You're my brother

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Summary

Jiang Cheng refuses to lose his brother at the Siege of Burial Mounds. He manages to save him instead.
Chapter One

The Burial Mounds was always known for its oppressive darkness and the constant gloom that it proudly carried with it. It was infamously known for murders, for vengeful ghosts, for undead corpses, and most of all, for battles. A thousand battles had took place there, and in the future, another thousand would fight again in the exact same spot. Jiang Cheng was sure that this one, however, would always be one of the more memorable ones.

Screams blared across the mountains of corpses, a grand chorus of cries, shouts, and shrieks, all coming into one great symphony. Above, the sky is swallowed whole by a void of blackness; it engulfed everything into an eerie darkness, no stars or moon to guide, no hope for beacons of light. It was complete darkness.

Tens, hundreds, thousands of men fought their way to the top, swinging swords and throwing talismans, fighting away the darkness that wished to consume them. They groaned and they screamed and they ignored their exhaustion to fight one more corpse, to get one step closer to the enemy. Jiang Cheng led them. He was the one they looked to for instructions, the one who motivated them, the one who they were getting vengeance for.

He had no idea what he was doing.

Behind his men he spotted others who led their own armies, all for different wants but a similar goal. The minor sects merged together, becoming one great mixture of colours. There were the Jins, who had greed in their eyes but revenge layered on their chests, their constant want for more motivating them. There were the Lans, whose army looked considerably smaller than what they had planned, but no less strong. There was Nie Mingue, leading the Nies, battling for justice. And there was him, leading the Jiangs, fighting against a person who used to be family. Who still is family.

Looming above them was the feared Yiling Patriarch, insanity shining in his eyes, gentleness hidden in his sharp movements. He controlled the corpses with practiced ease, his thin fingers gliding across his notorious dizi, his image similar to the puppets that dance to his tune.

The darkness of the Burial Mounds surrounded him and seemed to melt into him, until he became one with the surroundings. He looked like the bringer of death, his red eyes casting a glow on his face, looking strangely beautiful and terrifying at the same time. He was a god, and they were the humans that were receiving his wrath, his almighty power. All Jiang Cheng could focus on was the paleness of his skin, the gauntness of his face, how his bones poked out of his skin. Burial Mounds took life out of everything, and that included the master of it.

(If he only stayed with Jiang Cheng, he would not be this way. His skin would be tanned and healthy, his cheeks plump and rosy, his posture full of the bright life that he used to shine upon the world. If only he stayed with Jiang Cheng, and not with the Wens. But the Wens needed help, and Wei Wuxian would not be Wei Wuxian if he didn't give help. It was in his nature. He only gave and gave and gave, and never, ever, cared about what he left for himself. And now, at the very end, there was nothing left. He has nothing. All because he selflessly gave and never took.)

They look to him and see a monster, a demon, the personification of evil, who murders and pillages and commits acts so atrocious that everyone fears his name. Jiang Cheng looks to him and sees his best friend, his beloved brother, the one he loves, who is gentle and kind and acts so selfless that Jiang Cheng can't help but think that he is the hero that he aspires and fails to be.

But now his sister and brother-in-law are dead, and his anger blinds him. He doesn't want to think
how Wei Wuxian feels (he must be so scared, he's probably blaming himself, the idiot) as it doesn't matter. He was the one who killed them. (Although, he wasn't. It was the Ghost General that killed Jin Zixuan, and his sister was trying to protect him.)

One step at a time, he gets closer to the enemy and one step at a time, he gets closer to vengeance. They expect him to kill him once he gets to the top. They expect him to brandish his sword, cut through the enemy, and claim victory for slaying the evil that plagued them.

One step at a time, he gets closer to his brother and one step at a time, he gets closer to facing the tension between them. He wants to scream at him and hug him at the same time. He wants to prepare hurtful words, throw them at him so he knows Jiang Cheng is hurting, and then he wants to bring him home so he knows he can still be forgiven.

He has no idea what he was doing.

He can't live up to their expectations, and he does not have the ability to do what he wants. He is unable to harm his brother and is also unable to help him.

Jiang Cheng has no idea what he's doing. But one step at a time, he got closer to his enemy, to his brother, fuelled by the anger that burns in him. He doesn't know what he will do or say once he gets up there, whether it is to kill or harm or help his brother. If there's one thing he knows, though, is that his sister is gone and he has only one family member left. His sister isn't coming back, she had died protecting him, and he was not going to disrespect her sacrifice by letting them kill Wei Wuxian. She would want them to stick together; they are family, after all.

That doesn't mean he'll let him off the hook. He will shout and yell and scream and hit Wei Wuxian until he felt satisfied, and only then will he try to rebuild something between them. But that has to be done in the comfort of their own home, not out here with ravenous beasts hoping to sink their teeth into his brother, to gain every piece of knowledge he has. He can already see it; in Lotus Pier, where it all started, a shaky foundation of friendship building between them once again.

First, he needed to get Wei Wuxian.

One step. And then another. A corpse is killed, murdered by the furious slash of Sandu. Another one comes at him, this time blocked by the sudden whip of Zidian, a weapon that he and his brother are both masters over.

Finally, he was there. A few feet away from him was his brother, with invisible ghosts haunting him and death pulling him down. Behind him, his army followed, cultivators cheering him on, the only thoughts in their minds kill, kill, kill. Wei Wuxian had not noticed him, so wrapped up in his own melody.

But then it stopped.

Wei Wuxian's bony fingers released Chenqing from its grip, and down, down, down it went, rolling onto the muddy battlefield. It was a careless action, one that caused confusion and shock, an action that said this weapon isn't needed anymore. Everyone watched in horror as another, more dreaded, more vile, feared weapon was pulled out. The Stygian Tiger Seal looked large in Wei Wuxian's thin hands, like it was too heavy an object for him to hold.

Wei Wuxian's eyes met his. Jiang Cheng paused where he was, his thundering heart slowing down as time seemed to stop. There was a light in his eyes, one that Jiang Cheng knew well. He had seen it a million times, which as soon followed by a dangerous or suicidal act. This time, though, it was worse. It said my time has come, you will not need to deal with me any longer.
And then Wei Wuxian smiled. It was not one of the sinister smirks that whispered promises of death and evil that he had taken up once becoming the Yiling Patriarch. Instead, it was one of his bright, kind, gentle smile, one reserved for their carefree days of childhood and dreams. It was almost relieved, as if he had just been told he can rest after exhausting himself, like he was saying finally, this is the end. Jiang Cheng’s felt like all the breath had been taken out of him.

He could only watch in horror as the Stygian Tiger Seal split in half within Wei Wuxian's grip, the power emanating from it blinding him for a split second, and then the two halves dropping to the ground. Suddenly, he remembered a half-forgotten conversation.

("I'm trying to find a way to destroy it. The Jins keep bothering me for it, and I would rather them not having it." Wei Wuxian complained, practically lying on Jiang Cheng's desk. He paid him no mind, eyes assessing paperwork that unfortunately came with the new position of Sect Leader.

"Why don't you just break it?" Jiang Cheng asked, only half paying attention as he reviewed statistics and complaints.

"Silly Jiang Cheng, if only it was that easy! If I just broke it, then the power would backfire on me, and I would be as good as dead! It needs to be in a controlled environment...")

Slowly, he turned to see that all the corpses had halted in their movement. As if a button had been pressed, they spun around and faced their master. All at once, they began moving, running at inhuman speeds to be the first to tear and bite and kill who they now saw as their target - Wei Wuxian.

Jiang Cheng stared in shock, as he was sure many others were doing, before he began to move. Dirt dug into his nails and shifted under his feet as he desperately tried to climb the short distance that was between him and his brother. He fell, at one point, the mud giving way under his shoes. He got back up and tried again. He cursed himself for being too slow, too human, while the undead were already biting at Wei Wuxian's heels.

Wei Wuxian was still smiling, still happy, while the first corpse got hold of him. Jiang Cheng wanted to get hold of him and shake him frantically, shout at him and lock him away so he never has any ideas like this again. He told himself that he would do that, as long as he could hurry hurry hurry be faster they're going to get him he's going to die-

The flute, Chenqing, was dumped in the dirt in front of him. It was clogged with mud and blood and crud, the proud flute having been reduced to a stick in the dirt. Jiang Cheng grabbed it with his mud stained fingers, shoving it in his belt, not caring if it actually stayed there or if he missed and it rolled away. It was the weapon that brought about thousands of people's ends just by existing: his brother-in-law, his sister, and his brother. It was Wei Wuxian's weapon, though, and he would need it to fight.

The next thing he grabbed was Wei Wuxian’s unprotected arm. It already had scratches on it, the sleeves of his robes worn and torn, shredding to pieces at his touch. Moving his hand, he reached out again and encircled his hand around Wei Wuxian’s thin wrist. His hand encompassed it, and he still had space on his fingers left to spare. The wrist was warm, though, reassuring him that his brother was alive, and he was not too late.

Afraid that he would cause injury, he brought himself closer to Wei Wuxian instead pulling Wei Wuxian to him. He didn’t want to risk the chance that a corpse would tear parts of his brother’s body when he would pull him towards him, as the undead had already made their claim on the battered body of his brother.

The corpses had them surrounded, the little space suffocating, the bodies spilling over one another to
get to the prize. He held the said prize close to him, unwilling to let go of him ever again. The undead tore at his clothes, teeth and nails and hands each wanting to shred him to pieces. He sliced at them, hacking wildly with both his sword and his whip, his strength bolstered each time he felt a new cut slash into him.

Distantly, he could see the many armies miles away, simply standing there, watching. Jiang Cheng wanted to scream at them to do something, anything, to help, rather than stand there like a bunch of idiots. He faltered, though, when he realised that the corpses were doing their job. Why would they help the enemy, that they're seeking to destroy, from being destroyed?

His army knew he was there, and were the only ones who tried to fight their way in. The act was meaningless, though. Nothing could get past the crowd of wild corpses, and they soon quickly realised that, and resorted to screaming and crying for him to get out.

In a never ending loop, he slashed at all the bodies that came near them, fiercely defending what he had left. Between sinking his blade into a corpses' head and kicking one down close to him, he realised the body in his grasp was frighteningly still. His head shot down to look at Wei Wuxian who was leaning on him and, thankfully, he was still alive. Shock was evident on his features, to his wide eyes and gaping mouth, the cursed smile gone. Bruises and bites and scratches littered the skin that Jiang Cheng could see, but he couldn't tell if any of them were fatal. Wei Wuxian clung to him like a child does to its mother, like he couldn't tell if anything was real.

Not faltering, he struck down each fierce corpse, feeling his spiritual power and energy slowly ebb away with each swing of his sword. Fortunately, the Stygian Tiger Seal started to lose its power. Without anyone controlling them, the corpses began to drop like flies, becoming weaker and weaker until people started fighting again. By then, there were only a hundred or so left, and none were bothering him.

Ducking down so no one would notice him, he cupped Wei Wuxian's face, attempting to calm himself as he confirmed that he's here he's real he's alive I have him- He wanted to scream and shout at him (what was he doing!? Was he trying to get himself killed? (Yes, yes he was, and it's my fault)) but right now, all he could do was pull his brother closer, wrapping his arms around him. Slowly, his brother responded in turn, weak arms cradling him like they did when they were younger.

Jiang Cheng stuffed his face in his brother’s neck, like a child wanting comfort, tangling his muddy fingers in Wei Wuxian’s hair. He smelt like dirt and blood and decay, yet there was something hauntingly familiar in the scent, something that made Jiang Cheng want to curl up and have Wei Wuxian hold him forever.

Gently, Wei Wuxian pulled away, soft eyes examining his face and soothing fingers lightly running over a cut on his forehead. He appeared shocked, still, and on edge, as if he expected Jiang Cheng to suddenly blow up in his face and kill him. And perhaps he did, but Jiang Cheng was feeling too scared and petrified from seeing his brother attempt to kill himself to even mutter a word against him.

“Why...did you save me?” Wei Wuxian's voice was hoarse and quiet, barely a whisper, the words shaky. Jiang Cheng remembered that same voice singing songs to him when he couldn't sleep, giving gentle reassurances when his parents had a fight, laughing and making jokes when he was feeling down.

There were so many answers to the question - I wanted revenge to be from my own hands. I don’t want you to die. If you die, it has to be by my terms. You promised you'd stay by me. You don’t deserve this. She wouldn't want us to be apart. We are family. I love you, I love you, I love you. - and Jiang Cheng wanted to tell him each one, when his pride didn't cloud his thoughts and make him falter.
“You're my brother.” He answered in the end, sniffing as a burn suddenly appeared behind his eyes. *I love you,* he didn't say.

Wei Wuxian stared at him, his whole body frozen, before he flung himself at Jiang Cheng, and then they were back to clinging desperately to each other as if the other was going to be taken away.

For him, he was. Wei Wuxian was going to be taken away from him if he didn't figure out something. Noticing that all the corpses had been killed and that the cultivators were slowly coming closer, Jiang Cheng pulled away from the embrace, trying not to miss the warmth so much. A plan forming in his mind, he led Wei Wuxian to a pile of corpses while Wei Wuxian complied, confused.

“Be still,” Jiang Cheng ordered, knowing that it was almost impossible for Wei Wuxian, but it was required if his plan was going to work. He laid his brother down onto the bloody mud and covered him up with corpses until he wasn't noticeable. He felt like he was on autopilot, or that a blanket was covering his mind, and that he was not really experiencing what he was doing, as if someone had taken over his body.

After, he sat down in the mud, close by but not suspiciously near Wei Wuxian, surrounded by dead bodies as he prepared to wait for the others to find him. Remembering the flute, he took it out, rolling it in his hand. It had blood and mud on it, with strange small teeth marks decorating the end. Using a clean part of his sleeve, he tried to clean it, which only resulted in getting more dirt on him. He persisted anyway.

When shadows fell over him, he looked up. Each Sect Leader was present, with Jin Guangyao with Jin Guangshan and Lan Qiren with Lan XiChen, Lan WangJi suspiciously absent. Nie Huaisang hadn't came to the battle, whether it was for the reason he claimed of refusing to fight a person he apparently saw as a friend or because he just didn't want to, Jiang Cheng didn't know, but Nie Mingjue was alone.

“So, where is he?” Jin Guangshan uncaringly asked, making a disgusted face at all the dirt and bodies around them. Jiang Cheng stared at him, knowing he had red and puffy eyes but not caring enough to look away. He knew he made a pitiful sight but he couldn't find it within him to be bothered. “Well?” He said when Jiang Cheng didn't answer.

“Your stupid Seal is lost and broken! You won't find it!” Jiang Cheng snarled, his voice breaking at the words. Everyone knew the true reason the Jin clan participated in the battle, and why they attacked Wei Wuxian. The whole war was basically because of the Jin’s greed for wanting the Stygian Tiger Seal, and the reason suddenly seemed utterly unfair to him. His brother almost died for a stupid *Seal*.

The burning at the back of his eyes got worse, and soon, a tear dripped down his cheek, and then two, and then three. He rubbed harshly at his face, ignoring how the cuts on his face ached at the contact.

“He's dead,” He almost sobbed, the words coming out as a whisper. “He's dead and he's not coming back.” *He's alive and barely a few feet away from you.*

“Torn apart by his own creations,” Lan Qiren muttered, one hand stroking his beard. “Karma, I suppose.” Jiang Cheng sent a burning glare at him, his respect for the elder washed away by the comment. He swallowed down the venomous words that appeared in his mouth, barely refraining from muttering them.

The Jins quickly made a retreat, soon after, claiming all the goods they could find in Wei Wuxian’s residence. It wasn't his home; Lotus Pier was the one that claimed that title. There wasn't much, and
all the inventions they wished to have were half done at best.

“Sorry, kid.” Nie Mingjue roughly said before he made his own leave. “I know that you were close with him, but this is war, and he had done many terrible things.” Wrong, Jiang Cheng thought, and he thought Nie Mingjue would be the first to suspect that. All the information of what Wei Wuxian had done wrong had been told from the Jins, and everyone knew not to trust them.

“I can't imagine how hard it must be for you,” Lan XiChen said, Lan Qiren already having left. Lan XiChen placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, but Jiang Cheng saw more than felt it. “I know you treated him as a brother, and he the same to you. I don't know what I would do if my brother…” He trailed off. Lan XiChen’s brows furrowed. “I would do anything for him.” He met Lan XiChen eyes. There was a sureness in there, an overwhelming dedication, and a small questioning look.

Jiang Cheng glanced at him, then looked towards the mound of corpses that hid Wei Wuxian, then moved his eyes away again. Lan XiChen followed his gaze, his eyes searching for what he was missing, but thankfully he was left confused. Jiang Cheng wouldn't know what to say or do if Wei Wuxian was found.

“If you ever need any help, you can always rely on Gusu Lan.” Lan XiChen offered, smiling gently despite their horrendous surroundings. “And…” The Gusu Lan Sect Leader glanced towards the pile of corpses, as if he came to a realisation. Jiang Cheng felt dread pool in his stomach, getting ready to fight for his brother. “If you need something doing or something hiding from the other sects, then we can always help. It is forbidden to tell secrets, after all.” Lan XiChen smiled brightly.

Jiang Cheng was left alone, sitting on sloshy mud that sunk when the slightest of pressure was put onto it, corpses surrounding him, and a brother hidden underneath said pile of corpses. The Burial Mounds was always known for its oppressive darkness and the constant gloom that it proudly carried with it, but right now, it was looking a bit brighter in the morning sun.
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

So...

Maybe I shouldn't have started this while also writing two other fics?? Lesson learnt (not), and hopefully, you won't hate me for totally abandoning this for like three months. Cause I'm back now with a new chapter, yay! And now since Red is practically finished (the last chapter already written and will be posted on Saturday), I can focus more on this. Parity is the primary fic I'm going to be working on, but this will (hopefully) get constant updates too.

Anyway, here's the new chapter! Enjoy!

For a brief, horrendous moment, he had thought Wei Wuxian was dead after he had pulled the corpses off of him. His brother was simply laying there, expression peaceful and eyes closed, the gauntness of his face making it look like he actually was wasting away, one with the pile of corpses. In that short few seconds, a multitude of thoughts ran through his head. There was a lurching in his chest, as if someone had just punched him. His breaths peaked, and the quickly draining adrenaline spiked up again. Denial shot through his head, and frighteningly, a small bit of relief, saying no one can hurt him now. It made his guilt pile up.

As Wei Wuxian's eyes flickered open, all his thoughts collapsed. His whole body filled with relief, pooling over to thankfulness. His fear still lingered, sticking to him like an unwanted virus, whispering words of his brother's death, gone like the rest of his family. He had no need to fear, he reassured himself, his brother was here. His brother would protect him. Although, at this moment in time, he would be the one who was doing the protecting.

While Jiang Cheng helped his brother sit up, the other cultivation sects worked in the distance. They were pillaging, no other word for it. Men raided the late Wens abodes, the flimsy houses cluttering down in a heap one by one as they were overwhelmed by weapons and fists and unhindered hate. The cave Wei Wuxian had lived in was clearly the hotspot, many hundreds of people working their way up or plundering the cave already. The fields of plants the Wens had miraculously begun to grow were quickly stomped down until no other living thing remained.

The two of them watched as everything that Wei Wuxian made was destroyed.

All of the Wens were undoubtedly dead, gone like the wind. They didn’t even need to question what would happen with their dead bodies. Left to rot, probably, like everything else in the Burial Mounds.

Wei Wuxian became frighteningly still in his arms. His eyes were vacant, the little light he had left drowned out by sorrow and guilt. Jiang Cheng swallowed down his own guilt.

He knew who was in the Burial Mounds - only the elderly and the young, people who had little ties to the Wens, who only wanted to rest without the crimes of their family burdening them - and yet he said nothing against the accusations of Wei Wuxian raising an army to reclaim Wen rule. He was blinded by his own grief and anger, incented by the rumours that stormed rampant. He didn’t want to
face the truth. And now all that Wei Wuxian wished to protect was dead.

He wondered what would have happened if he did speak up. If he criticized the Jins of their blatant lies, revealed all their cruel actions, denounced Jin Guangshan’s name. If he stuck by his brother through thick and thin, not leaving him to rot away in the very place he had lost his cheery, bright brother. The place that had given him a tainted, melancholy fragment of the same boy back in return. If he had taken in the Wen remnants in thanks for their help during the burning of Lotus Pier, not leaving them to the cold merciless claws of the cultivation world.

Would things be different?

Perhaps they would be. Perhaps the Wens would still be living. Perhaps they would have been thriving in Lotus Pier, blooming with the lotus flowers, bringing joy to everyone around them. Perhaps his brother would have still been with him, by his side as his right-hand man, as they promised years ago. Perhaps he would have gotten his sunny brother back as time healed his wounds, and not poisoned his mind as the Burial Mounds did. Perhaps his brother would still be happy.

Perhaps his sister would be alive.

But this was not that fantasy. Nothing could change his actions or allow him to go back to redo them. The Wens were dead. His sister was dead. His brother was almost dead, too. That was reality, and Jiang Cheng was never one to linger on what could have been. All he could do now was protect what little he had left. He flinched as he noticed some people glancing at them, afraid that his fears would come alive, that someone would see Wei Wuxian, not quite healthy but definitely alive. The Burial Mounds, however, gave great spots for protection. It was almost as if the Burial Mounds was trying to give back the kindness Wei Wuxian gave to it, masking its master from prying eyes.

The ground was uneven, worn from battle and sitting depressively in mounds, the small hills concealing them from sight. Black bamboo also grew out of the ground beside them, as tall as mountains, providing ample cover to hide behind. It was a small safe haven, for now. The vengeance-driven cultivators couldn’t see them, yet there was the danger that someone will soon. He turned his eyes to his brother.

Wei Wuxian sat there, his face darkened by the gloom of the Burial Mounds, highlighting the sharp edges of his face. His bones poked out of his skin, the thin layer stretching around them. He looked like he was dead.

Jiang Cheng nudged him slightly. “Wei Wuxian,” His voice sounded hoarse as if he hadn’t talked for quite a while, and his throat protested, aching horribly. Wei Wuxian didn’t react. “Wei Ying,” He tried again, but still there was no answer. Sighing, he nudged him again. It didn’t do anything. Wei Wuxian was a hollow doll.

They needed to get out. This was a perfect time, while everyone else was distracted by their victory and destroyed everything to their heart's content. Little would notice him going home. Those who did would surely understand, remembering the times when Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian were mentioned in the same sentence without the word ‘hate’ between their names. Or, maybe, they would not bother to think about it at all. It was the perfect moment to sneak Wei Wuxian to Lotus Pier.

But then what? Hide him forever? Wei Wuxian was not a person who was made to be caged. He never was and never will be. The sun cannot be trapped, no matter how many people try. Wei Wuxian's whole being was a protest against that, his personality too big for his body, his ideas too big for the world. No, Wei Wuxian can never be hidden forever, but he can be hidden for a short
amount of time. When the time comes when he is finally revealed, Jiang Cheng would deal with what comes after, when he is hopefully more prepared.

"Wei Ying," He tried again, his voice sounding broken even to his own ears. He was tired, exhausted even. His forehead fell on his brother's shoulder. He could feel the bones even under the layer of fabric, poking and prodding out, making it an uncomfortable pillow. His heart, which was already shattered, was crushed to dust. "Please." Jiang Cheng stared at Wei Wuxian's hair, the strands caked in mud. If it dried, then it would be hard to wash it out, if it could at all. It was an unusual thing to focus on, but small things were calming. He could imagine the fight Wei Wuxian would have about it, arguing to just leave the mud where it is, instead of cutting his hair as any sane person would do.

There was a slight movement in his peripheral. Slowly, hesitantly, a hand slid up his lap and hooked a finger around his own. Like the rest of him, the fingers were bony, the skin straining over the bone. They were frail, and Jiang Cheng was sure they would snap under the slightest pressure. He was afraid of even touching them. Wei Wuxian's head leaned against his own, and he felt the steady breathing of him, his shoulders raising slightly with the movement.

This was wrong. It was not supposed to be this way. Wei Wuxian was not supposed to be comforting him while he himself was barely there and was the one who needed protecting the most. It was supposed to be the other way round. Jiang Cheng was meant to be the older brother for once, the one who cradled Wei Wuxian’s body to him, the one who gave him soft assurances.

As he soaked up Wei Wuxian’s attentions, however, he realised he needed this. He needed the respite after having spent months feeling like he was incredibly and totally alone, with no one to help him in sight. His brother, off running rampant in a faraway place. His sister, married to a man he once hated, and then dead and gone in the next moment. In some ways, he was still that child before Lotus Pier burned, itching for his family's comfort. To finally have his brother back was a relief.

Succumbing to the familial contact, he relaxed. He ran his own fingers over Wei Wuxian's knuckles, each one feeling like a hill until finally, he decided they must move until it was too late.

Jiang Cheng pulled away from Wei Wuxian, trying not to dwell on the coldness that the loss of contact left him. He stood up on shaky legs, attempting not to step on any of the corpses that were scattered around them. The putrid smell of rotting bodies wafted in the air, making each breath a tackle. Jiang Cheng was sure the smell would cling to him multiple days after the battle.

"Do you have any big wounds?" He asked Wei Wuxian, kneeling by his side. For a second he was afraid that Wei Wuxian would become unresponsive again, with his blank stare and motionless body, as if he didn't understand the words. Thankfully, Wei Wuxian slowly shook his head but offered no other reaction.

Biting his lip, he wondered if he should believe him or not. Wei Wuxian had always been one to hide or lie about fatal injuries, claiming he could handle it. But right now was not the best time to check, nor the best place, and so he would have to believe him. Besides, he doubted he had the right medicine or skill to heal a big wound if he had one. The only thing he could do was to take him to see a doctor as soon as possible.

Gently, he took one of Wei Wuxian's arms and put it around his shoulder, and put one of his own around Wei Wuxian's waist. Hoisting him up, he let his mind focus on the task ahead: getting Wei Wuxian to Lotus Pier as quick as possible without anyone noticing. He knew it was going to be hard before he even started. Gentle was not one of the words he would use to describe himself, not soft or kind. In fact, he was the exact opposite, relying on harsh pushes and rough words to convey what he wanted.
Wei Wuxian didn’t need that right now. Wei Wuxian needed gentleness, and softness, and kindness. Everything he was not. Everything his sister was. But his sister wasn’t upon the earth any longer, and he was all Wei Wuxian had left. He would become what his brother needed before he even had any thoughts of revealing Wei Wuxian’s presence to another gentler, softer, kinder person. He didn’t need Lan XiChen’s offer. He didn’t need anyone’s help.

First, though, they needed to get away from the Burial Mounds. They both stumbled down hills, tripping over mud and dead plants and bodies. Wei Wuxian was limp in his hold; the only thing that was holding him up was Jiang Cheng’s arm around his waist. He was a heavy weight, a burden upon Jiang Cheng’s shoulders that would surely cause many problems later on, but he refused to let go. The man remained unresponsive, shut tight within his shell, unwilling to open up. His eyes were unfocused, glazed over, as if a sheet of glass was covering them.

It was a slow journey, one that Jiang Cheng was ready to give up. After ducking past many wandering cultivators and dragging Wei Wuxian when his weak knees gave out under him, they managed to get under the cover of trees just outside the Burial Mounds, the darkness of the place following them and clinging to their bones. Jiang Cheng felt no loss when leaving the cursed place, heaving a sigh relief as the resentful energy retreated and fresh air gathered in his lungs. Wei Wuxian, who had made the inhabitable Burial Mounds his living space and cultivated friendships there, turned to look back at their path, his shoulders drooping and his eyes mournful. Jiang Cheng wondered if he would ever be happy again. It seemed so long ago when he had last seen Wei Wuxian smile.

He was happy to give Wei Wuxian time to lament while he unceremoniously dropped him by a tree, stretching his sore shoulders and having a rest himself. The danger had passed, as everyone was centred around the Burial Mounds, and would surely not leave for hours yet. From there, it would be easy to get to Lotus Pier undetected.

That gave Wei Wuxian no excuse, however, to suddenly stand up with the help of the tree and clumsily shuffle back in the direction of the Burial Mounds. Jiang Cheng immediately shot up.

“Where do you think you’re going!?” He shouted without thinking, before he winced at his tone. Already he was failing at being gentle and soft and kind, his anger burning eternally in his chest, the first weapon he picked up. Wei Wuxian didn’t answer, grasping at the tree even while his fingers cut and bled on the sharp bark, shakily stumbling back the way they arrived. Jiang Cheng raced up to him, grasping his wrist and pulling him away from his support. It was easy to do, so effortless that it surprised Jiang Cheng. Wei Wuxian fell against his chest, his body slamming into Jiang Cheng's. It didn't even cause an ache.

“What are you doing?” Jiang Cheng asked, softer this time, letting go of his wrist and instead cradling his upper arms. Wei Wuxian stared at the gloomy Burial Mounds, his eyes desperate and anxious, struggling in his hold with jittery movements. He refused to let go, his stubbornness like steel, his decision immovable like a mountain.

When Wei Wuxian eventually tired himself out and finally understood that Jiang Cheng was not letting go of him, he slumped in his hold, short, panicked gasps shaking his entire body. He knew his brother was not in the right mindset at the moment, his mind plagued by the deaths of those he felt responsible for, the insanity of demonic cultivation crawling within his body like worms. Despite knowing this, worry overrode his mind, and he began frantically searching Wei Wuxian's body to see what was wrong. Whatever troubled Wei Wuxian, though, was not on his body. Wei Wuxian continued panicking, short nails clawing at Jiang Cheng's arms. This new Wei Wuxian scared him.
He would even take the unresponsive, shut off version over this. He couldn't handle his unpredictable moods.

"What-What's wrong?" Jiang Cheng asked, ignoring how Wei Wuxian's nails drew blood from his arms, digging into past injuries that he had gotten from his mad battle with the hundreds of corpses. "Wei Wuxian!" He wrapped an arm around his brother's waist when his grasp began to loosen, unwilling to release him.

"Let go!" Wei Wuxian exclaimed, his voice a weak croak, falling down to the ground in an attempt to slither out of his arms. Jiang Cheng went down with him. "Let me go!"

"Not if you don't tell me what's wrong first!" Jiang Cheng growled, his patience snipping at the edges, as it always did when Wei Wuxian was involved. No matter if Wei Wuxian was the happiest he could possibly be or so upset his mind was unstable, he always managed to wear down his patience quicker than anyone else ever could. Not even Wen Chao's monumental irritability could rival his brother's. He loved him for it, for the familiarity it brought him.

When Wei Wuxian hit him in the face, it was the last straw. "Wei Wuxian, stop it this instant!" He sounded like a parent scolding their child. Nonetheless, it worked, Wei Wuxian going slack under him, eyes focused on him and red-faced from the workout. He was lightly panting, but not like the harsh gasps from before. Whatever Jiang Cheng did, it brought Wei Wuxian out of his self-imposed exile in his mind, the evidence of insanity gone.

"A-Cheng," Wei Wuxian said, the intimacy of the words shocking him, causing him to flinch back. The man below him smiled, a splinter of what was once a brilliant teasing smile, pale lips pulled upwards slightly. He waited with bated breath. "You sound just like Madam Yu." Jiang Cheng stared at him for a minute, in which Wei Wuxian stared back, the smile stubbornly sticking to his face. Finally, Jiang Cheng huffed, his head falling on Wei Wuxian's chest. He felt more than saw the chest sink, similar to that of laughter, yet he could hear no chuckles.

He was cured of his momentary insanity, but Jiang Cheng knew it would come rushing back in the foreseeable future. For now, though, he was alright.

"What's wrong?" At his words, Wei Wuxian seemed to remember why he had originally been panicking, shifting where he lay but not renewing his struggle. Jiang Cheng would have knocked him out if he began again.

"I need to go back." He froze, baffled by the answer, wondering if he heard right. Wei Wuxian had come out with many preposterous things in the past, but this was one of his highest and stupidest moments. Surely he knew the only thing that awaited him in Burial Mounds was his death? And possibly Jiang Cheng's too, as he was the one who claimed he was dead. His lying would be found out, and the Jins, thirsty little beasts they are, would spare no time ripping into him and tearing him to shreds.

While Jiang Cheng would have no problem dying for his brother under normal circumstances, say, a frightening fight with hundreds of corpses to protect his brother or sacrificing himself to keep his brother safe, but this was not a normal situation. He was not going to die because of his brother's stupidity.

"No," He instantly rejected, watching as Wei Wuxian's expression grew pitiful. He could practically hear his brother's heart shattering. His own squirmed with it. Wei Wuxian had always been strong, though, if not physically then mentally. One of the many things Jiang Cheng envied him for. His expression hardened, his grey eyes glimmering like steel, determination on his brow. Wei Wuxian was never one to abide by orders, and this time was no different.
"I'm going." Wei Wuxian attempted to shuffle out from under him.

"No, you aren't." Jiang Cheng easily pinned him down. He almost leant his weight on him in an attempt to keep him still but remembered the many bruises and cuts that Wei Wuxian surely kept quiet about from the corpses. They had probably opened and bled quite badly due to Wei Wuxian's earlier struggle, and there was no saying what they looked like now. His worst fears sprung to mind, eager to cause him to dread, but he pushed them to a small corner of his mind, locked away until he was in the right place to assess the damage. He couldn't make Wei Wuxian strip in the middle of the forest, however hilarious it would be. He reminded himself that he needed to get to Lotus Pier. Quickly. Preferably with Wei Wuxian.

"I am!" Despite his best efforts, Wei Wuxian's attempts did nothing and only left him tired in the grass. Jiang Cheng raised an eyebrow at him, a frown tugging at his lips. For a moment, Wei Wuxian looked truly angry, becoming the fearsome Yiling Patriarch that men cowered and ran away from at the faintest of mentions. His eyes glowed an evil blood red, the shadows creeping towards him, becoming the demon he was said to be. Anyone who did not know him personally would be scared out of their wits.

Jiang Cheng was not that person.

He had grown up with Wei Wuxian. He had seen his ups and his downs, and everything in between. He had seen Wei Wuxian angry when he was a child, pouty lips and cheeks flushed red, as a teen, vicious glare and lips thinned, and as an adult, the true horror of the Yiling Patriarch. When he saw Wei Wuxian's angry expression, all he could think about was the cute child that petulantly stomped his feet with his pinchable cheeks ballooned into a pout. The look did nothing to him. He knew he was safe from Wei Wuxian's ire, knew that Wei Wuxian would never send resentful energy or a corpse his way.

"No." He carefully sat on Wei Wuxian's waist, not daring to put his weight on top of his brother's body. He was afraid that it would snap with how thin he was. "You are not going. Why do you even want to go back anyway?" Wei Wuxian stared up at him in defiance, his mouth sewed shut. "Fine, then, be quiet. I'm happy dragging you to Lotus Pier whether you like it or not."

As he was about to stand, Wei Wuxian grabbed onto his robe, weakly trying to pull him down again. "Stop, Jiang Cheng." Slowly, he began to sit again, this time beside his brother rather than on him, trusting him not to attempt to run away again. Jiang Cheng would catch him either way. Wei Wuxian wore a troubled expression, brows furrowed and teeth chewing at his lip. It was his signature expression for contemplating whether to share his burdens. Wei Wuxian never liked to share his troubles, always willing to take on everything he could without asking for help, even if it destroyed him (and I let him; when he came to me I pushed him away). He would take on the world if he could.

"What do you want from there?" He asked again, pulling Wei Wuxian out of his thoughts.

Wei Wuxian stared at him with a complicated expression. "A Wen." He said at last.

"All the Wens are dead, Wei Wuxian." Jiang Cheng growled, ripping out of his brother's grasp, jumping up from his seat. Perhaps the insanity had not been cleared from his brother's brain after all. "They're dead and gone. The Sects had killed them." Wei Wuxian flinched at his harsh words. Jiang Cheng could practically see him slightly retreating back into his shell. His brother, however, was far more interested in finding whatever he needed rather than withdrawing into his own mind again, insanity taking over.

"No, they haven't. There is a boy - the child you saw before. I hid him in a tree. Please, Jiang Cheng,
I need to go back, you don't have to follow. And I-I promise, I won't ever bother you again - please."
His words were vulnerable, his expression even more so. Jiang Cheng faintly remembered a toddler clinging to his leg, and the proud smile Wei Wuxian presented him with. He never knew Wei Wuxian cared so much. *(Of course he does, he would walk away from me in favour of a Wen, would try to save someone without thinking of the consequences)*.

Jiang Cheng doesn't want Wei Wuxian to never bother him again. He didn't want that at all, and he wondered where Wei Wuxian picked up such a ludicrous idea when he had literally just saved him so they wouldn't be apart. But despite Wei Wuxian's pleadings, he was not about to let him walk into certain death.

"Wei Wuxian, we can't go now. The Jins will be there for hours yet, and the Lans will surely want to set up summoning rituals to check if you are truly dead. We can play off your spirit not turning up at the rituals, but we can't hide you in broad daylight." Wei Wuxian looked heartbroken by his logic, but still readily defiant, willing to give his entire life to save a child. Jiang Cheng was stumped by his brother. He knew Wei Wuxian would go to the ends of the earth until he had the child in his arms, safe and protected. Even if Jiang Cheng tied him to a tree or shackled him in the deepest dungeons of Lotus Pier, it would do nothing to stop Wei Wuxian on his quest.

The only thing he could do was roll along with it.

"Okay," Jiang Cheng began. "I'll take you to Lotus Pier, and you'll stay there, while I go back and get the kid. Deal?" Wei Wuxian looked hesitant to accept, but Jiang Cheng would not offer any other alternatives. He would drag Wei Wuxian back to Lotus Pier kicking and screaming if he had to. Seeing this, Wei Wuxian reluctantly nodded, a small smile growing on his face.

Wei Wuxian was compliant after that, as obedient as a puppy. He stepped onto Sandu without a word of protest, though Jiang Cheng had to hold him as his momentary strength left him along with his fight. Halfway back, he had fallen asleep, snoozing on Jiang Cheng's shoulder in a way only he could. He didn't think the world would find him quite as scary if they knew the terrifying Yiling Patriarch drooled while he slept. Needless to say, Jiang Cheng was fighting with the urge to push him off the whole way back.

When they arrived at Lotus Pier, the grounds were empty due to most of his forces being at the Burial Mounds. Younger disciples were laying far off, too far off to see Jiang Cheng sneak Wei Wuxian into Lotus Pier. He deftly avoided servants on his way to Wei Wuxian's room, blending in with the shadows and lurking in the corners. He heaved a sigh of relief as he placed Wei Wuxian on his bed, the man still deeply asleep, feeling like a boulder had been lifted from his shoulders.

Wei Wuxian was successfully back home.

And now he only needed to get his brat.

Ignoring the enticing call of his own bed, he gave one last look to Wei Wuxian and left the room. No servants dared to approach the room Jiang Cheng had so carefully tidied, not wanting anyone to mess up Wei Wuxian's things for when he came back. And if Wei Wuxian had at least some common sense, then he would not leave the room, if he woke up in the time Jiang Cheng took at all. He was beyond tired himself, he shuddered to think of how exhausted Wei Wuxian was.

Yawning, he mounted Sandu and took off again. The trip to the Burial Mounds was by no means a short one, about half a day's worth, but was not so long it tired him out, like trips to Lanling or Gusu often did. With his low spiritual energy and tiredness, however, it took much longer than he expected. A quarter way through he resigned himself that he was not going to make it with how exhausted he was, the weight of it pulling him down. It was dangerous to fly any longer, and so he
landed by an inn and booked a room to sleep in for a few hours. It would do no good if he tried to smuggle a child out of Burial Mounds while half-asleep.

He woke up later than he had meant to, but had enough energy to quickly propel himself towards the Burial Mounds, rushing to find his brother's child.

Burial Mounds was empty when he arrived. Upon seeing the destruction that the Siege had caused, he was suddenly thankful that Wei Wuxian had not come with him, otherwise, he would be reduced to a hollow shell again. The devastation the Sects left was insulting, mocking those who used to live there. The wood for the houses were kicked around, their farms smashed and unplanted, their meagre belongings thrown every which way. Jiang Cheng didn't even want to think of what had happened to their bodies, staying clear of the Demon Slaughtering Cave.

The tree Wei Wuxian had used was unmistakable. It was one of the only trees in the Burial Mounds, big and hulking, looming over everything with a sinister air. He reluctantly approached it, searching for places that Wei Wuxian would hide a child in.

There was a small alcove in the bottom, nestled between the large menacing roots poking out of the ground, masked by hanging black moss. A small sliver of black fabric hung out of it, unmistakable as Wei Wuxian's own. His heart lightening, he peered into the hole.

There was no child.
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was not possible for Lan WangJi to go to the Siege of Burial Mounds.

He didn’t like that utterly devastating, terribly realistic fact. He hated it with a passion, much more than he has ever hated anything else before. This was a burning hate. What once started as a small kindling, unassuming, glowing embers spread like a forest fire, now blazing in his veins and setting his whole body aflame. His heart leapt out of his chest, smouldering angrily, urging him to run, run, run, to Wei Wuxian’s side, protect him at all costs. If he did not, then the fire would burn him from the inside out, and he would be reduced to pitiful ashes, brushed away by the wind.

It seemed that was what his fate would be.

Days ago, he had stood tall and strong, fueled by the weakened, unreactive shell of a boy he had once, and still does, love. His fire had been burning bright, then, brilliant enough to rival the sun. He did not care that it was his own family he was fighting against. He had fought for what was right, for what he believed in, as they had taught him time and time again. Numbly, he wondered why they appeared shocked when he had bared his sword.

And the fire had won. It scorched everything in its path, uncontrollable, until he settled with the knowledge that his love was safe. With that truth, the fire was tamed, settled, barely a candle. The Elders then proceeded to blow it out. Lan WangJi was left in the dark, without a light to guide him, searching for some spark to guide his way. Foolishly, it had led him back to the Cloud Recesses, the white illumination of the mountain retreat blinding.

Thirty-three lashings with the discipline whip was what the punishment was. Thirty-three cuts. Thirty-three Elders. Lan WangJi had counted up to thirty-three with each crack of the whip, satisfaction curling in his stomach, the pain numb from the pleasant knowledge that the Elders did not get what they want: Wei Wuxian’s head. They thought that it was a punishment, that he would be ashamed of the resulting scars. He refused to. These thirty-three lashes could be burned into his soul and he would still carry them proudly, showing that he had done what was right, that he had protected the one he loved. They were gifts. Awards. Trophies.

The embers that the Elders thought they had snuffled out were still persistently glowing, burning against all odds. With the thirty-three strikes the embers burned hotter and hotter, one slash after the other lighting the fiery flame, feeding it more and more and more. The fire accepted it like a hungry raging beast.

It burned for one reason only: for Wei Wuxian. The thought of his first and only love was his fuel, stroking his fire and urging it on.

And then, with Lan XiChen’s painful arrival on an early summer morning, water rained down on his proud and strong fire. It happened before Lan XiChen even finished his sentence - “A Siege is being planned-” . The flames pittered out, in a long, slow, torturous timespan, that felt like it lasted years instead of seconds. Only dust was left.

That morning, Lan WangJi had automatically gotten up from his bed. He changed from his sleeping robe, into a snowy white garment embraced by blue clouds, as he did any other day. He fixed his hair, put a crown atop his head in an up-do, and gathered some talismans, his sword and his guqin.
The injuries on his back were not burning, but rather freezing, the cold settling on his skin and clutching him with icy claws. He ignored the pain, ignored how he had little strength, ignored how it was not possible, and the certain reality that he was not going to make it in time. It didn’t matter, though. He had best the Elders once, he could do it again. This time, he was not fuelled by fire, but instead by the hollow hole in his chest, gapingly empty, a yawning black void.

He never made it past the door. He struggled, using BiChen as a crutch, unwilling to give in to the small part of his mind that teasingly chanted, you’re going to fail, you’re going to fail, you’re going to fail. He gritted his teeth past the pain and moved on. Lan XiChen was there, waiting for him. With a grim expression and sorrow weighing doing his lips, his brother looked older than he was, more like the Sect Leader rather than the brother he always promised to be.

“You’re not going.” Lan XiChen said, his words harsh and blunt, a finality that he refused to change. Lan WangJi tried anyway. They were brothers born of stubbornness, their very creation came from their father’s unwillingness to turn in his lover, and the perseverance ran in the family much to Lan Qiren’s ire. But no matter how much he stared defiantly, or frowned angrily, or even when tears pooled in his eyes, Lan XiChen refused to bend. The last option was to push past him. The thought brought him too much joy than he liked.

He didn’t want to harm his brother. While other families had fights or feuds or sibling games, Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen never had the thought. He had never laid a hand upon his brother, or vice versa, and so the thought of hurting him was a foreign one. He was angry. Terribly angry, so much so that it consumed his insides and fought with his logic and memories, controlling him like a puppet. He was furious that Lan XiChen entertained the thought of hurting what was most precious to him. That he would hurt what was most precious to him, would lead a group of men to rally against and become the exact monsters Lan WangJi was protecting Wei Wuxian from. He knew Lan XiChen was sorry, that he was knee-deep in guilt and distress, and that he would come back changed. Lan XiChen was terrified of having to come back and tell his younger brother that the love of his life was dead.

Lan WangJi refused to let him go through that. And so, with Lan XiChen blocking his way, he pushed. And pushed. And pushed. And pushed. Guilt gnawed at him with each strike against his brother, but he knew what he was doing was right, was so certain of the fact that it was engraved into his mind. But Lan WangJi, burdened with the weight of thirty-three trophies, was of no match to a perfectly healthy Lan XiChen, hardened by his will. He was weak, and slow, and clumsy. His sword was not steady in his hand, the blade shaking like a leaf, and was easy to nudge away. His legs were sluggish beneath him, and it felt like he was standing with weights attached to his back.

He was vulnerable. Lan XiChen didn't hesitate to take advantage.

Bichen was knocked away with barely a push from Shuoyue. The force of it swept him away, his feet fumbling to stay standing. As soon as Lan XiChen gripped his forearms, his legs went crumbling beneath him, traitorously giving up on him. His brother caught him, strong arms embracing him and stopping him from hitting the ground, mindful of his bleeding welts. Tears gathering in his eyes, Lan WangJi shoved his face into his brother's shoulder, his grief wracking his nerves as an encompassing sadness overtook his body.

Lan WangJi didn't like the feeling. It was like defeat, the misery of losing. the frustration of rejection. Lan WangJi was not defeated, nor had he lost the battle of protecting Wei Wuxian, his will still strong and stubborn. This was merely a setback, a hinder in his quest, but he would get to Wei Wuxian’s side and protect him from Lan XiChen, and Jiang Wanyin, and Jin Guangshan, and all the other thousands of cultivators. From the whole world, if he had to.
It seemed only he remembered the bright boy that once shined his light upon the earth, cackling jokes and careless words, bringing joy to those he met. That boy was kind, and selfless, and gave the world to those who gifted him a smile. The world was not kind to the benevolent ones, however, cruelly jealous of those who were made to be extraordinary. In his place, a man who was still kind and selfless returned, but who was also toughened by his experiences and wielded a power that the world hated. They had forgotten about the boy who lived before, armed only with cheery smiles and teasing remarks, and engraved in their minds the demon they believed they saw. Wei Wuxian would never use his unique cultivation for bad, Lan WangJi knew, as he remembered that boy he had met on the rooftop. The world didn't. They were cruel, and unkind, and unsympathetic to Wei Wuxian's cause.

They were going to eat him alive.

He had to protect him.

The world didn't agree. They didn't see who the real monsters were, didn't notice the sheep's skin that they were wearing.

It was not to be. An unfulfilled goal, a brutal truth, a harsh reality. It was not possible for Lan WangJi to go to the Siege of Burial Mounds. It was not possible for him to leave his own jingshi.

With an arm wrapped around his shoulders, Lan XiChen attempted to get him back to bed. He refused, sticking to the ground he sat on, not bending to the pleading look his brother sent him. Fine, then, he thought, if he couldn't leave now, he could leave later, when his brother went. His Sect could not keep him contained. Nothing could. His back was frozen numb, blood dripped down his skin like a gruesome waterfall, and his whole body ached in protest with every movement, but his mind was unchangeable. He would make it to Wei Wuxian's side, even if the whole world hated him for it.

Lan XiChen knew this with merely a look. Worry was etched into the lines of his face, his softness doubled, handling Lan WangJi as if he was porcelain glass, shattering at the smallest of touches. Gently, he forced a cup of water into his unsteady hands, supporting it with his own. Lan WangJi studied Lan XiChen's expression, seeing concern and sadness and a little bit fear swirling like a hurricane on his face, and his guilt lurched in his stomach, doubling in intensity. He found himself drinking from the cup before he knew it, hoping to placate some of Lan XiChen's fears.

As soon as a flash of guilt washed over his brother's face, however, he knew something was terribly, horribly wrong.

He glanced down at his cup. The water innocently stared back at him.

His mind swirled, dizziness overcoming him. Lan XiChen gently took the cup back from him, his expression pained, holding him close to his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." His brother whispered against his hair, chanting it again and again like a prayer. Lan WangJi felt a wetness on his face and realised his brother was crying. His chest ached, his heart roaring in anger at what Lan XiChen did, battling with the instinctive need to comfort him. He couldn't comprehend it. All he could do was sit there, fading into unconsciousness while his brother cried.

When he awoke again, he was not angry. He was not furious. There was no all-encompassing wrath that made him see red, or any bitterness lingering in his mind. He didn't feel much at all. His body was a statue, his heart stone, his mind dust. The bandages on his back had soaked through, yet he felt nothing. No fire or ice. There was only a yawning void, a black hole, swallowing everything in his body until he had nothing left inside him.
He could never be angry with his brother. If he was in his shoes, he would do the same.

He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, time a blur that his mind couldn't wrap around. He could have been staring at the ceiling from his bed for an entire day and he wouldn't have realised it.

But when Lan XiChen arrived again, he was not perfectly impeccable as he had been before, when he had tragically betrayed Lan WangJi's trust. His boots were unrecognisable. His robes were stained, mud and blood creating a rotten painting on the once-white robes. Shuoyue hadn't been cleaned. There was a thin cut on his cheek, weeping slightly, but he knew it would disappear within a day. The lines on Lan XiChen's face were harsher, as if had aged a decade within a day or so. There was no triumph, no mad excitement, nor any victory that lightened his features. There also wasn't any sadness or distress that would come with the words Wei Wuxian is dead.

It made a ray of hope appear in Lan WangJi's chest, like the sun peeking through dark storm clouds.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian had escaped along with his crew. Perhaps he had once again accomplished the impossible and fought back all the cultivators. Perhaps they reached a peace. As long as Wei Wuxian was alive, then everything would be alright.

His brother remained silent, however, approaching his bedside and quietly kneeling down. Lan WangJi waited on the edge of his seat for Lan XiChen to tell him the Siege had failed, or Wei Wuxian is alive, or even Wei Wuxian is missing. Anything that meant the cultivators had failed. His expression was hopeful, bright eyes shimmering like glass as they bore into his brother. Lan XiChen stared at him, studying him and his expectant expression, lips parted and eyes exhausted. Lan WangJi knew his brother was tired, that he desperately needed rest, so much so that the wind could easily blow him away, but he needed answers.

Then, Lan WangJi watched with horror, Lan XiChen’s face twisted into one of guilt and sorrow and all the bad things in the world, that pointed towards Wei Wuxian being gone. The sudden turn was unexpected. Lan WangJi’s hope fell to the ground, shattering and being stomped on until it was unrecognisable. His heart fell with it. He stared at his brother listlessly, the light draining from his eyes, observing his grim expression.

“WangJi,” His brother muttered, his lips pulled into a tight line, his face white as he hesitantly said the words that Lan WangJi dreaded above all else. “Wei Wuxian...is dead.”

That was it.

It was over.

Lan XiChen’s face crumbled more, weary lines deepening, his throat bobbing. Lan WangJi couldn't comprehend anything. Slowly, Lan XiChen went in for a hug, his hands gentle as they smoothed out his hair and cradled his head to his brother’s chest, as if he was no more than a child. He could remember that Lan XiChen would do the exact same thing in their younger days, gathering him up in a hug as he sat outside his mother’s gentian house, a pillar for him to lean on. The usual feelings of comfort and safety didn’t appear, nor did the feeling that everything was alright as long as he had his brother by his side. Because everything wasn’t alright. Nothing was fine.

His world was disintegrating around him.

No.

He refused to believe it. Wei Wuxian wasn’t dead. He was the sun, everlasting and bright, unable to
be smothered as his sheer intensity outshone all others. He had to see it with his own eyes.

Lan WangJi tore out of Lan XiChen’s embrace, ripping himself away from the empty hug full of nothing and everything combined. Before Lan XiChen could even voice a protest, he was out of his bed, grabbing Bichen in a tight grip, the wounds on his back ripping and bleeding anew. He ignored it, ignored everything. He had only one sight in mind: to see Wei Wuxian, whether it was in the living world or the dead. Not even the boundaries of the world would stop him.

Lan XiChen had only just stood up when Lan WangJi strode out of the room, leaving him in the dust with words of objection on the tip of his tongue. He mounted his sword as soon as he stepped outside, leaving the gasping disciples and fatigued Elders who had come home after the Siege had ended, soon becoming specks of white in the distance. His mind didn’t even process their existence.

Wei Wuxian was everything.

Nothing would stop him. No god, no immortal, not even the exhaustion that clung to his bones and seeped into his skin. If he ran out of spiritual energy, then he would walk. If he ran out of energy, he would crawl. If all his blood drained from his body and he lost his physical being, then he would make his way there as a ghost, unhindered by physical affairs. Nothing would stop him. Nothing could stop him. He was unbreakable, unmoving, a statue that no mortal or immortal could destroy, an enemy no one could conquer.

He didn’t stop to meditate so he could regain lost spiritual energy or avoid the Qi deviation that would surely come to claw at him later. He didn’t stop to bind his wounds, his trophies, leaving them proudly on display even as they sapped his energy. He certainly didn’t stop to sleep, his exhaustion fueling him, urging him to go faster, faster, faster – find him, protect him.

Lan WangJi arrived at the Burial Mounds in record time. Never had Bichen flown so fast, so swift, his sword hurtling speeds unknown to him. His back was bathed in red, and every step was a hurtle, but he continued on, driven off the desperate plea to see his love. Mud soaked his clothes, becoming a gruesome painting along with his blood, yet he paid no attention to it. He didn’t pay attention to the scenery, didn’t linger beside the destroyed shacks, didn’t weep for the forgotten bodies he stepped over on his way, didn’t fight the tarrying cultivators who’s hate burned bright for his love. Wei Wuxian was the only thing that mattered. Everything else was merely in the background.

The Burial Mounds was dark and dank, the setting sun casting a dim glow on the hills of mud and mountain of bodies, doing nothing to aid Lan WangJi on his quest. He squinted at the black soil and the black plants and the black stone, attempting to catch a glimpse of black and red robes, a smile brighter than the sun, eyes holding the universe itself in its depths. The figure that meandered in his mind and dreams, teasing words on his lips and laughter that grabbed the attention of everyone in the room. Stubborn. Selfless. Kind. Beautiful.

But there was no echoing laughter (except for the deranged, who laughed and celebrated at the edge of the battlefield, tainting Wei Wuxian’s home with their careless drunken words and rude gestures), nor any sun which chuckled and smiled and called, “Lan Zhan!” with a honeyed voice and syrupy words.

There was nothing.

Wei Wuxian was gone.

No, no, no. This is wrong. He must be here. Perhaps he was hiding - Lan WangJi knew Wei Wuxian would never hide, though. Always ready for a fight, to bravely right what is wrong, the thought of cowering wouldn’t even cross his mind. His distraught mind searched for answers,
clinging to hopeless words in an attempt to not give up, to not give in to the fact that Wei Wuxian was gone. It was a pointless, worthless effort.

It was over.

Nonetheless, Lan WangJi continued searching. Desperately, eternally, unyielding. He ran through the battlefield, a name stuck to his lips, repeating again and again. The blood hadn’t stopped, hunger squirmed in his stomach, and the urge to sleep was omnipresent. He pushed forward.

And then, there was a cry. Weak, small, obviously not who he was searching for. But he found himself walking toward it, gravitating to its area, taking anything he could get. There was a boy. The same boy who had once clung to his leg, who called him “Father!” while Wei Wuxian laughed, claiming the child as his while the crowd watched with wide eyes.

It was Wei Wuxian’s child.

Broken, sick, in the midst of a harsh fever, but so alive.

Lan WangJi took him home, to the Cloud Recesses, where he had once begged a man to go. A small little piece of Wei Wuxian that he could bring to the Cloud Recesses, at last.

Every step home was a crushing, devastating torture. Inch by inch he made his was there, the weight of his guilt pulling him down and slowing him, his mind running wild with the words he was scared to say, with the words he will have to say. He had to tell his brother that he was too late. That he couldn’t save him. That his child was most likely dead. The fact buzzed around his head, taunting, it’s your fault, it’s your fault, it’s your fault. It echoed in his mind, haunting him like a ghost, eternally looming over his shoulder. He could taste it at the back of his tongue, foul and dry, blocking his throat and suffocating him.

He didn’t bother to fly. He couldn’t even if he wanted to, his Qi as erratic as his thoughts. Walking meant the arrival to Lotus Pier was delayed. That also meant he had more time to suffer and plan the words he was going to say. But how would you tell someone that the child they tried so hard to protect was killed?

Perhaps through meaningless words, uttering grievances and excuses, whispering I'm sorry. But Jiang Cheng was not one to play around with worthless words, finding them distasteful and unneeded flattery. He liked to tell it how it is, blunt and to the point, no matter how painful the truth is. He was not one to meddle with feelings. He couldn’t be further removed from them, ignoring his own in favour of the red hot anger that coursed through his veins, his best defense.

When his parents died, it was anger, pure white rage controlling his body until he got his merciless revenge. When his sister died, it was anger, burning so bright that it blinded him, his emotions battling one another as he tried to figure out was right and what was wrong. Now, his brother’s child had died, and he floundered around. He couldn’t respond in anger. After all, he also participated in the battle to eradicate the Wens, the scourge of the world. How was he to get revenge on himself? Punishing, beating, starving himself would do nothing except make himself useless to Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian also didn’t need anger. Too much anger had already been sent towards him, to the point that he had tried to -
No, Wei Wuxian didn’t need anger. He also wouldn’t take empty words. He needed the *truth*.

But Jiang Cheng didn’t know if he was strong enough to give it to him.

Nonetheless, he took each step towards his home, his heart being dragged along the ground behind him. When Lotus Pier came into view, he stopped and stared at the building. He was reminded of a time when he had once staggered his was home, guilt heavy in his stomach, his brother imprisoned in a cave. Jiang Cheng thought he would get out - to defy the impossible once again - but he struggled home alone. With the same dread he felt now, he had to utter the words “Wei Wuxian is trapped.” *and possibly dead* hung in the air, for who could survive the Tortoise of Slaughter?

Of course, Wei Wuxian could. He could survive anything.

Hopefully, that also extended to the death of his child.

Jiang Cheng bought a basket of loquats. He didn’t know why, as he knew Wei Wuxian would be in no mood to eat, but all he could think about were bones poking out of skin and a skeleton-like figure and belly caving in and - *it's all your fault*. He had to make it right again. To make it how it was supposed to be before Wei Wuxian wished for too much, before his dreams were too big for the world to handle, before his light was too bright and the sun got jealous.

The Wens were gone. Everything was how it used to be. (*As long as they ignored the aching, black void where their sister once stood*).

He found Wei Wuxian in the Ancestral Hall. Before, when the Siege was merely a plan and revenge on his brother didn’t feel so *real*, when he hadn’t seen what state Wei Wuxian was in, when he hadn’t seen him attempt to k- Before all that, Jiang Cheng had planned to drag him to the Ancestral Hall, perhaps kicking and screaming but *alive*, where he would then force him down on his knees and beg for forgiveness from their sister and their parents. It shouldn't have surprised him that Wei Wuxian went their willingly, of his own prompting, yet it did.

He hated seeing his brother bowing so low, his grief suffocating the air, as if he was asking for forgiveness for destroying the world and dooming the human race to its untimely end instead of losing control and letting the world hate him. Jiang Cheng almost wanted to believe that he was also apologizing for leaving the sect, for abandoning Jiang Cheng, though he knew it wasn’t true. Wei Wuxian never regretted saving lives, saving innocent people, even if the whole world hated him for it. He always had to be the hero.

“Hey, what're you doing out of bed? Wait - how did you even get here without being caught? You were supposed to stay in your room!” Jiang Cheng said, not knowing what else to say, awkwardness overwhelming him. He couldn’t begin with *I couldn’t find your son*, or *your son is undoubtedly dead*. His mouth wouldn't even form the words, his lips tightly closed as if he had been cursed with the Gusu Lan’s silencing spell.

Wei Wuxian flinched up, his head swiftly turning to look in Jiang Cheng’s direction, assessing his whole body. Wide, distressed eyes met his, Wei Wuxian’s body slumping as if he was a puppet and his strings were cut, the utter devastation he felt making him curl up. His heart broke as he met those shocked eyes that stared deep into his soul.

It was pointless to try to think of words to say on his way back. The lack of a small child told Wei Wuxian enough.

Jiang Cheng helplessly watched as his brother was destroyed from the inside out, his heart shattering into a million pieces, his mind collapsing. When tears appeared in Wei Wuxian’s eyes, it broke Jiang
Cheng out of his trance, and he rushed to awkwardly embrace his brother, not having the ability to do much else. Time manipulation was, unfortunately, an impossibility. He could not save the Wens, nor save his brother from his grief. He had lost that chance long ago.

Tears delved into sobs, and soon sobs was outright bawling. Jiang Cheng’s arms tightened around his brother, his heart aching with every new shake of his body, holding him close like one may do with a child. He was forced to press Wei Wuxian’s face into his shoulder as his crying got too loud, smothering his sobs and hiding his pained face, afraid that someone would hear, that someone would find them and take Wei Wuxian away. They were not safe even in their own home. He hated doing it, hated that he had to hide Wei Wuxian when he finally showed him some weakness. The last time his brother had cried in front of him was when they were pitiful children. After that, Wei Wuxian hid every problem, his pain, locking himself behind a mask and putting everyone before himself.

Wei Wuxian was not just crying for his child. This was all the tears he had never allowed himself to cry in his twenty-two years of living, holding them in until they started to pool over, until it all got too much.

Their family’s death and the loss of their peaceful home had been a crack in his soul. Jin Zixuan’s death was a rock to the already fragile glass wall, widening the slim crack into a gaping hole. Their sister’s death had been devastating, hitting on the glass until spiderweb cracks spread along it, ready to break at the slightest of winds. His child had been the last string holding him together. It was what truly broke him, shattering the delicate wall and grounding the pieces into dust, ripping his soul from his body.

Now, he was drowning in the tears that had been built up for too long.

Jiang Cheng frowned at the realisation. He had the urge to join his brother in his weeping, the voices in his head screaming at him, invading all of his senses until all he was let with was the mindless ramblings that were born from his own inability to come to terms with things *(It's my fault, my fault)*. But he could not weep for those he did not feel sadness for. The Wens were unknown beings to him, a simple small society which his brother had protected, their personalities blank spaces and their lives without a name. He did not feel sad for his brother’s son, the little boy a stranger to him, but rather his brother, who’s body crumbled in his hold, his heart wracked with grief.

Nevertheless, he held his brother tighter and tighter, as if he was attempting to mould their two bodies together to become one, hoping to keep Wei Wuxian whole with only his hug. He ran his fingers through his hair, even as they got tangled in the dried mud that still coated the strands. Placing small, butterfly kisses on the top of his head as their sister once did to them when they were younger, Jiang Cheng shushed his brother, gentle and calm noises escaping him in an attempt to soothe him, like he did when the newly orphaned Jin Ling tantrumed up a storm.

Apparently, he could be gentle and soft and kind in the most desperate of times.

Slowly, gradually, Wei Wuxian quietened with him. His bawling receded back into sobs, and those sobs soon transformed into silent tears. They sent knives piercing into Jiang Cheng’s heart, hurting him more than the loud bawling could ever do. He wanted to see his brother happy, not cause him more sadness.

He was truly a useless brother.

Kneeling before their family’s alters as if they were begging for protection, Jiang Cheng held his brother close, a wave of familiarity washing over him. Once, days forgotten to people but soaked into the petals of the Lotus flowers, Wei Wuxian him close after a particular nasty fight in which they had the unfortunate opportunity to see that left him tears. Wei Wuxian had promised that he would
protect him from the whole world if he had to. Jiang Cheng, with his shoulder soaked and heart heavy, now promised the same.

He would destroy the one who caused this.

Chapter End Notes

Don't blame poor XiChen ;(  

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