the men’s sword-bearing hands. As he pushes off on the weapons, he finds a second set of men charging at him in unison with militaristic precision.

Wu Ji narrowly avoids them by gliding backwards using the tips of his feet in a snaking formation.

From behind, he hears a few of them soar through the air, hoping to ambush Wu Ji, but his nei gong wards off the attack, propelling the men backwards immediately when their palms graze him.

The battle is chaotic and Wu Ji concentrates on every sound, every sudden movement and directs his mind to calm and feel out the fight, the energy surging beneath his fingertips, eager to release. Wu Ji hones his focus.

He feels the pressure build within the depths of his core, moving up through his sternum, and with the slowing of his breath, he paces his heart, closes his eyes, and channels Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi at the center of his body. His hands guide the energy as Wu Ji feels a finite surge of adrenaline and conserved forces course through his veins, and with the outward push of his arms, a burst of power throws every patriot within his radius into the air and towards the barks of aged Birch.

When Wu Ji resets, his eyes slowly open to sharpened amber. He has not used this much force since leaving the Central Plains and suddenly he feels as alive as when he had first learned wu gong from a discreet manual inside a secluded cave.

The Mongolian soldiers around Wu Ji are restless, but hesitant. They hadn’t missed the sound of spines and bones breaking, flesh and blood colliding with the strength of nature.

Wu Ji sees a storm of emotions on Wang Bao Bao’s face.

He realizes the other man will not back down, but as Wu Ji looks around at the men littered on the ground, he thinks of Da Ye's son, these Mongolian sons and husbands and brothers who are sacrificing their lives not for their country’s cause, but for Wang Bao Bao's insatiable need for revenge.
Wu Ji doesn’t want to keep fighting. He turns around to walk away, hoping this is enough between them.

But Wang Bao Bao won’t let him go.

The General suddenly sends another signal, and one single man leaps out from among the crowds.

The man lands in front of Wu Ji, and he recognizes him as the person the maiden in white had injured.

“It’s you…” Wu Ji pauses and he senses the man is more foe than friend.

He raises palm to fist and slightly bows to Wu Ji as way of introduction. “My name is Batu Boko. Zhang Wu Ji, I owe you my life.”

Wu Ji notices the Prince giving his soldiers the gesture to halt and stand back.

“You’re one of Wang Bao Bao’s men.”

“Yes, I am the one that led us to you.” Batu’s voice does not waver. “Seems like it can’t be helped that you and I face off today. General Köke Temür has saved my entire family, and I am indebted to him.”

Wu Ji may not want to fight, but the fight seems to keep beckoning him. He thinks at least he is fighting one man and will not have to injure many more. In the back of Wu Ji's mind, he is already pondering about his best escape route once he defeats Batu Boko.

He affirms Batu with a nod and readies his body into a dueling position.

“I will allow you fifteen moves without counterattacking as my repayment for you saving my life.”

It surprises Wu Ji that Batu is so self-assured. The other man had been injured and could have lost his life had Wu Ji not stepped in, but he sounds confident of a victory even with the concession. Wu Ji wonders if there may be more than meets the eyes.

Wu Ji prepares his first attack, and immediately springs into opened palms and stiffened forearms. He is striking the other man with every extension of his elbow, but Batu is alert and strong, easily dodging Wu Ji’s first, second, and even third attempt with nothing but speed and lightness of feet.

With moves four through eight, Wu Ji uses Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi and conducts the energy like a refined whip that could snap the other person in half, but Batu is able to split the force with the spread of his arms, creating two powerful energy waves that knock down a row of trees on both sides.

The other man has no expression on his face. He projects a calmness that rivals even Wu Ji’s Tai Shi Fu, and there is something admirable in the other man’s ability to keep his word and competently defend against Wu Ji.

By the thirteenth strike, Wu Ji still has not grazed him. Batu’s qing gong now is immensely more powerful than when he was with the maiden in the forest. Wu Ji recalls the other man had only defended against her then as well.

Finally, on move fifteen, Wu Ji is able to land a palm strike on the man’s right shoulder, but he feels Batu’s nei gong flow the energy Wu Ji just transmitted back through his meridians and outward, creating a counter-force that propels both men in opposite directions.
They land with the sliding of heels on gravel as they plant their feet firmly. The two men regain their 
composure by controlling their breathing and readjusting their nei gong, eyes never leaving their 
opponent’s.

Wu Ji thinks he may have found his Mongolian match.

Wang Bao Bao’s voice interrupts the battle. “Zhang Wu Ji, fifteen moves are up. It’s time for your 
defeat.”

With his commander’s indication, Batu unflinchingly charges forward towards Wu Ji, and the man’s 
movement is faster than any martial arts skills Wu Ji has learned exists. Every strike is barely 
discernible until skin contact occurs, and when Wu Ji is able to feel its force, he hardly has a chance 
to counterattack. His eyes are fixed on Batu’s strikes, but even Wu Ji is having difficulty detecting 
them.

When Wu Ji himself is able to strike his opponent, the man uses his entire body to shift his weight as 
well as Wu Ji’s, dancing and dodging in a mock wrestling match Wu Ji has only seen Mongolian 
men engage in as he traveled the country.

But this unique combination of wrestling agility, muscled force, and immense internal energy piques 
Wu Ji. He doesn’t understand Batu’s wu gong, but there is something esteemed about the other 
man’s ability.

Foreign lands bring foreign skills, and Wu Ji can admit he has never seen this happen through all of 
his encounters in Wu Lin. He is briefly reminded of the Persians but is pulled from his musings when 
Batu slides in feet first, hoping to take out Wu Ji’s legs.

Wu Ji narrowly avoids the attack as he leaps upward, spinning to gain better ground and find his 
footing.

When Wu Ji is mid-spin, concentrated on Batu and his next move, he feels a flash of brutalizing pain 
on his right shoulder.

Wu Ji lands clumsily and staggers backwards, clutching the crafty arrow that pierced straight through 
his collarbone. He looks down at the blood now freely flowing, soaking the clothes Da Shum had 
just made for him and notes the color is a darker tinge than usual. There is a numbness that is 
spreading along his arm and neck far too quickly for a normal injury.

Wu Ji’s eyes fly up to Wang Bao Bao, who puts down his bow slowly, his own eyes firm on Wu Ji. 
He remains seated on his warhorse with a hardened expression. If he feels any trace of remorse, Wu 
Ji can’t see it.

Even Batu Boko looks marginally shocked at the underhanded tactic his revered General just 
applied.

But Wu Ji isn’t surprised. He is far too familiar with how much vengeance changes a person.

Wu Ji grits his teeth and bears down, letting out a slight wince as he breaks the arrow in half with his 
hand. He grips the wooden end and pulls, eyes piercing Wang Bao Bao as metal rips its way back 
out of his torn flesh. The tip of the spearhead is completely blackened.

He tosses the broken pieces to the ground and immediately uses his middle and forefinger to firmly 
hit two points encasing the wound, hoping to slow his bloodstream and impede the spread of the 
poison. The jolt of nerves freezing has Wu Ji clutching onto his numbed limb.
Maybe it is the toxin constricting his rationality, but he doesn’t understand why he feels a twinge in his heart for Wang Bao Bao. For Wu Ji, there is a feeling of defeat; that her brother, her only kin left, is the one who did this to him.

Absurdly, Wu Ji wonders if she hates him just as much.

His vision begins to blur, but Wu Ji tries to shake himself out of it.

Nothing moves around him except Wu Ji. The soldiers lift their weapons, but don’t act.

Wu Ji is so tired of fighting. He closes his eyes and suddenly lets out a choked laugh.

*So this is how this ends.*

When his eyes open, Wu Ji has already turned away from Wang Bao Bao and his men, and his feet are unsteadily taking him away from them.

He stumbles past Batu Boko and thinks maybe he hears Wang Bao Bao’s voice telling him to stop. If the man wants to fight fairly, Wu Ji will fight with him, but he doesn’t want to have to see her brother kill him in this way.

Wu Ji can hear Wang Bao Bao increasingly becoming more agitated the more Wu Ji walks away, and he can sense the moment her brother leaps off his horse, the sound of steel whipping through the air, echoing from behind.

*Maybe this is how I will die. Min Min ah, will you cry for me like I did for you?*

Wu Ji is mid-step and stumble when his world comes to a complete and grinding halt.

“STOP!”

Wu Ji feels a jolt in his body that both surges life back into him, but also fuses his feet to the dirt and gravel beneath him. His mouth parts, but no words come out.

He knows this voice distinctly, can recognize it even in the slightest lift and fall of her sigh.

The sound of someone’s qing gong rustling through the air behind him and the *clinkclinkclink* of metal on metal is dulled out.

For a moment, Wu Ji wonders if the stiffness that has overtaken him is due to the poison flowing into his bloodstream.

All he hears is her voice ringing in his head as a flood of memories washes over him.

*A flash of regal red in a grand manor.*

“They are Zhao Min and have waited here in anticipation.”

*The scent of sweet perfume wafting from a ceramic wine cup, an enticing pink crescent dotting the rim.*

“Zhang Cong Zi, by this point, I’m sure you know who I am. My father is Ru Yang Wong, esteemed commander of the Imperial Army. I am of Mongolian descent, and my real name is Min Min Temür. The Emperor pronounced me to be Zhao Min Jun Zhu, referring to the Han name I gave myself.”

*An icy gaze paired with the fire and defiance in her tone, admonishing all of Wu Ji’s accusations.*
“I, Min Min Temür, am capable of admitting to anything I do, but if I haven’t done it, even if you cast me into the eighteen levels of hell for eternity, I will still refuse to accept the blame.”

The very last glimpse he catches of her before the ensuing separation Wu Ji has endured for the past three years.

“Back then, I was able to risk everything to follow you. Now, I am also able to do everything in my power to stay away from you. I, Min Min Temür, can do exactly as I say. The only thing I regret is that the price I had to pay was with my father’s life.”

The clarity of her tone slices through him sharper and deeper than any metal.

Min Min.

It must be the poison, because even as the flurry of movement dies down, Wu Ji still cannot move.

Min Min.

He hears the clashing of swords behind him pick up again. Wu Ji wills himself to turn around.

He recognizes the long, cocooned veil of white, the maiden in the forest, but her voice. Her voice was Zhao Min’s.

Wu Ji feels his own voice shake when he speaks, throat tight and watery in a mix of fear and anticipation.

“Min Min… is that—”

Before he could finish, Wang Bao Bao takes the moment of distraction to rush past the figure in white and land a blow on Wu Ji’s chest, and they both expel in opposite directions from the force of Jiu Yang Shen Gong 九陽神功.

Wu Ji is driven back, but she is there to catch him, one hand around his shoulder as she steadies him. The misty veil conceals her face, but Wu Ji is certain he has his answer.

He considers the smile on his face to be foolish, but it doesn’t last very long as he tastes viscous iron instead of the salty lump lodged in his throat before.

Wu Ji tries to bear down on his teeth to staunch the blood, but to no avail. He feels a cold, crimson trail flow from the corner of his lips, erupting from the internal wound in his chest.

His legs give in and he buckles to the ground, but she is still there to catch him, a small, but immovable force ready for Wu Ji to lean on. When they both reach the ground, he lets the weight of his body fall into her, and she gently lays his head on her arm. Wu Ji tries to smile even as more blood spews from his lips.

Her hand comes up to wipe it from his face, and he tries to speak, to assure her, only to choke on the dense fluids blocking his airway. But he keeps trying anyways; he wants to be able to tell her I’m okay. It’s okay…

It doesn’t come out.

The pain is there, muted and faded in the abstract of Wu Ji’s miasma, but everything seems to pale in comparison to the only two words repeating like a tantric mantra in his head.

Min Min.
Wu Ji thinks it is silly of him to be scared of blinking, but he would rather be the silliest person in the world than live out the fear of losing her again. He fights back the murky shroud threatening to invade his vision of her, to take the sight of her away from him.

His eyes burn more than the wounds and Wu Ji grabs on tightly to her sleeve.

He can’t let her go again.

A gust of wind breezes by them, picking up a little more of the fabric, and Wu Ji is able to catch a glimpse of her face.

He assumes if he dies now, he would die happy.

“IT’s okay, Wu Ji ah.” Zhao Min tries to smile for him, too, but the moment is short-lived. She sighs unevenly, and Wu Ji knows she is steeling herself. Her expression hardens as she turns to her brother.

When she speaks again, it is laced with contempt. “This is how you win now? By using poison and cheap shots? A righteous man would never do this.”

Wang Bao Bao scoffs, his breathing labored as he holds onto the arm that had just wounded Wu Ji, feeling pain blossom through the limb. “You are the last person who should be lecturing me. This debt owed in blood has no regard for your righteous ways.”

The General’s eyes dim with rage and anguish, and Wu Ji knows the memories must have surged back, the sight of Ru Yang Wong’s bloodied armor pierced with the arrows his Ming Sect had left behind. “You think your Zhang Jiao Zhu is defenseless? Look at all of my men he has killed. Look at how he killed my Father!”

“It wasn’t him!” Zhao Min interrupts, and she holds Wu Ji just a little bit tighter. Her voice is softer now, tired, as she looks down at the man in her arms. “It wasn’t him, and you and I both know that.”

“It doesn’t matter who it was! They all need to pay!” Wang Bao Bao’s knuckles go white while his expression emits the same darkness he feels within.

“I understand your pain.” Wu Ji pictures Zhao Min’s brows furrowing in grief, but he knows she is determined. “I know you’re angry. I know you want to seek retribution for what happened to… your Father, but this is not the way. Hurting him, hurting yourself… you think he would want this? If you want to honor the late General, then live in his footsteps. Defeat Zhu Yuan Zhang on the battlefield!”

Wu Ji sees the moment her words rattle Wang Bao Bao, the slight faltering of his legs giving him away. His eyes momentarily shift while becoming unfocused, but he regains himself quickly and the hatred they possess return.

“Say whatever you want, but your Zhang Jiao Zhu will not be leaving here until I watch him take his last breath.”

She draws a shaky breath just as Wu Ji does, too, and slowly moves to get up, leaving Wu Ji sitting on the ground. Wu Ji instantly feels the loss of warmth when she extracts herself from him.

Zhao Min moves forward, one foot in front of the other, and in the middle of this battlefield littered with the remnants of a lethal combat, she exudes serenity in her trail of white.

The silence that stretches between Zhao Min and Wang Bao Bao is solemnly tense. For a moment, it feels like there are no soldiers around them. No blood, no sound, nothing but a pair of sibling bond
Zhao Min stands before Wang Bao Bao, whose eyes are pouring into hers in a mix of resentment and pain, and Wu Ji watches her hand come up to cup his face as she leans in to whisper something indistinguishable in the General’s ear.

Wu Ji’s vision is blurred, but he notes the stunned expression on Wang Bao Bao’s face as Zhao Min pulls away and makes her return back to Wu Ji.

“We need to go.” She gently sits him up and swings his good arm over her shoulder, lifting Wu Ji. He admires her strength for how small she is, and he remembers how perfectly she molded into his body while in his arms.

He wishes he had the strength to hug her right now.

“Can you walk?” He feels her other hand gently press against the wound on his shoulder, and when it comes back stained in sable and crimson, Wu Ji winces, but doesn’t miss the tightened grip she has on his waist.

His lips tilt up slightly from her concern, and he slowly shakes his head *I’m fine.*

Zhao Min nods, satisfied. “Let’s go.” She holds onto him and steadies them to leave.

He expects Wang Bao Bao to stop them, prepared for another ambush, but to his surprise, the General and his troops remain immobile as they watch Wu Ji and Zhao Min walk away.

--

Wu Ji endures the pain long enough until both him and Zhao Min are beyond her brother’s line of sight, and as they near Da Shum’s and Da Ye’s residence, he fuzzily wonders how she knew her way back just as his world falls into darkness.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人
You are the one fate has arranged for me.

--

Wu Ji tries to tilt her face up; he wants to be able to tell her that everything he has done, he did for her willingly. Given the choice between this life and a life completely devoid of Zhao Min, Wu Ji will choose this path without a second thought a hundred times over.
He can’t help her. Not yet.

Wu Ji is just a face among the hoards of people lining the streets of the Capitol, waiting anxiously to see the beheading of their renounced Jun Zhu. They are thrilled to witness her parading around the city in a wooden trap that binds her to the duties of the nation she should not have disgraced.

He can’t do anything, but watch as her people, the people she had worked proudly and tirelessly for in a land far from home amidst the dangers of Jiang Hu, throw rotten vegetables and hurl abuse and profanities at their former princess without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Their rage will not diminish until they see their traitor dead. Nothing was going to satisfy the thirst they possess until steel separated her head from her neck. Her people were out for blood.

Wu Ji needs to be patient; he knows this. In order to save her, he has to bide his time. He had snuck into the Capitol after hearing the announcement that Zhao Min Jun Zhu was to be executed in three days for treason. For trying to save a renowned rebel fighting against the Yuan Empire. For trying to save him.

And all he can do now is stand here and watch as Imperial Soldiers escort Zhao Min to her execution.

Wu Ji knew no one could make Min Min Temür go to the extent of betraying her country and forsaking her royal bloodline, of risking life and death without an ounce of regret... no one, but a lucky orphan boy who miraculously became Ming Sect Jiao Zhu and caught the eyes of Mongolia’s most brilliant princess.

Now, seeing her like this affirms how much Wu Ji despises this fact, hating that of all people, it is him she had fallen in love with.

It shouldn’t have been him. Zhao Min shouldn’t have sacrificed everything for a coward who refused to accept her love.

Wu Ji did not know whether to laugh or cry.

He had pushed her away and tried to bury the storm of feelings he had for her to keep her safe, to protect her from this unfortunate love that couldn’t possibly have a happy ending. Wu Ji had foreseen that one day, they would both regret it if they gave in. Either Wu Ji was going to die by the hands of her family or it was going to be the other way around.

He never thought it would be Zhao Min who would suffer the most.

His biggest fear and the reason he had continuously run away is playing out right before his eyes and Wu Ji can’t help her. Not yet.

From behind the crowds, Wu Ji surreptitiously lurks along the edges, keeping pace with the wooden cage. His eyes never leave her.

She sits lifelessly inside, eyes dazed and without the light and fire he has grown accustomed to, the spark that drew him to her.

There is no trace of Zhao Min Jun Zhu. She has seemingly given up.
Wu Ji fiercely wants to fight with all his life to bring her back.

They stop in front of the execution platform and a man three times Zhao Min’s size is waiting, sharpened blade in hand.

The official sits in his post far from the crowd already surrounding the area. The faces on the stage are grim.

Wu Ji lingers among the restless crowd. He is waiting for the perfect opportunity while trying to will his heart to calm. It does her no good to act in haste.

Everything is dependent upon the sun approaching the designated time. As it nears, the impatient and edgy mob gradually stills. An unnatural calm settles upon them.

The wind has picked up in the arena, lifting dried, withered leaves into the air as they swirl and dance around her in a scene reminiscent of a dark and strange hell on earth. She is beautiful even in her deadened state.

The once noisy crowd is now quietly tense as they anticipate the next act, the final act.

Everyone plays the role accordingly: she is the treasonous princess, they are the blood-thirsty mob with an executioner ready to exact justice, and Wu Ji... Wu Ji doesn’t want to be the hero. He just wants to get her out of there.

The government official begins to speak, listing off the crimes that have brought their princess to her knees. She doesn’t even bat an eyelash.

Wu Ji is worried at how still she is.

He watches as the official looks up and judges for time and sees the moment the other man decides they are ready. The judge gives the executioner the signal through a nod, and as he picks up the wooden marker with a single word etched on it, Wu Ji braces himself.

He won’t let anything happen to her.

The executioner raises his saber and iron sharply reflects the blinding rays.

With one hand, the official tosses the marker like the prisoner in front of him means nothing, aloofly sending Zhao Min to her death.

Wu Ji sees his chance. He knows he is fast enough to intercept the marker before it even hits the ground.

He summons his nei gong, moves his body in their direction, and prepares to leap out.

He can’t.

Wu Ji feels something holding him back. His feet are like lead.

The wooden marker lands resoundingly on the platform, and the hollow thud echoes in Wu Ji’s head.

The heavy saber swiftly comes down.

He tries to move, but Wu Ji can’t. He can’t!
Metal converges on muscle and meat and bones, and Wu Ji immediately closes his eyes before the gruesome separation of head and neck occurs. He can’t.

No no no no no. His eyes are glued shut. He can’t look. He can’t.

Wu Ji can’t help her. He can’t.

Out of the blue, a rough hand closes down on Wu Ji’s throat, blocking off his air passage with a fatal grasp. His eyes fly open.

Both of Wu Ji’s hands go up to push and grab and pry the hand off his neck.

“You did this.”

Wu Ji’s vision begins to go white, but he focuses his eyes on the blurred figure, making out gray hair and steeled armor and distinct Mongolian braids. The man is stained in darkened blood.

He closes his eyes when Ru Yang Wong’s clutch tightens even more around his throat.

“No,” Wu Ji tries to let out, but it’s weak, barely audible, and all he can do is shake his head. “No, I wouldn’t… No…”

“It’s your fault. You did this. You killed her!” His grip tightens and Wu Ji sees red veins clouding the whites of the other man’s eyes.

“No…” he can’t breathe and everything hurts. Wu Ji’s limbs feel like they are weighed down by boulders, and he can’t even attempt to fight back.

From the corner of his eyes, he can see the hazy form of Zhao Min’s fallen body. Wu Ji briefly wonders if the red he is seeing is from lack of air or the blood she has shed.

Did she feel any pain?

Ru Yang Wong’s grip is fortified around Wu Ji’s throat, and when there is the distinct sound of cracking bones, he realizes it’s his.

“You deserve this.”

Red.

Wu Ji startles awake gasping for air as his hands come around his own throat.

He feels lightheaded from jolting up so abruptly, and in that same instance, there is also an agonizing ache bursting along his upper torso. This particular mixture of terror and pain and confusion leaves Wu Ji trembling.

He tries to focus on his surroundings and maybe recognizes that chair and that table and the yellowed ivory fabric covering the entire dwelling.

Wu Ji realizes he is back at Da Ye and Da Shum’s residence, inside the room he has called his own for nearly a month.

He clutches his bandaged shoulder, feeling out the tenderness of the wound. His head is throbbing in a similar amount of pain as his shoulder and Wu Ji tries to focus. He thinks he is missing something important.
A swirl of white.

A gleam of silver.

A flash of red.

Suddenly, everything that had transpired starts rushing back to Wu Ji in fragments: Wang Bao Bao, fighting off the soldiers, the injured man he had rescued.

Min Min.

Wu Ji throws his blanket aside, not minding the pounding in his head nor the fragility of his limbs and rushes up off the bed trying to find his footing. His heart pounds in panic as he looks around the small dwelling, but no one is there.

The whole room spins as he stumbles off the bed and towards the entrance. He needs to find her.

When Wu Ji swings the fabric door open, the brightness of the midday sun hits his eyes and momentarily blinds him. He grabs on to the yurt's entrance to find his balance and shakes away the dotted whites fading in and out of his vision.

Slowly, Wu Ji’s obscured sight morphs and forms into a halo that encompasses the deep blue silhouette in front of him.

The figure standing over a fire heating a black kettle that uniquely smells of wintergreen and rosewood is distinctly her.

Wu Ji shakes away the dizziness, one hand still firmly placed on the dwelling as he takes it all in. He recognizes the smell of medicinal herbs and fragrant flowers, the crackling sound of burning wood, and Zhao Min all existing in one surreal image before him.

Zhao Min. Min Min Temür.

His Min Min.

She is here, present and alive only yards away, and Wu Ji is suddenly flooded by ten thousand emotions he can’t decipher.

All he can do is watch as she takes meticulous care in fanning the flames, wiping away the heat and dampness from her face, and Wu Ji doesn’t understand why his eyes begin to brim with unanticipated tears.

He can’t help but let out a watery laugh to himself when she leaves a light smudge of ash and soot behind on her cheek.

Wu Ji is unable to process the overwhelming feeling of relief that overtakes him. He can’t feel anything other than release; not the hot, grating pain on his shoulder nor the numbness of his arm or torso.

The thick, heavy sense of loss Wu Ji has been carrying around in his chest for the past few years seems to erupt out from his core, choking him in its escape. His throat feels constricted and suddenly there is moisture on his cheeks. He bites his trembling lip.

Three years.
Zhao Min walking away with her father’s coffin.

Zhao Min saving him from her brother.

Zhao Min safe and alive before him.

The sudden tightening of his lungs and heart takes Wu Ji’s breath away. He brings his hand up to cover the sobs that begin to wrack his entire body.

Wu Ji quivers in the tears that soak his eyes and cheeks and hand, but he has absolutely zero control as they continue to fall. His nose is now a runny mess and he uses his sleeve to try to wipe the excess wetness from his face.

The reprieve he feels and the release of tears leave him lightheaded.

Three years.

Wu Ji has been looking for Zhao Min through the passing of nearly twelve seasons, through unknown lands and deserts, rain and shine with no direction and a loyal horse as company, and she is now right in front of him.

The reality before him clashes with the insurmountable yearning he has endured for the last three years, and all of it nearly brings Wu Ji to his knees.

He is so scared this is all just a dream.

Wu Ji’s own voice sounds raw and foreign to him when he speaks, lips and tongue feeling out the unused name he had been so accustomed to calling before they parted ways. He can’t remember when he had uttered it last.

“Min Min…”

It is barely above a whisper, weak and unsteady from injury and tears, but Wu Ji keeps trying anyways.

He sees her unexpectedly straighten up, turning to walk away, and Wu Ji panics. She didn’t hear him. He is still shaking, but his body moves forward before he can register it.

“Min Min!”

Wu Ji sees Zhao Min's entire body freeze.

He is hesitant, but knows this is his only chance, so he takes another step closer to her. The fear he feels seizes his stomach.

“Min Min… it’s—is it really you?”

He waits. She still doesn’t move from her rigid stance, but Wu Ji will wait. He will always wait for her.

The fan in Zhao Min’s hand slowly drops to the ground. Wu Ji notes the measured rise and fall of her shoulders accompanying deep breaths.

*Let me see you. Please.*

Zhao Min takes one final deliberate inhale and turns her entire body around to face him.
Wu Ji’s lips are parted in anticipation, eyes glued to her despite the tears lingering on the edges, threatening to spill over.

“Min Min…”

When Zhao Min’s eyes settle upon his, Wu Ji can clearly perceive the mingling of tears, nerves, and conflict that mirror his own.

With just the simple glimpse of her face, Wu Ji wholly embraces the release of every ounce of tension from his body, feeling prominent lightness sweep over him.

He whispers, “Min Min.”

Then his knees buckle, and Wu Ji cracks a tearful smile on the way down.

“Wu Ji!”

Before he fully hits the ground, Zhao Min is there to break his fall, catching Wu Ji in her arms and steadying him onto the grass.

He tries to keep his tired eyes open because he needs to see her. She is so close to him now.

Wu Ji concentrates on worried eyes and furrowed brows, feels soft and gentle hands grounding him. He doesn’t dare take his eyes off her.

He speaks through labored breaths. “Min Min… Min Min, it’s you. It’s really you.”

In his incoherent state, Wu Ji can make out her nodding and trying to rearrange him in her arms. Zhao Min looks troubled and Wu Ji wants to take away that look on her face.

He attempts to reach his hand up, but a surge of immense pain explodes across his upper body, and Wu Ji scrunches up his face from the ache.

“Wu Ji…” Zhao Min is trying to get his attention, one hand cupping his face, and Wu Ji wills himself to focus on the tenderness of her voice. “Wu Ji ah, let me bring you back inside. Come.”

He feebly nods and seizes his injured shoulder. Wu Ji remembers little by little of how Wang Bao Bao ambushed him with poisoned arrows and the toxins now instilled in his body.

As they stumble back in the direction Wu Ji came from, he vaguely hears Zhao Min’s voice above the ringing in his ears.

“Wu Ji ah, you shouldn’t be out here in your condition. If it wasn’t for your immense nei gong, you would have died already.”

The slight nagging tone mixed with Zhao Min’s genuine concern for him amuses Wu Ji in the depths of his consciousness.

She leads Wu Ji back inside the yurt and gently sits him down on the bed. Immediately, his world spins at a far lesser pace.

“The poison in your body, it’s called Mogain Khoran in Mongolia, made from the deadly venom of Steppe Vipers, the Aconitum flower, and the Ganja herb. To activate it, our medicinal manuals say you must mix it with human blood.” She pauses and looks down at her hands. “Because of this key ingredient, my father forbade us from using it. To take you down, Ge Ge…”
Wu Ji feels his head shake of its own accord. *It’s okay, Min Min.* She doesn’t need to explain to him. He understands.

Zhao Min takes a deep breath and forgoes her last train of thought. “Regardless, I’ve given you doses of the antidote. Like I said, had it not been for your nei gong, you wouldn’t have made it. You’ve been unconscious for two days and two nights. I thought…”

Her voice trails off as she lets out a shuddering breath, and Wu Ji’s bleary mind is still processing the fact that he’d been knocked out for that long.

She pulls out a pill from a ceramic capsule and hands it to him. “Here, take this. It’s the antidote you’ve been taking. Then you can use Jiu Yang Shen Gong to completely rid the poison from your body.”

Wu Ji obliges without a second thought, swallowing the round pill.

When Zhao Min takes a step back, Wu Ji closes his eyes and musters up his powers to trigger the meridians inside his body, enabling Jiu Yang Shen Gong to calm and stabilize his vitals. Wu Ji uses his good arm to gather remedial energy in the pits of his stomach, and his entire body vibrates with the force slowly working its way up to his chest, moving towards his bandaged right shoulder and arm. A hot sensation surges through bone and muscle, radiating heated energy capable of pushing the toxins out of him.

Wu Ji stays like this, meditating with his nei gong for nearly two continuous shí as he persists through the forces coursing through his body to slowly eliminate the mix of fatal venom and herbals. Wu Ji doesn’t stop until he senses the poison has fully been dispelled. When he establishes a stable state, he feels his body reclaim the strength and solidity the poison had stolen from him. There is only a mild throbbing in his shoulder now.

Wu Ji slowly blinks his eyes open, readjusting to the flickering candles now illuminating the darkened room.

The first impression he sees consists of royal blue and embroidered white, and Wu Ji tries harder to fixate his regained sight on the figure in front of him. Her shape alters slowly into a sharpened image of round, crystal eyes, a perfectly arched nose, and lips as rosy as the petals of fully bloomed lotuses.

“Wu Ji ah, how do you feel?”

Wu Ji centers his vision to discern an anxious Zhao Min still hovering over him, and he languidly smiles.

“Min Min, you’re still here.”

She knits her eyebrows closer together. “Of course I’m still here. Do you expect me to leave you when you’re like this?”

“I—”

Zhao Min cuts him off with some minor fussing, immediately checking the open wound on his shoulder. “I need to redress it. You’re bleeding again.”

He thinks the dips and shallows gathering between her brows don’t belong there, so Wu Ji brings his left hand up and uses his thumb and index finger to carefully smooth out the grooves fixed on the bridge of her nose.
He smiles, satisfied, when the frown is replaced by a stunned expression.

“There, that’s better.”

Zhao Min touches the place where Wu Ji’s fingers had been, and only manages to blink at him.

Wu Ji smiles at her again. “Don’t frown, Min Min. I’m fine now.”

Their eyes linger and her face softens, no longer frowning nor stunned, and he watches as she settles on an emphatic sigh followed by renewed tenacity.

Zhao Min’s hands move forward but hesitate by his lapel, and Wu Ji looks down to realize he is only wearing one layer of clothing. He glances over at the vivid burgundy seeping through the old gauze and thin white fabric draped over his shoulder, then back at Zhao Min who pauses.

It prompts Wu Ji to recall his injury at Shao Lin and how Zhao Min had fearlessly remained by his side despite the disapproving eyes of his Ming Sect members and Wu Dang uncles. She’d hesitated the same way but pushed through any and all judgment in order to be able to bandage him up with her own hands.

“It’s my job now. No one gets to do this, but me, Wu Ji ah.”

Zhao Min had whispered it low enough for only Wu Ji’s ears as she began to undress and meticulously bandage him in front of all the other men in the room.

Wu Ji hadn’t missed the hurt in Zhao Min’s eyes when his Shi Shu 師叔 and Shi Bo 師伯 rejected even the idea of her tea offering despite the smile she presented to him.

Zhao Min had already suffered so much for Wu Ji, protected him with no regard for her own life, and even up until now, Wu Ji doesn’t think very much has changed.

He boldly grabs her hand, guiding both their hands onto his chest, eyes and smile beckoning her to proceed.

Zhao Min takes a moment to interpret the gesture and Wu Ji can sense her uncertainty, but she gives in and affirms him with a nod. Wu Ji’s smile broadens and he lets go of her hand.

She slowly pulls away the right lapel of his shirt and drags it across his sore body, letting the fabric hang off of Wu Ji’s side. Zhao Min takes great care in thoroughly removing the stained dressing layer by layer to reveal the grisly damage underneath. The fresh blood seeping out is now bright red, indicating the successful absence of poison.

Zhao Min proceeds to dust a generous amount of Ya Luo Duan Shi Gao 亚罗煅石膏 over his wound to staunch any further bleeding and ease the ache he feels. Her fingers are gentle when she begins to rewrap fresh white linen around his shoulder.

Wu Ji’s eyes are rounded and bright, and with almost a soft childlike wonder, he follows her every move.

There are so many things he wants to tell her, so many things he is burning to ask. The first question he actually initiates aloud takes Wu Ji a little by surprise as well.

“Min Min, what did you whisper to your brother for him to let us go?”

Her hands pause near his shoulder. She is quiet for a beat, solemn, and Wu Ji is worried he may have
said the wrong thing.

“I… If you don’t want to tell me, I understand. I didn’t mean to—”

As he flusters, Wu Ji nearly misses what she says next.

“I told him that if either you or him dies that day, I would kill myself.”

Zhao Min’s eyes are focused on him and only him.

Her words resonate within the depths of everything Wu Ji is, and he can’t fathom her statement, her promise because Min Min Temür can and will do exactly as she says. Wu Ji and Wang Bao Bao both fully comprehend this.

Wu Ji is suddenly thankful he is still alive.

All at once, he feels so big and so small, like an inconsequential moth to Zhao Min’s magnificent flames. She burns bright and all encompassing, and he is inextricably drawn to her, resolute even in death.

Despite the years of separation, Wu Ji is certain her love for him remains the same as his for her. Nothing was going to change his mind.

He feels the weight of this knowledge and her words binding them together again, and the small hope that had sprouted within him now blooms beautifully and massively inside his chest.

Wu Ji’s search, his blind optimism, and the fears and doubts and heartbreak that had confined him all these years dissipate in this very moment.

They share no words, but as if buckling from under the intensity of it all, Zhao Min’s eyes break away. She reticently looks down at the white fabric in her hands and again starts to unravel it around his shoulder.

A soft smile spreads across Wu Ji’s lips, and his mind is suddenly so clear.

He gives in to his urges, grabs her hand again, and decisively pulls Zhao Min into him.

Wu Ji wraps both arms around her body, uninjured arm coming up to tenderly cup the back of her neck as he breathes in honey and jasmine and exhales in relief.

He finds complete solace in their embrace, letting the years between them fall away as he draws her in closer.

Wu Ji can feel Zhao Min wiggling around on his chest anxiously. “Zhang Wu Ji, let me go… your wound. I—”

He doesn’t know what else to say to quiet her, so he goes with a simple, “Thank you, Min Min.”

Wu Ji holds her until he feels Zhao Min’s entire body slacken and she gives in to the embrace.

"You don't need to thank me. It's my job, remember?"

Wu Ji tightens his hold on her thin frame, closing his eyes and deepening the smile on his face. Right now, Wu Ji can’t feel any pain. It doesn’t matter anyway. Pain or not, he wasn’t going to let her go again.
Then the faintness of her voice draws him in even closer.

“But... Wu Ji ah, you should have let me go.”

He pulls back from the hug, puzzled by her words. They remain inches apart but Zhao Min isn’t looking at him, and when she speaks Wu Ji must strain to listen.

“You should have let me go three years ago. You shouldn’t have come all the way out here. And for what? You—” Zhao Min is struggling through her words like Wu Ji has never seen her do before. Her shoulders are slumped and she still won’t meet his eyes.

Wu Ji tries to tilt her face up; he wants to be able to tell her that everything he has done, he did for her willingly. Given the choice between this life and a life completely devoid of Zhao Min, Wu Ji will choose this path without a second thought a hundred times over.

But she does not give him the chance to answer. In a flash, Zhao Min pushes him off and stands up in haste. With shoulders pulled back, she lifts her head up and reveals the darkened expression on her face.

It is indecipherable, and Wu Ji can only stare at her. “Min Min…”

Zhao Min’s eyes are piercingly cold and her fists are clenched tight; the tone of her voice leaves no room for compromise. “I told you not to come find me.”

With that, she brushes past him and abandons Wu Ji in a storm of confusion.

He clumsily trails behind her, but when Wu Ji makes it out the door, he runs into Da Shum and nearly knocks the older woman over in his rush.

Da Shum seizes him, preventing Wu Ji from giving chase, and he grabs onto her out of frustration. “Da Shum, I need to go after her!”

She holds on tightly to his sleeves with both hands. “Wu Ji, she won’t go far. I promise you she will be back.”

He watches helplessly as Zhao Min mounts one of the horses and rapidly recedes into the pitch-black horizon, but Da Shum’s words pique Wu Ji’s interest enough to settle his restless feet. “How do you know?”

He is still looking off into the sightless distance as the elderly woman proceeds to try to assuage him. “Because this is her home now. She has been living here with your Da Ye and me for the last two years.”

Wu Ji’s eyes immediately dart back to Da Shum. He doesn’t believe what he hears. “W-what?”

Da Shum sighs and finally lets go of him once she feels he is no longer a flight risk. “You two just reunited. Give her some time, Wu Ji ah. Now come inside with Da Shum. I am sure you have many questions for me.”

Wu Ji thinks his mouth is gaping open, but his awareness lacks any kind of function as he tries to process everything she just told him. Shocked can’t even begin to describe his current state of mind.

“I promise she will come back. For now, let’s go inside.”

As he mechanically follows Da Shum back into the room, Wu Ji hazily wonders if everything that
has happened today is just a delusional dream he can’t wake up from.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

You are the one fate has arranged for me.

Now, there are so many layers in their history, chapters that are difficult to read and digest. The pages are yellowed and worn down from the constant thumbing of memories, flipped back and forth an innumerous amount of times over the long years of separation.

There are incomplete chapters that neither of them have read, missing pages and smeared calligraphy muddying a story that has yet to find its ending.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wu Ji is pacing.

He knows he is pacing and he knows Da Shum is watching him pace, back and forth, back and forth, as he tries to go over all the details that transpired over the course of the last few days.

Zhao Min has been living with Da Ye and Da Shum for two years. What has happened in the last few years? How did she end up here? Has she known Wu Ji has been in Mongolia looking for her? Will she really come back?

Wu Ji’s head hurts from all the questions swirling around in his head.

He and Da Shum haven’t spoken a word to each other since Zhao Min ran off, and in the turmoil that is Wu Ji’s mind, he hasn’t asked the older woman a single question. He doesn’t know where to begin.

His endless stream of thoughts halts when he hears Da Shum’s lengthy sigh from where she is seated. “Wu Ji ah… Wu Ji!”

Wu Ji finally pauses in his pacing and snaps his head up towards Da Shum’s voice.

“Why don’t you have a seat and I will tell you everything I know. Your pacing is making this old lady dizzy,” she says, shaking her head and holding it in mock exasperation.

Wu Ji obliges. He sits down with her at the small table near the entrance, and she pours them each a
cup of water.

“Drink up, Wu Ji ah. You’re still recovering from your wound.”

Again, Wu Ji does as he is told. His movements are sluggish, but he doesn’t think it’s the injuries that are leaving him in a daze.

“I know this must all come as a shock to you,” Da Shum treads lightly, almost as if she is worried she will spook Wu Ji if she speaks too quickly. “And Da Shum really didn’t like lying to you, but Min Er had begged me not to say anything. For the last two years, just as you have been doing, she has helped your Da Ye and me immensely as well.”

Her voice goes soft. “We treat her like she is our daughter, so when she pleaded for us to take you in and not tell you her whereabouts, we couldn’t say no to her.”

Wu Ji tries to keep his hand still around the ceramic cup as he continues to slowly sip on it.

“I tried to convince her to see you, but I’m sure you know how willful she is. Min Er had made up her mind; she would rather silently take care of you from afar than come forward and see you again…”

His grip tightens around the small cup.

“And whatever Zhang Min says, she does.”

At this, Wu Ji stills, eyes still glued to the cup.

*Zhang Min… Min Er.*

Wu Ji can’t help but let out a small, rueful chuckle. He thinks he knows all too well.

Opposing emotions wage war within him while he tries to interpret Zhao Min’s intentions. Logically, he knows with her background, her identity needs to be concealed for her own safety, but he can’t help but feel hurt.

Wu Ji feels tenderness where Zhao Min had taken his surname as her own, but all these years, he had unknowingly been looking for a Zhao Min who changed her name and refused to see him. Who refused to be found.

Wu Ji knows this is her ironic style of keeping him close while still pushing him far far away. She has always been and continues to be too many steps ahead of him.

“Though Min Er had not told me why she’d ended up out here in the outskirts of the desert, I had pieced a few things together. When she first arrived, I waved her down the same way I did you. She’d been by herself with just a horse and very little material things. At first, she’d only intended to stay for a short amount of time, and I don’t really know what it is about this place, but you both took to it really well and the stay extended for her, too. Though she tended to be mostly quiet and withdrawn, Min Er would still help this old lady care for my little lambs. She’d cook with me and listen to me talk endlessly.”

A warm smile crosses Da Shum’s kind face, and from the flames dancing and casting deep shadows around the small room, Wu Ji notices more distinctly the whites of her thick, bristly hair made coarse from numerous years in the sun and sands of the desert.

There is a constriction around Wu Ji’s heart the warmer Da Shum’s smile becomes. He is so
immensely grateful Zhao Min had found someone who shares Wu Ji’s fondness for her. That she wasn’t alone all these years.

“About a few months in, three men showed up, and their interactions made it clear that they were used to taking commands from her. I had a feeling then that there was much more to Min Er’s story and background, but I didn’t pry. After that, she would continue to summon them a few more times, but she never left our residence. It was only more recently, about two months ago—the last time I had seen those three men around here—that she began coming and going much more frequently. I believe that was when Min Er found your whereabouts.”

The older woman pauses to drink from her cup and tries to meet Wu Ji’s eyes. He doesn’t move a muscle.

Wu Ji thinks the pointed look Da Shum is giving him is as deliberate as she intends for it to be.

“Min Er may not have wanted you to find her, but I think knowing that you were out there, knowing you were looking for her, she couldn’t stop herself from coming to you.”

He slowly sets his cup down and takes a moment to digest her words. Wu Ji’s mind is still too muddled from all his churning thoughts, and he looks at Da Shum with helpless eyes.

“How Ji ah, who do you think has been taking care of your every meal and living condition since you’ve been here?” She puts both her hands up, wrinkled palms and fingers fanned out for Wu Ji to see. “My hands weren’t the ones poked and stabbed by needles for two full nights from patching up your clothes.”

Wu Ji thinks his mouth is hanging open, but no words come out. The pervasive tightening in his chest amplifies, but Wu Ji is starting to understand everything more clearly now. The urge to get up and find Zhao Min gradually becomes all-encompassing again.

Recognizing her point has been made, Da Shum puts her hands down and sets them on her knees with a small thud; she is resolute in what she says next.

“I know we shouldn’t have deceived you. I am sorry for that.” Her voice softens to match the expression on her face. “Wu Ji ah, Da Shum can tell from the short period of time I’ve known you that you are a good man. But you are not happy, and for however long I’ve known her, I’ve never once seen Min Er truly be happy either.”

Then she utters words Wu Ji has heard previously before, and it is a resonation he has repeated in his memories with every waxing and waning of the moon.

“You both are so young, and whatever regrets you carry with you, you still have plenty of time to make amends. Call me simple-minded, but I believe that two people who are meant for each other will always find their way back to one another. You’ve found her now, Wu Ji ah, and whatever you make of it, I just hope that you both end up happy.”

Da Shum then gets up and gives Wu Ji a resigned smile.

“Min Er will be back by morning. Rest up, Wu Ji,” is the last thing she imparts before leaving the room and leaving Wu Ji with his restless thoughts.
Wu Ji doesn’t sleep a wink that night, tossing and turning on the bed as his ears fixate on every movement outside his room.

He settles upon the flickering candle on the table, melted down nearly to its roots, and Wu Ji feels the measurement of his patience dissolve along with it.

He does not even have the comfort of his blue handkerchief, the scarf having disappeared after he’d awaken yesterday, so instead Wu Ji settles for fidgeting with the wooden hairpin that is usually safely tucked away.

Wu Ji has restlessly listened for horse hooves and footsteps in the distance all night, and it isn’t until dawn starts to creep over the horizon that he hears the long-awaited sound of gravel crunching beneath different sets of footsteps.

It seems that was all it took to ease his impatient heart.

He had spent long hours thinking and thinking and thinking until questions and answers all melded into one, and he has become so tired of his own thoughts.

Wu Ji tells himself he needs to be patient. Zhao Min is like an injured lamb, nursing wounds that have never fully healed, and if he prods too forcefully, she will only lash out and hurt them both.

For now, Wu Ji thinks he can give her the space she needs.

He turns to his side on the bed and ponders Tai Shi Fu and Da Shum’s words. Reasons with himself that they are right.

Wu Ji has finally found Zhao Min and there is nowhere he wants to be but here. And for as long as he is here with her, he will do everything in his power to break down the barriers between them.

Whatever comes their way, Wu Ji can’t possibly imagine it ever being harder than living a life without Zhao Min.

He knows they have a well of things to work through, and all of this may take a considerable amount of time, but Wu Ji had long made up his mind, even before Zhao Min had left him, and he is resolute in his decision.

His love is hers, and whether she wants it or not, he will honor this for the rest of their lives.

There is a future out there for them. Of this, Wu Ji is certain.

He feels resolution settle in his chest and blinks in slow, measured beats to footsteps in the nearing distance. Wu Ji’s eyes adjust to the creeping lightness casting faint shadows in the small room while his ears continue to monitor the sounds outside.

The sounds continue to grow until the commotion of horse hooves trampling on earth and gravel is right outside his entrance, a loud and constant pitter-patter that forces Wu Ji out of bed.

He tiredly pulls himself up and walks to the door. Wu Ji lifts the veil of linen and a familiar flash of auburn hair coating the firm, sturdy body of his four-legged friend greets him.

“Ping An!” Wu Ji exclaims as he grabs its harness and reigns in the excited animal. Forgetting his exhaustion from moments before, he pulls the horse’s nose close to his chest, smoothing out coarse
hairs with soft strokes while Ping An relaxes.

“That is one lucky horse you have there.”

Wu Ji turns his head in the direction of Zhao Min’s voice and he can’t imagine his smile getting any wider, but it does.

“Min Min!”

Zhao Min stops a few feet away from Wu Ji and Ping An and gestures coyly towards the horse, a hint of a grin on her face. “I found him last night wandering the area. He actually walked right up to me and my horse. It’s like he knew I’d bring him back to you.”

Wu Ji’s smile warms at the notion. “I feel he’s kind of got a sixth sense of sorts,” he says as he continues petting from the top of Ping An’s head down to the ends of his mane. “More human than any horse I’ve encountered before. I think it’s why I picked him as my companion.”

He feels a rush of sentimentality thinking back on how far they’ve come. Wu Ji looks at Zhao Min, really looks at her, and musters up as much gratitude as he can express on his face. “Thank you for bringing him back to me.” Thank you for coming back to me.

Her eyes catch his for a brief second before looking away. At the ground, at the horse; anywhere but at Wu Ji. “Da Shum tells me you named him Ping An. I think you should have named him Xing Yun 幸運* instead.” At this, she lets out a small laugh and Wu Ji’s heart flips inside his chest. He blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

“I named him Ping An for you.”

Wu Ji can see his forthcoming words surprise her. Though he may be many things, Wu Ji is first and foremost an honest man, especially in front of a smiling Zhao Min.

“You had wanted to sew Ping An on the handkerchief you’d given me. Everything you’ve said, I’ve remembered. I could only hope that wherever you were, you, too, would be Ping An Wu Shi 平安無事*.”

Zhao Min stills. There is a beat of silence that spurs Wu Ji on, and he greets her stunned expression with a nervous smile and an outreached hand. “May I have it back?”

They both know exactly what Wu Ji is asking for, and Zhao Min’s face softens when she looks down at his hand. “How did you figure I had your handkerchief?”

Wu Ji shrugs. “Lucky guess.”

His smile deepens, hand still extended towards Zhao Min. The small amount of light peeking out over the horizon casts a blue hue around her, highlighting the curves and shadows of her features.

Wu Ji still can’t believe how beautiful she is. How he has found her.

He watches as Zhao Min lifts her eyes and draws him in with an assessing gaze. Wu Ji can see that she is gauging him and it takes everything in him not to squirm under her presence. She has always had such a profound effect on him.

Whatever Zhao Min is looking for, it seems she finds it in Wu Ji’s face because when her gaze breaks away, it is to reach into her waistband and pull out the blue handkerchief. She regards it for a moment before reaching out towards his extended hand, tying it around Wu Ji’s wrist.
The slight brush of her fingertips on the inside of his wrist sends a shiver down his back.

“I suppose it is necessary that we both find our own peace,” Zhao Min says as she finishes knotting the fabric. “I haven’t been able to find mine yet, Wu Ji ah. Have you found yours?”

Wu Ji contemplates for a moment. When he answers her, his voice and eyes do not waver. “No, maybe not entirely, but I found you. That’s enough for me.”

Zhao Min’s eyes are indecipherable, her voice low and conveying awe. “You left behind an entire kingdom.”

A measured pause.

“You did the same for me.”

The silence hangs and stretches between them as they regard each other with steady eyes, but Wu Ji notes that there is lightness that had not been there before. It’s not a burdensome quiet. Just knowing.

The corner of Zhao Min’s lips quirk up as she nods her head and breaks their gaze. Wu Ji thinks it’s a wonderful sight.

“I suppose you’re right. Last night… everything was a little overwhelming for me. I shouldn’t have run off like that. I, um, I went to visit my father’s grave.”

Wu Ji knows he can’t quite hide the surprise on his face. Zhao Min is too keen not to catch it, so she explains, “It’s where I like to go to clear my head. It helped. A lot. But I’m feeling a little tired now, so I’m going to go rest for a bit. Maybe… maybe we can talk later.”

Wu Ji tries to rearrange his face into a less dumbfounded expression. “Yes. Yes, I’d like that.”

Zhao Min gives him a small smile before she turns and heads to the yurt in the distance. Wu Ji doesn’t take his eyes off of her until she is inside.

He looks down at the handkerchief around his wrist, smiles, and thinks this is the most clear-minded 春明 he has been in a long long time.

--

Wu Ji doesn’t see Zhao Min again until evening when Da Shum calls everyone out to the main quarters for dinner.

He has had to keep busy all day helping Da Ye on the fields and pastures, herding cattle and horses and doing chores just to prevent himself from running to her.

Before, he could walk in to whatever room Zhao Min was in unreservedly and without any thoughts or concerns of formalities. With her, though Wu Ji had to lock away his yearnings of romantic reciprocation, he’d still felt an effortlessness in their exchanges; Wu Ji could freely be in Zhao Min’s presence, speak his mind, and expect her to go toe to toe with him on any subject. When he’d finally accepted his feelings, it was even easier to come and go, to find contentment just by being close to her.

Now, there are so many layers in their history, chapters that are difficult to read and digest. The
pages are yellowed and worn down from the constant thumbing of memories, flipped back and forth an innumerable amount of times over the long years of separation.

There are incomplete chapters that neither of them have read, missing pages and smeared calligraphy muddying a story that has yet to find its ending.

Wu Ji thinks they could still write a beautiful story together. If they could find their voices, find the ease and courage in their interactions again, they could use the strokes of fresh ink on new paper to pen a vibrant future.

But courage is hard to come by right now.

Dinner is a quiet and choppy affair consisting mostly of Da Shum’s efforts to carry on conversations with everyone.

Meanwhile Wu Ji awkwardly shoves rice into his mouth and furtively piles food onto Zhao Min’s bowl. She eats gradually and without interest, only maintaining eye contact with Da Shum when the elder directs the conversation towards her. Somehow Da Shum still manages to make Zhao Min giggle a few times. Wu Ji can’t describe how thankful he is of the older woman.

Tonight, he can more consciously feel the weight of the fabric tied around his wrist, and it brings him comfort despite the stilted atmosphere.

Wu Ji sneaks glances at Zhao Min, his eyes following her movement above the rim of the bowl in his hand. When he sees her set her chopsticks down once Da Shum has wrapped up her story, Wu Ji instinctively does the same.

Da Ye and Da Shum have also set their utensils down. Wu Ji notices Da Ye grab Da Shum’s elbow and they exchange looks Wu Ji can’t quite decipher.

“Fu Ren, your cooking has only improved with time. I haven’t eaten so much in a while! I think I need to walk all of this food off. Will you accompany me?”

Da Shum gives him a deliberate smile and grabs his hand. “That’s a great idea, Lao Gong!” She turns back to Wu Ji and Zhao Min. “Our old bodies need to take a stroll before heading to bed. It is not good to sleep on such full stomachs. Min Er, Wu Ji… you two don’t mind cleaning this up for me, do you?”

There is a beat, and it is now Wu Ji and Zhao Min who exchange knowing glances. Zhao Min sighs and nods, smiling at Da Shum. “Of course we can. Da Ye and Da Shum, enjoy your walk and have a good night.”

After the older couple leaves, Zhao Min gets up and begins to clear the table and take the dishes. Wu Ji follows.

He is like her shadow, trailing behind and doing exactly as she does, assisting where needed. They silently work together to clear the dining table and Wu Ji walks Zhao Min outside with the dishes in hand.

Under the moonlight, they set about washing the plates, bowls, and utensils, neither saying a word. Wu Ji thinks it is quite nice despite the circumstances surrounding them.

Next to him, Zhao Min suddenly shakes her head and laughs. Wu Ji can’t refrain from cracking a smile of his own. "What are you laughing at, Min Min?"
She is still shaking her head, but the smile remains. "Da Ye and Da Shum are just so obvious."

Wu Ji is confused. "Obvious? You mean how close they are? I think so, too. It’s so obvious how much they still love and care for each other." At this, Wu Ji’s chest warms with the observations he has stored of the couple.

Zhao Min giggles even more at Wu Ji and he still doesn't quite catch on, but the sound of her laughing makes him happy. "Wu Ji ah, you really haven't changed one bit." She is still shaking her head, but goes back to the pile of dishes.

Wu Ji follows suit, and everything is pleasant until a random thought from the morning pops into his head, latches onto him, and won't let go. He thinks it's maybe a really bad idea, but it refuses to leave him alone. It is making him fidget and edgy beside her, but he tries his best to hide it by focusing on thoroughly cleaning every piece of china.

It doesn't work. The question he wants to ask is burning a hole through him. It is a request that keeps him vacillating between asking and keeping his mouth shut. Wu Ji doesn't want to cross a line with Zhao Min, doesn't think he has any right to it.

But a small part of Wu Ji's mind urges him on, whispers to him that maybe it is a necessary step. Maybe they need this.

"I suppose it is necessary that we both find our own peace."

Beside him, Zhao Min calmly washes off the last plate and her voice nearly makes him jump. “If you have a question to ask me, then you can just ask.”

She sets the plate down in the wooden bin and looks at Wu Ji.

Firstly, Wu Ji wants to ask how she does that, knows every thought he ever thinks, but he refrains. There is something else more pressing he needs to get off his chest.

“I… I know the last time I asked this, it—“ Wu Ji winces at the memory, but tries to power forward nonetheless. “I— it was bad. I know this is a lot to ask of you, but I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Min Min, will you take me to visit your father?”

* Xing Yun 幸運 – meaning luck, fortunate

* Ping An Wu Shi 平安無事 – meaning safe and sound, at peace
My apologies for the SUPER late update. Between work and some much needed time off, I couldn't find the time nor energy to write. I am super thrilled to get through this chapter because I feel it is a much needed transition for Wu Ji and Zhao Min. It was probably the most difficult one to write and I posted it without much edit or re-read, so I'm sorry if it feels rushed/choppy. Next chapter has been written for a while now and just needed a connecting point. I hope to be able to post it sooner rather than later. Hope everyone enjoys :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

妳便是我 命運安排的人
You are the one fate has arranged for me.

--

She is silent as their affixed eyes linger, the all-consuming vibration in the air sending chills down Wu Ji’s back. The amount of love he feels for her, the longing of the past few years conveyed through the gaze he holds.

Wu Ji wants to fully give in to the urge of pulling her into him, wrap his entire body around her to protect Zhao Min from any pain or harm that may come.

But not like this. Not in front of her father and not before he can fully repent.

Wu Ji wants to do this right.
Wu Ji still can’t believe it.

Zhao Min had agreed.

She had been taken aback the night before, her entire body stilling as she registered his request. It was a few breathless beats before she could collect herself, but Wu Ji did not have to wait long for an answer.
Zhao Min took one look at the earnestness in Wu Ji’s eyes and couldn’t refuse him. When she nodded, Wu Ji was able to let out the breath he hadn’t known he had been holding.

Last night had seemed an endless anticipation, and when dawn finally broke, Wu Ji was again surprised that he had not been the first one up. Zhao Min was already outside preparing the ceremonial drinks and food they would be taking with them, quietly placing everything in an orderly manner into a woven basket.

He supposes they both had had a sleepless night.

Wu Ji and Zhao Min had set out before the sun had risen above their heads. The farther they traveled, the more the sunlight radiated through morning clouds, highlighting azure heavens and lush meadows that stretched out beyond the edge of earth and sky.

Wu Ji thinks about the young boy who had given him mantous, how he described the beauty of a land beyond the desert and a Hao Jie Jie who took care of him, took care of them both.

Wu Ji still can’t fathom this reality.

Zhao Min is here with him and what surrounds them are warmth and lightness strictly contrasting the harshness of the desert he had experienced.

Even their horses are galloping at a pace that inexplicably sparks hope inside Wu Ji.

The wind breezes by just enough to feel like Wu Ji and Zhao Min are in a gallivanting dance, enveloped in a mockery of all the things they once dreamed their future would be.

With Zhao Min riding freely beside him, Wu Ji can’t help but long for promises made long ago.

Hope, Wu Ji thinks, is a dangerous feeling.

“Zhang Cong Zi, if one day, I can dispose of my Jing Zhu title, leave behind my royal status and become a commoner, and if you aren’t Ming Sect Jiao Zhu and can be just a regular person, how wonderful would that be?”

“If there really is such a day, I would truly love to see the world, enjoy the simple day-to-day life like everyone else. I’d put on the clothes of a Da Fu and help those who are sick get better.”

“If there really is such a day, I would truly love to see the world and all four seas with you. We could travel from North to South, experience the highest mountains and longest rivers. Live our entire lives in the freedom that belongs to us. Would you want to experience that with me?”

“Of course I would.”

When Zhao Min turns around to find Wu Ji and Ping An lagging a few steps behind her, the softness in her eyes dissipates all the fear in his heart.

Wu Ji admits he was never one to shy away from danger.

--

The weightlessness Wu Ji had felt moments before comes to a resounding halt when Zhao Min and
her horse stop in front of an open field surrounded by an impenetrable thicket.

She unmounts with ease and Wu Ji follows suit. They leave their horses by the nearest tree and Wu Ji trails behind Zhao Min as she approaches the clearing, woven basket in hand.

In front of the largest tree in the forest sits a perfectly carved slab of granite in all its simplistic grandeur, Mongolian characters and inked strokes engraved into its roughness.

Wu Ji notices that there is no mound, no bulging earth to indicate a burial. Instead, the oldest tree in the forest takes its place, and in a way, Wu Ji can’t imagine anything more fitting.

Zhao Min stops in front of it and when she speaks, her voice seems distant. “I’d returned my father to my brother. After I left. I couldn’t return to the capitol and take him back to the palace myself, but my father deserved a royal burial. My brother could do that for him. I—This… this was all I could give him.”

Zhao Min gently sets the basket down and kneels in front of her father’s headstone. Wu Ji stays a few feet behind, careful not to intrude.

He watches and takes everything in, warring between sadness and trepidation. As Wu Ji witnesses Zhao Min’s quiet devotion, it leaves him in thick remorse, chest aching for Ru Yang Wong and the daughter who is only able to visit her father’s empty grave.

“Father, I’ve brought Wu Ji to pay his respects to you.”

Zhao Min uncovers the items in the basket and picks up a wine bottle, taking her time in filling up her father’s cup with the fragrant liquor. She presents it to him with both hands, holding the pose and subsequently pours the liquid into the soil in a trail of memories and reverence.

Wu Ji observes in silence from behind Zhao Min as she remains kneeling, setting the cup down to refill it; then she drinks the next gulp of wine. With the third pour, she leaves the ceramic cup filled to the brim sitting in front of her father.

Wu Ji’s hands are balmy and clenched as the seared images of Ru Yang Wong’s final moments rush to the forefront of his mind.

Zhao Min speaks but doesn’t turn around, resolutely looking towards where her father should have been.

“Wu Ji, to be honest with you, I’m unsure as to why you wanted to come here today. I think I may have an idea, but I don’t think it’s necessary. If you want to seek forgiveness...” She pauses and looks down at the dirt and trimmed grass surrounding her father’s grave. Zhao Min then unexpectedly turns her head around and fixes her eyes on Wu Ji. “If you want to seek forgiveness, there really is nothing to forgive. You didn’t kill my father.”

Zhao Min doesn’t break their eye contact from where she is kneeling, and for a moment, Wu Ji is completely struck dumb by her assertion. He can’t read the expression on her face, can’t comprehend her words.

Indeed Wu Ji had wanted to come to ask for Ru Yang Wong’s forgiveness. He wants to apologize on behalf of his Ming Sect, for not seeing clearly through their plans, and for his inability to prevent the assassination.

Though futile and far too late, Wu Ji believes it is the right thing to do. He needs to face the demons and wrongs that have been rightfully haunting him since Ru Yang Wong’s death.
Maybe it is selfish and cowardly to seek forgiveness from the deceased, but at the very least, he needs her father to know. Needs Zhao Min to know he is sorry.

Wu Ji has never seen himself as inculpable. He is to blame. His responsibility lies in his naivety, the shortsightedness and lack of defense against... well, Wu Ji has never been good in trusting the right people anyway.

“I don’t blame you, Wu Ji ah.” He meets her gaze and feels pinned down by the weight of it belying her tone. "For the last few years, when I felt angry or when the hatred starts to consume me, I think about our very first conversation, the one we had at the inn. I hear you in my memories and it becomes so difficult to hate."

"Even if I kill each and every person, it still wouldn't bring my parents back. To be frank with you, I keep thinking: what if one doesn’t kill people and can even become friends? Wouldn't that be better? How long can someone go on fighting injustice with more injustice? I don't want to kill people and seek revenge, and I also don't want to see others do it."

“That’s because you’re benevolent by nature. If the situations were reversed, I wouldn’t be able to do that. Whoever kills my father, my Ge Ge, or even the person I love, I will kill them a hundred times over, including their loved ones. I must kill them all. Of course, this would include your Zhu Gu Niang.”

“If that happens, I will definitely try to stop you. If you kill Zhu Gu Niang or any Xiong Di of mine, I will not be your friend anymore. I won’t ever see you again. Even if we cross paths, I’ll not speak a single word to you."

“So you consider me your friend now?”

“If in my heart I harbored resentment towards you, I would not be sitting here drinking wine with you. I just think that hating a person is very difficult.”

The memory, clear as day, ricochets in his mind, and it is Zhao Min’s voice that snaps Wu Ji out of his jumbled thoughts.

“You’ve always called me intelligent, but I think between the two of us, you were always the wiser one, Wu Ji ah. It was probably a good thing I couldn’t avenge my father. I claim to be able to do anything I declare, but in front of you, as my sword drew your blood, I couldn’t do anything.”

Zhao Min’s small laugh rattles Wu Ji.

“I often asked myself, ‘What if I killed everyone in Ming Sect? What would happen? Would I never see you again? Would I be happy?’ I don’t think I would be. None of that would bring my father back. He’s gone, and no matter how many people I can justifiably kill, nothing would change this fact. I realized now that you’ve been right all along. It’s truly exhausting to hate someone.”

The tension in Zhao Min’s body melts off with every word and Wu Ji notices the look of defeat on her face. No, he thinks, maybe defeat isn’t the right word.

Acceptance, probably.

Zhao Min turns back to her father and places a hand on top of cold granite.

“I didn’t leave because I hated you, Wu Ji, and I didn’t blame you for my father’s death. I never did.” She runs her hand over the inscribed stone bearing her father’s name.
“When I left, I was angry that the people of Ming Sect had forced us into this corner, yet you still refused to see it. Refused to leave them and come with me.”

Her face drops into a solemn expression while Wu Ji clings on to every word she says next.

“They had killed my father. Betrayed your trust, but you were still willing to risk your life and sacrifice your happiness for them. These men you call your Xiong Di. When clearly they were only using you to achieve their glory. They didn’t care about what you wanted. But you wouldn’t let them go. I...”

Zhao Min shakes her head like she is being transported back to the moment she made her decision to leave.

“I was so disappointed. I knew that even if I explained to you until I was blue in the face, there was nothing I could have said that was going to make you leave with me. At that point, it almost felt as if you chose them over me.”

Her eyes are distant, words tapering off as if fallen into a hollow abyss and it takes everything in Wu Ji not to visibly wince. He wants to correct her so badly, to clarify that none of that was true, but right now these are Zhao Min’s thoughts, her feelings put into words for Wu Ji to understand and he is not going to be selfish enough to defend himself.

“But I can’t blame you for any of that anymore, Wu Ji ah. You didn’t kill my father. The people of Ming Sect did. And in a way, I am to blame, too.”

At this, Wu Ji’s eyes shift from Ru Yang Wong’s tombstone to Zhao Min’s face.

“You were right when you’d said I was foolish in thinking everything was going to work out between us. I was arrogant and naïve in thinking I could win. I shouldn’t have forced you to be with me, and I only have myself to blame for persisting towards the things I selfishly wanted. Had I listened to you, had I let go, none of us would be where we are today.”

Wu Ji feels her words like a gut punch, visceral and unrecognizable in its resonance.

Zhao Min doesn’t hate him.

Zhao Min doesn’t blame him.

No. She blames herself.

Wu Ji thinks of the last few years he had spent shouldering the responsibility of everything that had happened—his Ming Sect’s betrayal, Zhi Ruo, his Yi Fu, his grandfather, and all the brethren who lost their lives in the war... including Ru Yang Wong—the idea that their love was to blame brings him an entirely new and sickening pain.

Wu Ji had thought like her once, when he was stubborn and willful, thinking logic would triumph over his warm, bleeding heart. That he could lock away his feelings and bury them beneath his duties and righteousness only for them to return stronger each and every time.

They had wore him down and stripped him of any residual pride, leaving Wu Ji open and vulnerable for a girl who had done the same for him.

Wu Ji is certain that of all the things he may regret, their love was not one of them.

But hearing Zhao Min blame herself, blame her own feelings for everything that had happened cuts
something inside Wu Ji he cannot stem.

Through the years, despite his guilt, Wu Ji had used their love to look forward. He forced himself not to dwell on the things he couldn’t change and focused his efforts on his search for her.

It was the only way he could fuel the hope inside himself.

At the very least, Wu Ji was living for the future, but it seemed Zhao Min had continued living on in their past.

His stomach turns more and more at the thought.

“Min Min—”

“I knew you were going to come find me and you weren’t going to give up; it’s not in your nature. When 老大 Lao Da, 老二 Lao Er, and 老三 Lao San informed me of your whereabouts, I couldn’t control myself. I had to go see you.”

“Da Shum told me you’ve known where I was for a couple of months now.”

She nods.

“Min Min, you… It’s been you, hasn’t it?” There’s a softness to his question, a quiet awe that trails into a beat of silence.

Zhao Min doesn’t answer, but Wu Ji fully accepts the timid flutter of her eyes as her confirmation.

He remembers all of the small convenient coincidences and little luxuries he’d thought he was so fortunate to encounter as of late. Wu Ji thinks of Zhao Min always being ten steps ahead of him, always quietly looking out for a foolish man who has time and time again been too late in appreciating everything she has done for him.

“You’ve been the one taking care of me all this time. The blankets, Ah Shan, protecting me from your brother, Da Ye and Da Shum…”

A pink flush spreads across her face, but she remains composed despite looking away. Zhao Min’s eyes and lips are gentled into a crestfallen smile. She looks at him with so much fondness that only makes him crave for more. “Zhang Wu Ji, if not me, then who?”

The long pause shakes Wu Ji to his core, draws out the magnitude of how much Zhao Min still cares for him, how much effort she must have put in to look after him since the search began.

Zhao Min sighs and he waits for her to continue.

“Even with my best efforts, in the end, I couldn’t prevent you from getting hurt. You must know that once you step foot into Mongolia, Ge Ge would seek you out for revenge.”

Wu Ji levels his gaze at Zhao Min and utters the only answer he has to give.

“I know, but I had a promise I needed to keep.”

She is silent as their affixed eyes linger, the all-consuming vibration in the air sending chills down Wu Ji’s back. The amount of love he feels for her, the longing of the past few years conveyed through the gaze he holds.
Wu Ji wants to fully give in to the urge of pulling her into him, wrap his entire body around her to protect Zhao Min from any pain or harm that may come.

But not like this. Not in front of her father and not before he can fully repent.

Wu Ji wants to do this right.

He feels the corner of his lips lift into a small smile, eyes never leaving hers.

“Allow me to seek forgiveness from your father. I need to do this.”

Wu Ji watches as Zhao Min takes in a shaky breath and blinks away the tears that brim at the edges of her lashes. Finally, she nods and moves slightly aside, opening up the space between Wu Ji and her father.

Shakily, Wu Ji steps into it and drops to the ground, knees hitting the earth in as decisive a sound as the echo in his heart. He stares at the tombstone like an image of the fallen warrior is right in front of him.

Wu Ji swallows the lump in his throat and doesn’t realize his hands have formed and unformed fists several times. When he speaks, his voice is low, but firm.

“Ru Yang Wong, I am here to ask for your forgiveness. Please accept this bow as my sincerest apology.”

Wu Ji lets his back bow forward and head drop down with the subsequent force of flesh meeting earth, feeling grass and gravel scraping against his skin. It aches in the most satisfying way.

He grits his teeth and pulls his body upright, only to let it drop a second, then a third and a fourth time.

Again and again, he bows his head into the earth as repentance, not heeding the burning pain.

Suddenly, Zhao Min’s warm hands are there to stop him. She catches him before he makes another contact with the ground, and when he looks up, Wu Ji sees that the tears from before have formed long streaks down her face.

“Wu Ji ah, enough. Please. You’re bleeding.”

His vision is wet and cloudy and Wu Ji doesn’t know if it’s from the blood seeping through the gash on his forehead or his own tears that are blinding him. His voice comes out barely above a whisper.

“Min Min, please….”

Wu Ji can’t hold back the tears that fall from his eyes, and he can’t articulate what it is he is asking for. He just hopes. “Please.”

Zhao Min is nodding, wetness clinging at the edge of her lashes.

Instinctively, Wu Ji’s hand comes up just as Zhao Min’s does, and they both reach for the other’s face, gently wiping tears and blood and dirt for one another. She thumbs away the teardrops on his face, and he can’t look away.

With as much sincerity as she can muster, Zhao Min utters the words Wu Ji has ached to hear for the past three years. “We forgive you. Wu Ji ah, I forgive you.”
Wu Ji shudders at the absolution these few simple words can bring him. How powerful they are to release him from invisible chains that have bounded him to his remorse.

Forgiveness. Zhao Min forgives him. I forgive you.

Despite all of his conjured optimism, despite his unwavering perseverance, Wu Ji had needed to hear it.

To hear her admittance, that she doesn’t blame Wu Ji for what had happened, that she forgives him opens something in him he hadn’t known had been so firmly locked up within the confines of his chest.

The sudden freedom fuels him, spurs Wu Ji forward as he pulls Zhao Min into a tight embrace. All the tension his body had grown accustomed to releases in an instant, like a jolt back to a living and breathing Wu Ji who hasn’t felt alive in years.

“Thank you. I’m so sorry, Min Min. So sorry. Thank you.”

Zhao Min clutches tightly to the garment on Wu Ji’s body, burrowing into his shoulder as her tears soak into the fabric. One of his hands comes up to cradle the back of her head as their release pours out of them.

When Wu Ji feels the shuddering breaths pressed into his chest subside and Zhao Min slowly pulls away, his hand comes up to wipe the residual tears from her cheeks.

She looks up at the wound on his forehead and reaches out to gently wipe around the affected area with her sleeve. Then Zhao Min lets out a small chuckle. It’s been so long since he has heard it. “Wu Ji, the last time I saw you, your forehead was also bleeding.”

Suddenly, there is bubbling laughter that escapes from both Zhao Min and Wu Ji at the absurdity of it all.

As he watches the girl he has been searching for for the past three years smiling fondly back at him, Wu Ji makes a silent vow to the father beside them that he will spend the rest of his life protecting her. Wu Ji knows that wherever Zhao Min exists, he will follow.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, My sincerest apologies for the completely overdue update. Work has been a nightmare for a little over a month now and I finally found some time to finish the last 10% of the chapter. For a month now, 90% of it was just sitting on my laptop haunting me daily haha.

We are getting to the final stretch and I debated whether this was going to be the last chapter, but I wanted to update what I have and split the last part for the final chapter. With that being said, I also did very minimal editing due to laziness, so please forgive any errors. I will eventually get to rereading and finding plenty of mistakes.

Next chapter will hopefully tie up all the loose ends I can remember from the original ending. Thank you to anyone out there still reading and indulging me in my own closure.
of this story. Hope everyone is well and please enjoy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!