**A Game for the Fool**

by **LadyCroft_Undead19**

**Summary**

How do you want to be remembered?
Obviously one will always want to be remembered as a good person, someone great whose virtues outweigh the flaws, of course they'd want to be remembered as someone who did something in life, who accomplished something with the time they were given, someone others could be proud of, or remember fondly of, years down the road.

Everyone always wants to be remembered when they were at their best and not at their lowest.

I like to believe I was a good person, funny and smart and kind, someone who proved to be a good role model for future generations.
I died content.
I wonder why, then, did I find myself in such a peculiar situation?

"Quest: Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation"
"Will you accept this Quest?"
[YES] [NO]

**Notes**

Hello everyone!
So, to start I have actually no idea how exactly to write a gamer-fic, so I guess we'll find out
how good I am at it together?
And I would to thank Dragonesque with her fic "Cradle", for being a great inspiration for
me, her fic is awesome and a must read!

- Inspired by Cradle by Dragonesque
How it starts

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Life is a Dream for the Wise, a Game for the Fool, a Comedy for the Rich, and a Tragedy for the Poor." Sholom Aleichem

Chapter 1: How it starts

How do you want to be remembered?

Despite the fact that it looks like a fairly easy, rational and straightforward question, it is not in the least.

How do you want to be remembered?

Obviously one will always want to be remembered as a good person, someone great whose virtues outweigh the flaws, of course they'd want to be remembered as someone who did something in life, who accomplished something with the time they were given, someone others could be proud of, or remember fondly of, years down the road.

Everyone always wants to be remembered when they were at their best and not at their lowest.

Certainly, you want to be remembered in laughter and joy and bittersweet longing. You want someone to be there to remember you at all, to mourn after you, give proof that your life had meaning.

But is that how you will be remembered?

We all have dreams and hopes and expectations, we all strive to achieve something.

*But did we succeed?*

I do not know how to answer that. How do you measure your life and actions and say "I did it"? Did what?

I like to believe I was a good person, funny and smart and kind, someone who proved to be a good role model for future generations. But, at the same time, I am aware of what is said behind my back, "crazy", "disappointment", "outcast".

I know I won't be fully remembered as the odd lady from down the street who owned that lil' quaint bookstore cafe, nor as the aunt who always had sweets tucked away in her pockets, the storyteller on weekends who read fantastical tales to wide-eyed children, or just as the aspiring artist that had all the creativity and talent to make it big in the world but lacked the health to make it so.

That said, I was not, by any means, sad to go, nor was I lonely. Although my marriage to my (ex) husband hadn't worked out, he and I remained on good terms, so much so that his family never stopped treating me as anything less than family.

I had never had any children of my own, would never be able to conceive at all, but I had witnessed
every milestone of my nieces and nephews and shared their parents joy and sadness of watching them grow.

Even if I failed in reaching stardom with my art, I still passed my teaching on to my student, who I saw more as another sibling than a rather persistent brat who conned me into agreeing to teach her anything.

Even if my parents and blood siblings never acknowledged our relationship and went to great lengths to not be associated with me, who saw me as a stain in their family's otherwise 'spotless' history. I was the one who had the last laugh, though.

I made a life for myself without any connections or underhanded moves. My life was my own and that was enough for me.

Could I have done more? Been something more?

Possibly. If situations had changed and somethings different, then certainly.

But I wouldn't trade the life I'd lived away.

I died of age-related complications in a hospital room surrounded by family and close friends. The man who I had once thought to be the love of my life, before the passion simmered down to mutual respect and admiration, holding my hand and reminiscing about the good old days.

The children I had watched grow were all adults now, with lives and families of their own, and my student would be fine without me.

I died in comfort. I died knowing I was loved.

I died content.

I wonder why, then, did I find myself in such a peculiar situation?

"A New Quest has become Available!"

"Do you wish to view New Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I stared at the floating letters, glowing with a faint blue light in the pitch black void I found myself in.

I reached out to the [YES] button, because I was curious to a fault and by god had my nephews 'schooled' me about the wonders of video games, and I had honestly nothing to do at the moment other than stare at the letters (which would get boring pretty fast), mildly interested in the fact that my body, still wearing that goofy hospital gown with the mickey mouse faces on it, was wrapped in intricate lines of the same glowing blue light as the letters.

"Quest: Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation"

«You find yourself in the body of Wei Ying, thrown years into the past, with the knowledge of the war all that has happened up to your death.
You decide to change your future.
But will you be successful?»
"Will you accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I blinked, thought my old eyes had finally given up on me, and proceeded to read it again slowly. And again after that. And once more, just to be sure.

No, the letters didn't change. The content remained the same. And I pondered on what that meant for my failing sanity that what bothered me wasn't the sheer madness that was this situation (half convinced I was hallucinating the whole ordeal, and it wouldn't be the craziest hallucination I'd had) but the fact that I recognized that title.

One of my nieces had asked me to read this novel she's found on the internet titled "Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation", written by a chinese author. She'd wanted to have someone to talk to about the book but none of her friends was interested in reading it and, in her words, her mother was out of the question. I easily accepted, there were worst things the kid could be doing other than reading a book in the cafe under my watch, and even if the book turned out to be a bore, well... I had read encyclopedias growing up, I knew worst ways to spend my time.

In the end, it wasn't neither the longest or weirdest novel someone had asked me to read, and as for my niece's interests... I wasn't in any position to judge anyone's reading preferences but if she felt that I was a safe person to talk to about doubts or the pains of 'being different', well my door was always open.

I had loved the plot of the novel, well-thought out and with well-written characters and meaning, it was easy to love.

Actually, for that niece's birthday I had painted her a portrait of the two main characters, Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian.

Whose birth name happened to be Wei Ying.

If this really was some sort of daydream or hallucination then kudos to them, because they were clearly going the extra mile on this one, it really looked like this whole thing was real.

What if it truly was?

I pursed my lips. Although I had loved the novel, I obviously had some bones to pick with the author, changes I would've liked to see, but that was to be expected of a fan.

Looking at this objectively, Wei WuXian did not have a bad ending, it wasn't a fairy-tale happy ending by any means, but it wasn't a bad ending either.

Question was, should I change it?

Whilst it was all very well and good to believe you can change something for the better, the same held true for changing something for the worse.

I reread the 'Quest' once again, "Found myself in the body... up to your death."

I was going on a limb and assume this meant the siege of the Burial Mounds, so no Mo XuanYu.

'And no knowledge of his "happy ending", go figure.'

The information was too vague, I needed to know more.
Would I forget who I was? Would I really only remember being Wei WuXian and these two years after the war?

This made no sense...

"Will you accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

My heart quivered in my chest. I hesitated.

Why would I do this? Should I do this? At what cost? For what?

What do you have to lose?

I twitched and drummed my fingers over my crossed arms. I was already dead, even if this was all some highly detailed hallucination, I would still be dead very soon. My body wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

My life was complete and all my worldly affairs were sorted out, even if I forgot I had ever been Sarah Windsor. So what would it matter? She would be gone either way and if I accepted… A new world.

A new life... One filled with the potential to be someone great.

The next great adventure!

I chuckled and uncrossed my arms, musing on what led me to this very moment.

When all was said and done I was a crookedly old woman with all the snark and wit of a twenty-year old stuck with the curiosity and wonder of a five-year old child.

Really, what else would be my answer?

I pressed the button.

"You have accepted the Quest: Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation."
A new life begins

Chapter Summary

It's a brand new day in a brand new life, and oh, look! That's a pretty rock!
*Falls over*
Honestly, sometimes life just starts with a dramatic entrance, other times it all starts by tripping over your feet and getting a bump on your head for your troubles.

'Well... that certainly doesn't sound very helpful,' I blink at the description.

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello!
Wow, so amazed by the response this fic has had! Really happy you're enjoying it!
Hope you like today's chapter!

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Fate laughs at probabilities." - Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton

Chapter 2: A new life begins

Moment of honesty here, out of all the numerous possibilities of how I would wake up in this brand new life, I was not, truly not, impressed with waking up as a three year old.

Waking up as a preteen Wei WuXian in Lotus Pier? Possible.
Waking up as a teenage Wei WuXian in Cloud Recesses or just before that? Likely.
Waking up as an adult Wei WuXian just trying to get out of the war alive and attempting to not die immediately after? Probably.
When the damn Quest read "thrown years into the past" I was not anticipating it meant more than a decade into the frikin past.
To remember my previous self was a toss-up, so I wasn't overly concerned that, yes, this had actually happened and the interesting game-like interface that greeted me with a cheery little ring was all just a part of this new life's charm, I was guessing.
Oh, and cherry on top of the ice-cream sundae?
I woke up as a three year old that had just managed to fall over and hit his head pretty bad.
"Owww..." I sat back on the ground and pressed my palms to my throbbing head. It hurt!
"A-Ying? Are you okay, baby?" A soft voice called out to be from behind, "That was a big fall!"

Everything is literally a big fall to a three year old, they can barely reach someone's knees...

I look behind me to see a couple standing beside a donkey, placing bags and other stuff into the pockets of the saddle it had on, wearing simple robes and both having impossibly long hair. The woman was looking back at me, grey colored eyes shining with worry, and her mouth was pressed into a thin line.

I probably shouldn't have just stared at her in shock, because holy hell this was Wei WuXian's mother, the Great CangSe Sanren!

She looked beautiful, not in the 'drop-dead gorgeous' sense of the word mind you, but something about her coloring and the way she held herself made my mind go blank for a second. Of course, when it comes to mothers, one second hesitation is enough to assume something is wrong with their child.

Wait... Did that make her my mother now?

I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that, I had no doubts that CangSe Sanren was a good mother for Wei WuXian, so much so that the boy turned man respected her and loved hearing about her. Understandable given the circumstances.

But, unfortunately, the word 'mother' would forever be associated with a stormy faced woman who saw isolation and deprivation of basic needs as completely normal punishments. My mother-in-law and sisters-in-law had helped curb those misconceptions and I could logically understand that the actions of one woman did not mean every single person did the same, but it was... hard.

"A-Ying?" The woman called out again and started walking towards me without waiting for a response, "Are you hurt?"

I opened my mouth to answer her but barely hold in the flinch when another cheery ring sounds right beside my ear (& oww, my head!) and a new message in glowing blue letters opens up in front of my eyes.

"New (Main) Quest Available!"

"Do you wish to view this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

Okay... Could you please give me a heads-up before, loudly, announcing that right beside my ear? Or better yet, could you not announce that right beside my ear?

The words floated right in front of my eyes, just solid enough to read but still translucent so that I could see through them, and I immediately focused on them because, wow they were really shiny and how cool!

"A-Ying?" The woman was suddenly just there, kneeling in front of me, and I jump in surprise.

I stare at her and blink, what the hell was I supposed to do?

"My head hurts..." I tell her, dazed.

Her grey eyes show worry and she pulls my hands away from my head so she could see what the
"How many times have I told you not to run too fast, you'll trip over your feet!" Typical mom's voice, right there, let me tell you, "It's okay, it's just a bump."

Well, thank goodness it wasn't something like a split skull, that would just make my dramatic entrance into this world all the more ridiculous!

She picked me up and settled me against her hip with the ease I had only seen on husbands and body-builders, like I weighed next to nothing, which was explained by the muscle I could feel underneath her robes.

...Holy hell, I wanted to be like her...

Didn't Wei WuXian take after his mother? I vaguely recalled that he looked very much like her... Or was it a comment my niece had made?

"He's alright then, honey?" A man's voice sounded above me and I looked up to see dark eyes shining with love and a rueful expression on his face.

Apparently my father also had a stubble... Would wonders never cease?

"He's fine, just a bump," She sighs, "This is what happens when you go on about all the adventures and 'beasts' you've defeated right before we're set to leave."

"Heh? It's my fault now?" His face does this comical little fault before he sighs and shrugs, "Whatever you say, darling."

I was not proud to say that I laughed at that.

Goodness, this was so funny! I hadn't seen such a well domesticated husband since Cynthia brought home that comely young man that she's somehow conned into acting as a dress-up doll for the bored older ladies of the household while the rest of the family went around bustling like ants getting ready for the wedding.

Good times.

"A-Ying, how could you laugh at your poor father!" The man gasps in fake-hurt, clutching his chest.

"He knows who's the one in charge here," CangSe Sanren answers back without missing a beat.

Oh, I was so going to be like her. Prime role model right here!

And then my thoughts soured.

Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren died when Wei WuXian was around four years old.

It would be incredibly easy to say 'Not if I can help it!' or 'Not on my watch!' but I hesitated. Truthfully, I was not expecting to even meet them at all, in all the scenarios that played in the back of my mind before I accepted that "Quest" Wei WuXian would already be an orphan, furthermore he would already be involved in what I would call 'canon timeline'.

This was so far out of canon I felt myself flounder for a moment.

"A-Ying?" A hand presses against he bump of my head and I whine, trying to get away from the...
offending hand, I look up at my... at Wei WuXian's mother, and pout.

"That hurts..." I whine.

She huffs and shakes her head, "Are we all set to go?" She asks her husband.

"Yeah, all the things packed, the house is empty," He tells her, "Want me to carry him on my shoulders or do you want to have him on the donkey?" He asks.

"Shoulders?" I perk up.

They share a look before the man shrugs with a small smile.

"Take him, and make sure he doesn't fall and really hurt his head this time!" CangSe Sanren just sighs, "You're truly your mother's child and I feel Shizun would be laughing at me if she saw me now."

"And think, he's not even old enough to try to sneak off on his own!" Wei ChangZe chortles.

His comment was not appreciated and I'm sure he regretted it once he saw the glare he earned with that quip. He quickly took me from her arms and let me clamber on top of his shoulders, holding onto my ankles to make sure I wouldn't tumble off.

He was tall. Like, really tall. Sure, my perception of heights was screwed because I was, like, really tiny but, holy hell, I was going to grow just as tall or I'd file a complaint to whoever thought genetics would make me handsome as all hell but shorter than most of the characters.

Actually, Wei WuXian was one of the tallest characters, around 186cm? Before dying, that is. Mo XuanYu was short.

...I was not going to die. No way, no how.

Wei ChangZe took hold of the donkey's reigns and started walking, his wife sitting primly on the back of their donkey with their bags, and I was excited to get on with the trip.

Which is just as well because the damn cheery ring sounds once again right next to my ear.

Thankfully, I neither flinched nor jumped out of my skin, but I sure as hell frowned at the glowing letters in front of me.

"New (Main) Quest Available!"

"Do you wish to view this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

'Yes, yes... Show me the damn Quest,' I grumbled in my mind, picturing clicking on the [YES] button. No way in hell was I 'clicking' on empty air and make my... huh... caretakers? question my sanity.

The Quest box opened.

"Quest: Welcome to the Basics!"

«You are now a three year old and ready to take on the world! (Except not really)
There's adventures to be had and mysteries to uncover, but, beware, danger lies in every corner.

"View Quest Objectives?"

[YES] [NO]

'Well... that certainly doesn't sound very helpful,' I blink at the description.

Truly, how was this my life now?
What's That?

Chapter Summary

Where there's a basic tutorial for life.
Important decisions are taken and questions are asked.
Oh, and look! Pop-ups!

Chapter Notes

I am going to be honest here and say that I have zero experience in writing gamer-fics, and take inspiration from "Solo Leveling", "Scum Villain's Self Saving System" and from a Core Rulebook from the "Legend of the Five Rings" Roleplay game.
And if you play or have seen that book you'll quickly recognize some of the attacks and abilities later on, because I'm a total 0 when it comes to be creative about figuring out attacks, battles and cool techniques.

+ A Game for the Fool +

"A decision without the pressure of consequence is hardly a decision at all." Eric Langmuir

Chapter 3: What's that?

"View Quest Objectives?"

[YES] [NO]

Why ask if there's only one answer that will keep you from bothering me and let me enjoy the scenery?

'Yes,' I mentally press the button.

"Welcome to the Basics Quest Objectives:"

| Explore the Player Menu (Incomplete) |
| Level Up (Incomplete) |
| Acquire a New Skill (Incomplete) |

"Bonus Objective:"

See a ghost (Incomplete)

"Accept this Quest?"
'So... This was like a tutorial?' I wondered,' With easy objectives meant for you to figure out commands and how the game is played?'

Would this actually have like an interactive HUD letting you know what you could or could not interact with? Somehow I couldn't exactly picture that seeing as I was firmly living the environment and not staring at it through a screen.

I'd be understandably pissed if I couldn't jump over a fence or something like that. Once I was physically old enough to jump over anything, of course...

I accepted the Quest and looked around, nothing had really changed and no other pop-ups showed up to explain how to complete any of those objectives. I figured this meant it was up to you to find out the commands for yourself, which was fine by me. Gave me time to actually look around me and see the world I found myself in.

Wei ChangZe was walking at a sedate pace and the donkey didn't look to be in any hurry to get him to pick up the pace. The sky above me was a clear and bright blue, the wind was cold but the sun kept me warm enough. Speaking of warmth...

I looked down at myself, seeing the clothes I was wearing for the first time. They were simple robes, rather thick and sturdy, to obviously survive a rambunctious toddler getting into everything, and were very plain. Either I was used to brightly colored clothes or I was expecting to see the 'gorgeous' robes that people supposedly wore in these stories.

Except this isn't just a story anymore and we're not exactly in a position to wear pretty clothes.

Oh, right.

I really didn't want to get involved with the elephant in the room, but I was brought up to be a rational, if not overly analytical young woman, in attempts to curb the symptoms of my illness and the obvious signs that something was not quite right with me, but I digress.

So, I needed to think this out.

I was in the body of Wei WuXian, the one who would one day be called the Yiling Patriarch, the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, the flipping Bogeyman of the Cultivation World. I needed to get my act straight and get ready to play for keeps.

What did I know about Wei WuXian?

He was orphaned at around age four, the son of two Rogue Cultivators who were quite hard to pin down, as evidenced by the fact it took years for Jiang FengMian to discover the then seven year-old Wei WuXian in what I chose to believe had been Yiling.

He was brought to the YunmengJiang Sect and lived there and was the Head Disciple of the Sect, treated as part of the Jiang family despite the tension that placed on the Jiang Clan's relationships.

He would go on to study at Cloud Recesses and be a menace to their proper and strict teachings and mentality. Meet his future husband there.

...I was not going to get anywhere near that topic at the moment. Maybe not even in the next ten years, just no...
Then there's the war. And after the war there's suddenly this snowball effect of bad decisions and consequences that eventually leads to Wei WuXian's death and the destruction of his life's principles.

That was what had happened in the novel. But I was being given some sort of Carte Blanche to change that, problem was, what did I change and what did I keep as is? I had to think of the Butterfly Effect and the consequences of changing a seemingly inconsequential event.

I thought about it, really thought about it, and I reasoned I wouldn't change Wei ChangZe's and CangSe Sanren's deaths.

It sounded callous of me to say this but, well, they weren't quite... real yet. And although I had no doubt I would eventually grow fond of them and like them, even if I tried to acknowledge that they weren't just characters made of paper and ink, but actual living and breathing human beings... Their deaths were what set canon in motion.

Had they not died, Jiang FengMian would've never tried to find him, or brought him to YunmengJiang.

If I started changing things willy-nilly then 'canon' would become unrecognizable and I wouldn't be able to predict anything. I'd be caught flat-footed all the time, and if I was being honest, I was low-key terrified of what was in store for me in the future.

I was a bookstore owner, cooking and brewing coffee to feed the people coming in to read my book collection. I had been an aspiring painter! I wasn't that excited to grow up to wield swords and face droves of people trying to kill me.

Hell, the thought of having to kill anything made me queasy.

But I would have to, eventually, because this was my life now and I didn't want to lose it.

So, I would try to keep the timeline as close to canon as possible.

"A-Ying, you're so quiet!" Wei ChangZe spoke up suddenly," Is your head still hurting?"

His voice brought me out of my spiraling thoughts, I blinked and poked at my head. Ow.

"Yes?" I answered.

He laughed and jostled me slightly, "When we reach our next stop, we'll ask mom to kiss it better, it always works, doesn't it?"

_Huh, the constant child-friendly comments would grow old quickly._

"Yes..." I nodded, "Where are we going?" I asked.

"A nearby town, they're having some problems with their cattle. Might be the work of an evil being!" He tickles my ankles and tries to make his voice deeper at the end of his sentence.

_I wasn't impressed._

"What kind of evil being?" I asked him.

I got the impression that he was pouting at me, "Hmm, might be a Hungry Ghost or maybe just an Yao being mischievous and causing trouble," He answers.
"Hungry Ghost? Yao?" Those peaked my interest.

He huffs and mutters something too low for me to hear, "Hungry Ghost are always hungry and feed on the life-force of any living animal, usually cattle or forest critters; Yao are a wide range of beings, too many too name. But don't worry, they shouldn't prove to be a challenge for your mom and I!"

I gave him a 'hmm'. Not that his explanation wasn't interesting but I really wanted all the small details and gritty little descriptions. His child-friendly approach sated children's curiosity but failed to quench my thirst for knowledge.

So I went to try and find something else to occupy my time with.

Found it by pointing at every single plant that we came across.

"What's that?" I would ask and point.

Wei ChangZe would huff and answer.

After about twenty or so off these exchanges, I heard his wife start laughing and he would just sigh whenever I went to point at anything.

"New Skill Acquired!"

"Foraging Skill leveled up!"

...Huh... Wasn't that interesting?

"Quest Objective Completed!"

Also, interesting. Go me!

I gave myself a pat on the back and reasoned that if there was any skill worth learning about before being out on the streets all alone, then foraging was probably the best to go for.

Or thieving.

...How the hell do you practice thieving without getting killed the moment you get caught?

Well, obviously not getting caught would be the way to go, duh...

I should probably get on with checking out that Player Menu stuff, shouldn't I?

Yeah, probably. Most likely. Certainly.

Mentally picturing something popping up with the words 'Player Menu' failed, so I went ahead and thought 'open Player Menu'.

Surprise, surprise that worked.

«The Player Menu contains all the Player's Stats, Info, Equipment (in use), and Skills. Further information can be obtained by using the command 'Help'.

Example: "Help, Stats"»

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3]
Stats: 10 Points Available;
Intelligence: 5 Stealth: 3
Strength: 3 Charisma: 5
Agility: 3 Senses: 3
Stamina: 5 Luck: 5

Skills:
Language: 5 Writing: 2
Foraging: 1

Equipment:
Common clothes (child)
Straw sandals

I was faintly bemused by the fact that this actually looked like a character menu from a video-game and I was not expecting this. Then I noticed faint little tabs on the side of the menu, reading things like 'Inventory', 'Talent Tree', 'Advantages', 'Quest Page', and 'Story Arcs'.

Guess things just got a whole lot more interesting.

I dearly hoped my devilish grin didn't show on my face, children should be seen as perfect little angels and not as devils in the making.

I failed.

Oh, well... Wei WuXian's brand of craziness had to start somewhere.
Chapter Summary

Where things are explained, lots of reading ensues, and oh, look! A pretty bird!
Also, teleportation is real.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Discovery is the ability to be puzzled by simple things." Noam Chomsky

Chapter 4: So many shiny things!

So, first things first: Stats.

'Help, Stats,' I try out.

«Stats: The Player increases their Stats with Stats Points (ST) gained through leveling up and completing Quests. All Stats increase over time.
There are eight stats: Intelligence, Strength, Agility, Stamina, Stealth, Charisma, Senses, and Luck.

Intelligence helps the Player learn skills from books faster, leveling (mental) skills, and increases the processing speed of their brain.

Strength allows the Player to hit harder and withstand hits better, while also allowing the Player to carry/lift heavier objects or people.
Strength does not change the outward appearance of the Player, so caution is advised with showcasing superior strength in front of eyewitnesses.

Agility increases the Player’s reflexes, how fast they can dodge, jump, or generally make a menace of themselves.

Stamina is what enables the Player to keep fighting, perform actions and how long they can keep certain skills active. Stamina is also connected with the Player’s health and speed of recovery.

Stealth involves not only going undetected but also to control ones own presence and how easily they can hide/take things.

Charisma is how well the Player can schmooze their way out of trouble or get information out of unsuspecting targets. Being a generally comprehensible citizen and have minimal social skills is tied with Charisma.

Senses are the Player’s hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. The ability to be aware of their surroundings, enemies and attacks.
Luck influences outcomes of actions, Quests, battles and events. Increased Luck tends to cause things to go favorably well to the Player and horribly wrong to their targets.

Whoever had made this had clearly gone through a whole lot of trouble to make these...

So, I have points to spend...

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
  Title: None Level: 1
  Class: None Fatigue: 10

  Stats: 10 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 5 Stealth: 3
  Strength: 3 Charisma: 5
  Agility: 3 Senses: 3
  Stamina: 5 Luck: 5

  Skills:
  Language: 5 Writing: 2
  Foraging: 1

  Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Straw sandals ]

And since I liked to round things up, I was putting everything at an odd 5, then increasing Intelligence and Senses.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
  Title: None Level: 1
  Class: None Fatigue: 10

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 6 Stealth: 5
  Strength: 5 Charisma: 5
  Agility: 5 Senses: 6
  Stamina: 5 Luck: 5

  Skills:
  Language: 5 Writing: 2
  Foraging: 1

  Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Straw sandals ]

Looked pretty good, even if there was no outward effect on increasing the Stats. Deciding not to question it for now, because there were newer shinier things to get to, I instead focused on the faint tabs on the side.

'Open, Inventory,' I say.

The Player Menu shifts into a blank square with several different subdivisions under the word 'Inventory'.
The Player's Inventory is where all items retrieved from mobs, Quests, or bought from the Store are automatically sent to. The Player can place any item (minus living creatures) in their Inventory and bring them out at any time. Extreme caution is to be practiced when using the Inventory in front of eyewitnesses as all items retrieved 'appear out of thin air'.

Oooh... I liked this. I really, really liked this. I had my very own hammer space!

Which I couldn't use all the time because showing up with no baggage and suddenly have I-don't-know-what in my hands was bound to attract attention.

...We're going to mess with so many people using this...

Next, Talent Tree.

The Talent Tree contains all abilities, special attacks, and 'power-ups' that can be unlocked as the Player levels up. Talents are divided into 4 categories; Martial Arts, Spiritual, Demonic, and Social. Abilities have 4 alignments; Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and Void. A mark of a well-grounded Player is to know which alignment to use at any given situation.

Warning: These abilities are no longer known to the world at large and may bring unwanted scrutiny.

So, in other words, I can have superpowers, but I can't use them because no one else has superpowers?

That's bullshit, whatever happened to everyone's special in their own way?

The memory of how Wei WuXian was treated for creating Demonic Cultivation kind of pops up in the back of my mind and I have to concede the game might be onto something by telling me to not show-off.

I go to click on those categories, because now I want to see what there is to unlock, but the following message dashes that.

"Player has not yet reached necessary levels to unlock this function."

...Not fair.

I try the store next.

This is where the Player can buy virtually any item, although some can only be obtained after they are foraged, crafted, or acquired from mobs. The Store also allows the Player to sell items for Quest Coins. Items have different prices, rarity, and quality, and can be found under several categories: Weapons, Equipment, Accessories, Consumables, Materials, Recipes, Books, Misc, and Gifts.

After closing that message the Store appears blank for a second before the previous message shows up again.

"Player has not yet reached necessary levels to unlock this function."

Oh, frik off... Shopping is shopping and one is never young enough to like shopping!
'Open, Quest Page,' I grumbled.

Interestingly, but still doesn't improve my mood, there's a map visible on this page with a smiley face pin showing my location on it. Too bad the whole map is covered by fog, telling me I have a whole world to explore and too short legs to travel all of it.

«Quest Page is divided into two sections: Accepted or Ongoing Quests, and Available Quests. The first section allows the Player to view the Quests Information and its requirements, as well as its rewards. The latter contains every single unlocked and available Quest, regardless if it's a Main Quest or a Side Quest, where the Player has to go and who to talk to in order to 'start' the Quest.»

There was a single ongoing Quest, which was Welcome to the Basics, and everything else was empty, so it was pretty obvious I'd only get things unlocked after I get this Quest over with.

"A-Ying, look!" Wei ChangZe suddenly spoke up.

Like a teenager caught red handed, I close the screen so fast and sit up straighter, immediately trying to find what he was pointing at.

A screech sounds above me and I look up, startled, to see this huge bird swoop down on the field beside us and come back up with a rabbit caught in its talons.

"ChangZe!" CangSe Sanren scolds.

Oh, yeah... Poor toddler just witnessed a fragile rabbit be taken away to serve as the main dish of the big bird.

T'was Life.

"I didn't know it was going to do that!" Her husband yelps.

"Does rabbit taste good?" I asked out of nowhere, stopping the conversation in its tracks.

I could practically taste the awkwardness that question brought up, and I took my job as complete.

"Yes... Rabbit can be quite delicious," Wei ChangZe finally answers.

"Can we eat rabbit?" I ask him.

"If your father could be so gracious as to catch us one," CangSe Sanren reasons.

I quickly turn to look at her with wide eyes, "Can I catch a rabbit?"

I could imagine worse ways to spend a day than to frolic in the tall grass trying to chase after nimble little buggers with this two stumpy little legs.

Probably fall over again and really do crack my head open.

Meh...

"Maybe," She answers, which was mother language for 'hell no'.

"Okay," I chirp and go back to look around at my surroundings.

If either adult found my behavior odd or different, none pointed it out and just kept going on with
their journey. I spent a few more minutes asking after the plants, critters and generally anything under the sun before I got bored of it again and went back to my Player Menu.

There were only two pages left to view, Advantages and Story Arcs, but I honestly couldn't find it in me to view them right now.

Oh, sure I was curious about them, but I wanted something more exciting.

I guess I started fidgeting a bit too much because Wei ChangZe finally stopped and took me off his shoulders and handed me to a bemused CangSe Sanren.

She held me close to her and I shamelessly snuggled closer to her. I wasn't going to lie, it felt pretty great, whether it was because I've always been a very touchy-feel-y person, because I lacked a physical connection growing up and was borderline touch-starved by my late teens, or simply because this body recognized its mother, I melted right into her embrace.

She laughed and stroked my hair, nearly making me purr because, oh yes, I loved this.

I shouldn't be too surprised I promptly fell asleep shortly after and woke up as the adults were settling in a rundown inn.

In hindsight, my confusion at my new surroundings and indignation that I had fallen asleep, were very, very amusing.

Chapter End Notes

All features will be explored in length throughout the story, but this is basically so you know 'what' there is to it, even if WWX can't use any of it right now. And, originally, I had written Tech Tree but it sounded really weird in my head so I just went ahead and replace it with Talent Tree.
Chapter Summary

In which there's boredom, an existential crisis, and that the worst thing about bored toddlers is that anything becomes fair play in search of entertainment. Oh, and parents? Please remember to never leave a child unattended.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity." - Ellen Parr

Chapter 5: The Woes of Boredom

"Why do I have to stay here?" I ask, and no, I am not pouting.

"Because mom and dad have to go deal with that evil being, and you have to stay here where it's safe," CangSe Sanren repeats once more.

"I want to go with you," I clutch at her robe, doing the best puppy eyes I'd learnt from my nephew Colin.

She wasn't impressed, clearly someone had mastered the art of puppy eyes in their youth as well, "I've already said no, A-Ying."

And that was that.

So, here I was, alone in a room. In some inn god knows where. And bored out of my mind.

"Ughhhhhhh..." I grumbled from where I was lying face down on the straw mattress that could, very politely, be called a bed. There was barely anything closely resembling a blanket, which was an automatic downgrade for me because I liked my blankets, I was also locked in because no one in their right minds would let a three year-old in an unlocked room with no supervision.

Even if they thought it was fine to do it if the room was minimally locked.

Only reason I wasn't freaking out was because the room was quite airy, like big windows that had no glass on them because... well, because for some reason they didn't have glass.

So, my claustrophobia wasn't acting up and I was minimally relaxed.

Minimally because I was bored and there was nothing to do in here. Well, the adults had left a smattering of toys here with me but really, I was a grown woman and I would not be entertained by a couple of straw dolls and a rattle drum. At least not for long.

I remember getting my nephews rattles similar to this one when they were little, to the dread of
their parents, and it made me feel slightly upset.

The weight of the situation was settling in, and despite the fact that I understood that I wouldn't have ever seen them again regardless of whether or not I took this chance, I missed them.

...Goddammit, I wasn't doing this.

I needed something to occupy my mind with.

'Open, Player Menu,' I said.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
  Title: None Level: 1
  Class: None Fatigue: 40

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 6 Stealth: 5
  Strength: 5 Charisma: 5
  Agility: 5 Senses: 6
  Stamina: 5 Luck: 5

  Skills:
  Language: 5 Writing: 2
  Foraging: 1

  Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Straw sandals ]

My fatigue had risen, and I could feel my body was slightly more tired than it had been this morning, but it made sense when it would be dusk soon and night fell pretty quickly from what I understood.

So bedtime. Great.

I remembered I still had two tabs from before, Advantages and Story Arcs.

Tough decision.

'Story Arcs,' I ended up deciding, laying belly down on the bed and propping my head on one hand.

«This page allows the Player to view the memories of Wei WuXian relevant to the current Story Arc.

It also records the Player's progress and how they have impacted the world around them.

There are fixed Checkpoints throughout the Story Arcs that the Player has to overcome.»

Peculiar.

The Page itself looked to me as a linear map with odd little marks here and there.

A timeline.

Curious.

Well, I won't be bored now, I guess.
I sit up straight on the bed and make a 'come here' gesture with my hands so the screen would get closer to me. Which it did, because this system was awesome like that, and I took a closer look at those odd little marks. Something about them tickled me funny.

Upon a closer inspection, it was easy to see why.

They were actually knots.

Like, someone had put a bunch of sewing threads in the same box, shook it or scrambled them together, and when you went to pull them apart you find them all tangled together at some point.

My money was on these 'Checkpoints' being those knots.

But what were they?

"Help, Checkpoints," I call out, being alone had its privileges.

«Checkpoints are fixed events of a Story Arc that the Player has to go through in order to advance to the next Story Arc.

They can be delayed and can be changed, but the Checkpoint event will always come to pass. It is the Player's choice on how to overcome the event.

All changes are recorded at the end of the Story Arc, showing the Player's impact on the world.»

...Fixed events...

I felt faintly sick to my stomach and I had this buzzing in my ears that let me know I was staving off a panic attack.

There were fixed events I would have to go through that I could not prevent from happening.

Logically I understood it, there had to be a semblance of a plot for a 'story' to happen, there had to be an insurance that whoever they picked up to take over their 'main character' kept to the script, but this... This wasn't just a story...

What were the Checkpoints?

I could easily count Wei WuXian's parent's deaths as one. What else?

Going to Gusu? The Burning of Lotus Pier? Being tossed into the Burial Mounds?

The Wen Remnants dying?

Breathe in. Count to 5. Breathe out.

Think... Calm down... Think...

The Checkpoint will always happen, but it can be delayed or changed.

Changed.

This just meant that the scene happened but the outcome wasn't certain.

So I could still work things out.

...Crisis averted then...
I slump over the bed again and groan, I don't need to check my profile to see that my fatigue had risen. I wasn't going to try and open the Advantages page after that emotional roller coaster, that one can wait. I closed the Story Arc page and rolled over on the bed.

I wasn't tired enough to sleep so I just laid there for what felt like hours but must've been only around ten minutes before boredom set in again.

Ughhhh... What is this *torture*?

I expected awesome adventures, shiny swords and cool stuff happening all the time. I had already spent months in the hospital stuck in a scratchy bed with scratchy and silly gowns, boring nurses (though they were very nice, the overworked dearies) and a complete lack of intellectual conversations until my family came to visit, I had done my time being bored!

I demanded entertainment!

"Tip: No great discovery was ever made without a bold guess."

I stare at the unprompted words floating above my eyes.

A *bold guess, huh?*

I roll of the bed and kind of titter for a moment. What could there be that I haven't discovered yet?

I open my Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3  
Title: None Level: 1  
Class: None Fatigue: 45  
Stats: 0 Points Available;  
Intelligence: 6 Stealth: 5  
Strength: 5 Charisma: 5  
Agility: 5 Senses: 6  
Stamina: 5 Luck: 5  
Skills:  
Language: 5 Writing: 2  
Foraging: 1  
Equipment:  
Common clothes (child)  
Straw sandals ]

It looked to me to be a simple and generic video-game character profile. There was the main information, the equipment, the points thing-y and...

*Skills.*

What were skills?

Language, writing and foraging?

Foraging seemed like an obvious skill to have in a video game, but language and writing? Wasn't that...
Wasn't that a given thing that people would already know?

Or were they?

I close the menu and walk up to the wall nearest to me. There's a really big piece of furniture with drawers and shelves on top. It looks sufficiently sturdy.

...Here goes nothing.

I start climbing the furniture, a foot there, a hand there, and pulling myself up to the shelves. The whole thing kind of shifts and bit but doesn't topple off and fall on me.

I make it to the top shelf.

"New Skill Acquired!"

Oh, my god, I'm a genius.

I open the Player Menu back up.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
  Title: None Level: 1
  Class: None Fatigue: 40
  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 6 Stealth: 5
  Strength: 5 Charisma: 5
  Agility: 5 Senses: 6
  Stamina: 5 Luck: 5

  Skills:
  Language: 5 Writing: 2
  Foraging: 1 Climbing: 0

  Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Straw sandals ]

Oh, my god, they aren't kidding.

That's actually a skill?

*What else is a skill?*

I quickly make it back down from the furniture, it wasn't that high to begin with, and look around the room.

*What else can I use?*

...

I pick up one of the straw dolls and chuck it across the room.

"New Skill Acquired!"

"Player Leveled Up!"
... *Well, I was definitely entertained now.*

Through the course of the next couple hours I found out a few more things. There was an action named Sprint that I could activate and drained my Stamina like nobody's business, that I had a very squeaky singing voice and that I was more flexible than I had ever been.

Oh, and that, upon reaching 90 or so of fatigue, you got constant warnings to get in bed and sleep.

I would've liked to have been awake when Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren came back though.

I'm sure the sight of a wrecked room and an angelic looking toddler sleeping soundly must've looked like a scene straight out of a comedy flick.

Chapter End Notes

Fair warning, there's going to be a minor timeskip in the next chapter (just a week or two in-story) so I might forget to explain something or fudge a bit of details. Anyway, hope you're all liking the story so far and thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

It's a beautiful day outside. Birds are singing, flowers are blooming...
On days like these kids—... A-Ying! What have I told you about the chickens!?

Chapter Notes

So, I kind of ran with the scene and just couldn't find the right place to stop, so I just kept writing. As a result I had to split this chapter into two.
I might post the other half tomorrow, depends on whether I finish writing chapter 8 today or not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Flowers always make people better, happier and more helpful; they are sunshine, food and medicine to the soul." - Luther Burbank

Chapter 6: Checkpoint

Chickens were surprisingly fast. And noisy. And they let loose more feathers than I expected.
That said, chasing around chickens was pretty fun.
Even if getting chased by a chickens was not so fun.
"A-Ying, what were you expecting?" Wei ChangZe is laughing at me," You've been chasing it non-stop for half an hour, of course it would get angry with you."
"I didn't touch it..." I grumble, clutching the hand the smug looking chicken had pecked.
"You still chased it and scared it," He points out.
I pout at him and went back down to the ground and show these chickens who's boss.
I've been living in this world for two weeks now. Fourteen days doesn't really sound like much but they had been the longest I'd felt in ages.
In someways this world was the same as mine, but in others there was an obvious difference on how I expected things to go and was confused by what actually happened.
Back in my world, traveling on the back of a donkey with a small child and no fixed residence was an automatic call to CPS, here no one batted an eye at me trailing after my parents or, in this case,
entertaining myself by chasing a farmer's chickens while CangSe Sanren barters with him for rice and other food supplies. In fact, given that Wei WuXian lived on the streets with other orphans and fought over food scraps with dogs, I shouldn't be too surprised that my 'sheltered' lifestyle in comfortable living conditions from the 21st century was... unprepared for what was in store for me.

I needed to plan ahead, I realized that, but at the same time I was just starting to get into the mindset that I was now Wei WuXian. I still stared at my own reflection, awed by how different I looked from how I pictured Wei WuXian to be like, and had a distinct reluctance to call either Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren 'father' or 'mother'. Even 'mom' and 'dad' were hard for me to say, because some part of me was still very much aware that they weren't.

I was a stranger inhabiting their child's body. And they didn't know, couldn't possibly think that their child was replaced by someone else when he tripped and hit his head on the ground.

Sometimes it was really hard not to let it show I was an impostor pretending at being a child.

Other times, this life was like a breath of fresh air. Letting me have another go at life with higher stakes and even bigger rewards.

I dived after another chicken and dropped that line of thought.

"Stat leveled up!"

During these last few days I had discovered new things about the System. Apparently there was a fixed number of Skills that they could show on the Player Page, and after I spent a couple hours trying different things under the sun and asking a whole bunch of questions, I'd discovered a couple more skills (and leveled them up, in turn raising my Player level, because I was just that good) the System basically sent me a message that said something along the lines of:

Due to constant skill acquirement, we're upgrading your Player Menu to make it easier to sort the skills out.

_Or something._

It was late, and I had been tired, so I just said 'ok, let me sleep' and closed the notification.

So my Player Menu now had tabs sorting my skills out.

```
[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
  Title: None Level: 3
  Class: None Fatigue: 60

  Stats: 3 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 7 Stealth: 6
  Strength: 6 Charisma: 5
  Agility: 7 Senses: 8
  Stamina: 8 Luck: 5

  Skills:
  -Martial
  Acrobatic: 1 Throwing: 2
  Climbing: 1
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
```
Also, if you performed certain actions Stats leveled up naturally, but it was still faster to just use Stat Points. And speaking of Stat Points, every time you leveled up you got 3 Stat Points to spend, whilst completing Quests game you around 5 Stat Points and some Quest Coins.

Speaking of Quests, I'd completed the 'Welcome to the Basics' two days ago. Finally coming around to stop goofing off and actually open the last page of the Player Menu. Surprise, surprise I couldn't actually use it yet but I got the impression there was cool stuff in there.

The description read:

« Advantages are perks the Player can unlock through performing specific actions or tasks an unspecified number of times, or by using Player Points. These help the Player in various situations much like Talents and Skills, but are constantly active and have no maintenance cost. But, be cautious, Advantages can easily become Disadvantages, if the Player fails an unspecified number of actions/tasks or because of an injury, for example.»

Which sounded pretty cool, but was entirely blank for now as per usual.

"A-Ying! Come on, we're leaving now!" Wei ChangZe called out to me.

Well, no need to say it twice. I closed the screen and ran back towards them, raising my arms in the universal 'pick me up' gesture.

He gave me this long-suffering sigh but complied and put me up on his shoulders. I grinned and messed up his hair, giggling when he tickled my ankles in retaliation.

Today was a good day.

This world was beautiful.

Like, my niece had told me all about that animated series they had been doing when I started falling ill and then gossiped about the pretty actors of the Live-Action adaptation and the beautiful sets but I hadn't actually seen any of it. For the portrait of the characters I had painted for her I'd just used some fan art as reference and did my own interpretation of what they looked like.

(Imagine my surprise at seeing my cute ass face for the first time and gaping at my reflection)

But this world was, without a doubt, beautiful.

The adults had decided to stop by this open field near a river and rest for a while before continuing on the journey to Qinghe, or Unclean Realm as I understood it. There was a posting of an upcoming Night Hunt they wanted to participate in at our last stop and so their travel plans had changed a bit.

We were supposed to head to Gusu but were instead going further north and then, finally heading all the way down to Gusu. Why I didn't know, but knowing what I knew of their travels, which was
absolutely nothing, I wasn't overly surprised.

Wei ChangZe had quickly sprawled out on the grass after tying the donkey over by the shade, and CangSe had sat down near him, pulling out a calligraphy set to pen down a letter or write in that book of hers.

Which I had tried to read but the characters looked like squiggles to me, my writing skill wasn't high enough to let me read it. Understandable, but frustrating.

So, instead, I went exploring.

I was perfectly aware that despite not actually looking in my direction both adults were keeping a tight watch on what I was doing.

The field was really big, with tall grass and critters jumping around. Summer was nearly over so they were gathering the last bits of resources they could before they had to bunker down for the colder weather, or if they were lucky, the still had the whole fall to do so.

So I was just jumping around the tall grass when I stop.

Because, *holy hell*, those were a lot of flowers.

There was a whole sea of them! What the hell?!

I grinned and ran down to where the flowers were. I remember this one time, Hannah and Abigail had decided to have a family picnic and everyone had to come or suffer through their gripping and generally making us feel like horrible human beings. They chose this old picnic park that wasn't used very often, a pretty quiet and secluded place, near this lake.

On the lakeside there grew these beautiful flowers. Really, *really* beautiful flowers.

The girls, especially the little ones, loved them. And proceeded to spend the afternoon picking flowers and making flower crowns and bracelets with weeds and stuff.

The next morning Hannah calls me in a panic, asking me to dust out my medical encyclopedias and look for such and such rash and symptoms.

Her daughter was completely covered in dots and very, very itchy.

Turns out the poor girl was allergic to flower pollen.

I chuckled under my breath at the memory. Hannah had been so upset that her daughter was feeling like that, and slightly disappointed they couldn't do similar picnics until a doctor cleared her.

There were dandelions, poppies, and some other wildflowers. I found their meanings under some dusty old memory of flower books I'd salvaged from a yard sale.

I weaved the flowers into a flower crown and plopped it on my head, having to work around the small ponytail CangSe always tied my hair into, before weaving a larger one for her.

*Sharing was caring and all that.*

Speaking of... I looked at the smaller, yet no less pretty, wildflowers and immediately thought of the severe bun Wei ChangZe wore his hair in. I could totally stick the flowers around it.

*If he let me.*
...Nah, unlike CangSe Sanren, he can't resist my puppy eyes. (I look too much like her for him to resist it)

I started filling my pockets with flowers and, after picking up the larger flower crown, walked back to where the adults were still relaxing. CangSe looked up when she heard me get closer and blinked at my new look, I could see her lips quirk up, and she opened her mouth to say something but I quickly made a hush gesture.

I tiptoed around Wei ChangZe, who was fake snoring (did he really think people really snored like that?), and placed the flower crown on her head, patting it as a show of praise with all the self-important air of a kind bestowing a royal title.

Her eyes shimmered in amusement, and then wickedness when I turned around and started pulling flowers out of my pockets.

*There was only one obvious target for those flowers.*

Wei ChangZe tensed the first time he felt my pudgy little fingers poke around his bun, but he must’ve done some 'spiritual energy' trick and saw that it was nothing too nefarious and relaxed, letting me play with his hair.

Seriously, these people had good hair too!

As I was placing the pretty flowers in his hair I hear the little chime meaning I had a new notification. I lifted my eyes just enough to see:

"New Skill Acquired!"

And then there was a different sounding chime, louder and less chirpy.

More like a bell toll.

"**Checkpoint Finished!**"

...

Checkpoint?

---

Chapter End Notes

*Story time: There was this one story my mother always told me about picking flowers. The really big ones? Yeah, 8/10 they'll have dozens of spiders inside them. Never believed her, it was impossible for there to be so many spiders inside a flower. (I was young and dumb)*

*Guess who found out it was true?*
Family

Chapter Summary

The missing scene from chapter 6 because it ran too long. Where there's cuddles, fluff and quite a lot of angst. You've been warned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Families are the compass that guides us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter." - Brad Henry

Chapter 7: Family

I recalled the Story Arc page and what I'd learnt from it, pausing slightly to process that tidbit of information, and realized I'd just crossed over one of them without realizing it.

It wasn't a particularly good feeling.

"A-Ying?" I looked back to see CangSe Sanren frowning at me.

I must've looked spooked by something.

"Are you okay, honey? What's wrong?" She gestures me to come to her.

...Well, who am I to refuse cuddles?

I finish sticking the last flowers on Wei ChangZe's hair and quickly settle on her lap, feeling her stroke my head.

"What happened?" She asks, using one hand to put away the ink and brushes back into their box.

I needed an excuse.

Deflect! Misdirection! Change topics!

"I just thought," I start, "I'm really happy with you." I tell her.

She smiles, "Then why did that make you sad? Mom and dad are also really happy to have you here with us."

And then I had a brilliant thought.

"But what if you're gone?" I looked up at her with teary grey eyes, "I'll be all alone?"
CangSe Sanren blinks and looks to ChangZe, who has heard everything and sat up to look at me with furrowed brows, before pulling me closer to her.

"Mom and dad aren't going anywhere anytime soon, silly," She tells me.

You actually are, and that is just the start of my titanic mountain of worries.

"But you leave me all the time, I get scared when you're not there..." I tell her," What if you don't come back?"

The adults share a not so subtle look, and ChangZe sits beside her and pulls me into his lap.

"What brought this on, A-Ying?" He asks.

I blink at him, and answer," The chickens."

There's a beat of silence.

"The chickens?" He repeats.

"Yeah, they all lived in big families," I tell him," But there's only us three... Do I have more family?"

He ponders for a moment before deciding to answer me," Well, my parents died when I was younger, so I lived in the servants quarters of the YunmengJiang Sect after that," He explains," I didn't have any siblings by blood, but I do consider someone my brother." He adds.

"So I have an uncle?" I asked, assuming he was talking about Jiang FengMian.

"Ah, FengMian?" CangSe smiles," We've got to send him a letter one of these days, it's been a while since we last sent one."

"Letter?" I turn to her," Can I help?"

Wei ChangZe laughed," Better to let the grownups write the letter, your penmanship needs some work."

I pouted at him.

"What about you, CangSe?" He turns to her," Do you think your Shizun has given you any new shidi or shimei?" He smiles coyly at her.

Or well, I guess I'm not supposed that's a coy smile...

CangSe turns red and smacks him on the arm, "ChangZe!" She hisses.

The man shows no remorse over pulling me closer and angling his body so I can serve as a shield.

...Great role model, I'll strive to emulate you when I grow up...

"So I have more uncles or aunts?" I ask her, pretending I didn't notice any innuendo, and bringing the conversation back on track.

CangSe throws one last dirty look at ChangZe (who's chuckling under his breath) and answers me," I don't know, A-Ying. Shizun takes in young children who's otherwise be left to fend for themselves. I had a shixiong but I never met him, he left the mountain long before Shizun took me
"So I have two uncles!" I grin.

She huffs a sigh and indulges me, "Yes, you have a Shijiu and a Shibo."

"We'll have to tell FengMian he has a nephew then," ChangZe pipes up.

"You mean, you're going to tell FengMian he has a nephew, my name is anywhere near that letter and Yu ZiYuan will have a bounty out for my head," CangSe rolls her eyes.

I blink at that. So Yu ZiYuan really didn't like my mother, huh?

I kind of figured, from her treatment of Wei WuXian and the cutting remarks, but it was hard to say if that contempt was mutual. CangSe seemed more amused than offended or upset over the irrational hatred.

"Where does Uncle live?" I ask them.

"FengMian lives in Lotus Pier, that's where his Sect is," ChangZe answers me, "Next time we pass through Yunmeng, we'll see if you can meet him."

"And what about Shizun?" I ask CangSe.

She hums for a bit before saying, "My Shizun is known as Baoshan Sanren, and she's very renowned in the Cultivation world, A-Ying. She lives in a mountain and never leaves it, and no one but her disciples ever see her."

"Oh?" I tilt my head, "Why doesn't she leave her mountain?"

She smiles, "Shizun is very strict about worldly matters, her rule is that if a disciple chooses to leave the mountain they must never come back." She answers.

"What if you really miss her?" I ask, "Can you send letters to her?"

CangSe laughs, "No letter arrives by itself, A-Ying, someone would need to climb that mountain all the way to the top to deliver it. And no one is allowed to know where Baoshan Sanren lives."

I pout, "That's silly," I complain, "If no one ever sees her then how do they know you're her disciples? Can anyone say they're Shizun's disciples?" I ask her.

"No," She shakes her head and goes inside her robes to pull out a metal pendant, "When we leave the mountain, Shizun gives her disciples this token, no one else can craft a token like this except Shizun. It's made of a special metal, you see?" She shows it to me.

Under the sunlight the metal shimmers in a pale lilac color, the sun glints off the metal feathers of the dream catcher pendant, catching on the beads made of clear quartz and bouncing off in an array of colors.

In the center of the circular metal array there's a carved mountain scene.

It was beautiful.

"Ever since YanLing Daoren came down from the mountain, my shixiong, it's been known that only Baoshan Sanren's disciples carry this token," She explains to me, "So anyone without it cannot claim to be her disciples."
That... made sense.

And then I have a perfect idea.

"So you grew up on a mountain?" I perk up, "What was it like?"

She laughs and relaxes where she's sitting, obviously convinced I was no longer worried about 'being alone,'" Well, it was fun. And hard, I had to hike up and down that mountain everyday following after Shizun as she taught me. And don't be fooled when people say she's old, she is, very, very old, but she's reached the peak of cultivation and she'll let you know just how spry she is if you mouth off to her." She ruefully told me.

"As you learned throughout the years?" ChangZe chuckled.

CangSe nodded with a sigh," She was a hard task master, but she was an excellent teacher. She taught me so much..."

"Like what?" I ask.

She looks down at me and holds my hands in hers.

They are calloused and worn, obviously the hands of someone who had spend many-a-day swinging a sword.

"Something I hope you take to heart, A-Ying," She said," Always remember people's kindness towards you, and never your kindness towards other."

...This was the infamous quote that Wei WuXian had as a life motto of sorts!

And blamed his terrible memory on.

I turn my nose, kind of, at the words.

"Why can't I remember being kind to others?" I frown.

"It's not that you can't 'remember' it, it's just that you cannot expect your kindness to be repaid, but always repay others' kindness towards you," She explains.

I think it though, to a normal three year old those words would just fly out of the metaphorical window and truly just 'forget' any kindness I showed anyone, which was probably what had happened to canon!Wei WuXian, now that I think about it.

"I'll try," I end up settling on, not fully agreeing but not totally averse to that worldview.

They both smile down at me and hug me.

"That's okay, you're a good child, A-Ying," Wei ChangZe tells me.

When the day comes, I wonder if I can let them leave without me to never, ever return.

I didn't want to really think about it.
So, while I can understand why some authors choose to just put the english equivalent of the chinese terms, I kind of like them, so they'll probably be peppered randomly around the story.

Anyway, Shixiong means Elder/Senior Martial Brother; Shidi means Junior Martial Brother; Shimei means Junior Martial Sister; Shijiu means Martial Uncle (mother's older brother) and Shibo means "uncle (affectionate name for a friend older than one's father)", I copied it from this nice website with a dictionary.

I'm going to assume Jiang FengMian was older than Wei ChangZe (and to make a nice parallel between their kids), and if XXC left the mountain at age 17, I read this on post somewhere, a year after WWX died then there was no way for CangSe Sanren and XXC to have met.

Food for thought, does Baoshan Sanren have more disciples that just never leave the mountain? Because I've read that "disciples that leave the mountain" or such and such, and it got me thinking, if her students always left her then wouldn't it be "once the disciples leave the mountain"?

Also, I made a (crappy) art of the dream catcher pendant but I have no idea how to show it here, and I'm open for suggestions.
Why so serious?

Chapter Summary

Where Qinghe is the best place to eat, there's a new Quest to tackle (wait, is that an actual Quest?) and there's something wrong with today's children.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"There is nothing quite as painful as a truly awkward silence." - Obert Skye

Chapter 8: Why so serious?

Qinghe was... loud.

Not loud like, everyone was running around screaming and making fools of themselves, but loud in the sense that it was bustling with people. This was a major trade center, especially for animal related products.

There was a whole new culinary level cooking in Qinghe, which was understandable given the sheer number of pastures, butchers, shepherds, and hunters. People got bored of eating the same dish over and over again, they needed to create new ways of eating the same type of food.

And it was good food.

"Is it yummy, A-Ying?" ChangZe grinned at the way I was enthusiastically stuffing rice, eggs and ham into my mouth. And they also had this soup with chicken in it that was soooo good.

I nodded my head, mouth too full to answer vocally.

We'd just arrived in Qinghe and had been traveling for hours so CangSe had decided to stop and eat, so that's what we were doing right now.

Eating damn good food.

It was almost fall too, this far north the weather was noticeably colder and the trees had already started to change color.

It made for a beautiful travel scene but it also meant that it got darker sooner, which meant that I only had a few more hours before I get reacquainted with the interior of an inn and left to brood and be bored out of my mind.

There was always skills to level up true, but that took time and it got repetitive soon enough.

A chirp interrupts my thoughts.
"New (Side) Quest Available!"

"Do you wish to view this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

Oh?

I discreetly watch the letters floating in front of me and mentally give myself a little cheer, because oh, yeah, this is good!

'Yes,' I couldn't agree any faster.

"Quest: Find A-Sang's Toy!"

«A-Sang has lost his favorite toy somewhere in the town center.
A-Sang is very sad without his toy.
Find A-Sang's toy.»

"View Quest Objectives?"

[YES] [NO]

...What?

No, wait, actually... What?

How is this a quest?!

I choke on my food and ChangZe quickly hits me in the back.

"A-Ying! Be careful!" CangSe fusses over me," Chew your food properly!" She scolds.

I nod, pausing to put my chopsticks down, and chew the rest of the food in my mouth. "M sorry," I cough.

CangSe gives me a look before turning to her husband, giving him an even more pointed look," No more stuffing your mouth with food, eat slowly." She finally tells me.

I nod again, finishing the rest of my rice and soup.

Pretending to be looking at my soup bowl I focus on the letters again.

There was no way this was a legit Quest.

Well... You are a three year old, not much you can do either way.

But searching for some kid's toy?

It's doing this or be bored, choose.

...Not fair...

'Yes,' I mulishly agree.

"Find A-Sang's Toy Quest Objectives:"
|o Find the Toy (Incomplete) |
|o Deliver it to A-Sang's brother (Incomplete) |

"Bonus Objective:"

|o Defeat the Bully (Incomplete) |

"Accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

...I stare at the Bonus Objective and have to force myself not to burst out laughing.

*This Quest was ridiculous.*

But it's still a Quest.

I accept it, and my eyes lock on the sudden ticking clock.

...*This is a time-locked Quest.*

Seriously?

"I'm done, can I go play?" I ask the adults, putting away my chopsticks correctly (see, I *do* learn!)

"Play where?" CangSe asks.

"That small garden, with the trees, there were other children there," I mentally applaud my quick thinking.

The two share another look before Wei ChangZe pulls out a strip of paper out of his sleeve.

*Okay?*

"Just let me put this under your robe and you can go, alright?" He tells me," You must promise me not to take it off, okay? Or you'll be spending the next few days practicing your writing and reading."

That was a very, very parental warning if I ever heard one.

"I won't take it off," I tell him," I'm a good child," I parrot back the words he said to me.

His lips do a funny little twitch and he chuckles, sticking that paper to my back," Yes, you are."

"Off you go, and be careful! Don't follow anyone who tells you to, do you head me, Wei Ying!" CangSe stresses.

"I won't!" I tell her and quickly make my way to the garden where I had saw those kids.

The Quest mentioned a Bonus Objective, so it either had to be related to the Quest or at least the toy had better be near the kids.

Well, going about this logically A-Sang was probably playing somewhere and forgot about the toy, so going to places where kids usually play was probably the faster way to find the thing.

Actually, the Quest didn't even tell me what kind of toy it was.
What was I looking for? A doll? A ball? A rattle? What?

'Help, A-Sang's toy?' I try.

No answer.

Well, it was worth a try...

The garden wasn't too far from where we had been eating, in fact I could hear the noise the kids were making, so I picked up my pace, weaving in and out of the crowd of people going about their lives.

There were about five or six kids of various ages and genders gathered here, playing games and generally being kids.

It was so damn easy to see who the 'Bully' was.

Like the stereotypical schoolyard bully, the first time I see him is when he has a smaller kid by the front of his robes and is legit shaking the kid in the air.

...What were kids being taught these days?

The Bully had another kid with him, if we went by stereotypes then it must be his little brother who was, somehow, offended by the scrawny kid being shaken, and he was delighted at seeing the bully deal with the other kid.

There were so many things wrong with this scene.

Like, none of the other kids were even looking at the bully. They could hear the other kid crying but no one spared him a glance or tried to help.

Seriously?

What was wrong with people these days?

"You shouldn't shake people," I told him as I walked up to where they were.

The Bully stops and looks down at me.

"You say something, shrimp?" He spits at me.

I smile at him, "I said, you shouldn't shake people. Do you have trouble hearing or are you just too stupid to understand words?"

Everybody stops.

Silence.

Then the other kids finally turn to us and the look of pure shock on their faces...

The Bully quite literally just drops the other kid, who is smart enough to start running as soon as his feet hit the ground, and turns to face me fully.

'Reight punch,' Something inside of me whispered.

I dodged.
The idiot blinked and before he had time to try and hit me again I punch him square in the nose.

I was short, sure, but he had bent down as he punched, his face was literally just there. Who could blame me?

"New Skill Acquired!"

"Brawling Skill leveled up!"

"Stat leveled up!"

How nice.

"Mah noooze!" The kid cried, his hands coming up to cup his nose, which had started dripping blood.

Uh... Guess I had used more force than I anticipated.

*Oops?*

"You punched my brother!" The shorter kid yelled and threw himself at me.

*Can I just say... Called it.*

As the kid threw himself there, for a split second, seemed to have been a moment where he looked frozen in mid-air, but I brushed it off. I once again dodged and the kid flopped to the ground.

Schoolyard spat rules, think quickly... What had my nephews done in situations like this?

"What are you going to do? Weren't you hiding behind your big brother just a moment ago? Like a sissy!" I taunted, part of me face-palmed at my own words, and went to hide in shame somewhere in a corner of my mind.

The other kids all laughed at my taunt.

"New Skill Acquired!"

"Player leveled up!"

*No comment.*

The kid looked up from the ground and right into my eyes, I cocked my head slightly to the side and stared him down from my nose, feigning superiority," Oh, what? Are you gonna say anything to me, sissy?"

He looks from me to try and search his older brother.

*Gone. Kid ran as soon as his nose wouldn't stop bleeding.*

This kid wasn't too bad himself, he saw that he was all alone, saw that there would be no support from the crowd (everyone was still laughing at him), and then looked back at me.

He got props from me for knowing when to cut his losses.

Kid got up and took off running out of the park.
"Hey, you!" A girl in pig-tailed braids comes up to me, "You can have this, I found it by the fountain, it's really pretty!"

She hands me a wooden carved bird, painted rather intricately in blacks and yellows, and goes back to her game.

As soon as I grab hold of the toy, letter float above it.

"A-Sang's Toy (Quest Item)"

...

Sparres me the time of going to look for it, I guess.

Then girls words are fully processed in my head.

"Where's the fountain?" I ask a random kid.

He blinks, and points in a direction, "It's right in the middle of the market," He says with the tone of voice that made it seemed like the answer was obvious.

I thanked him and started to head towards the fountain, I peeked at the floating clock and saw that I still had plenty of time.

*I guess it was in case the Player hadn't went to look for the kids?*

The fountain was, indeed, pretty obvious once you entered the market.

I got there but saw no one that seemed to be looking for a toy, nor did I see any crying kid bawling after it, so I kind of sat at the fountain and thought of where to go from here.

I still had the toy in my hands.

It was a very beautifully carved toy bird, I wanted one of these for myself. I turned the bird in my hands, hoping to find some clue as to where this A-Sang might be.

As it turns down, there's a very big clue on the underside of the bird.

A stamp mark.

In the shape of a *beast head.*

"New Skill Acquired!"

A-Sang... A-Sang...

*It couldn't be...*

'Deliver it to A-Sang's brother'...

*It couldn't be... No way...*

A commotion drew my attention, there, just on the other side of the fountain, came these people hurrying into the market and desperately searching for something. After them trailed a child.

*A rather tall and intimidating child.*
It was a young Nie MingJue.

Oh, duck.

...For a moment I considered just tossing the toy in his direction and run like hell out of the market, since the System was obviously sending me to my death, but I quickly nixed the idea. To flee would only bring scrutiny and 'blame' onto my shoulders.

The adults, most likely servants, were hard at work searching for the toy, and wasn't it just adorable how big brother MingJue had obvious enlisted these people to help him find his little brother's toy, but they hadn't looked in my direction yet.

Key word, yet.

I had to make a decision quickly.

I looked at Nie MingJue again, already heads and shoulders above other kids his age and having a scowl worthy of Drill-Sergeant Nasty, and reasoned he wouldn't kill me.

Probably...

*Just suck it up, you're the one who accepted the Quest.*

I regret everything.

I get up and walk up to him, no one spares me a single glance (which okay, I did not look like a threat when I had no doubt the kid could bench press me), and when I get within a feet or two from him I raise the toy up for him to see.

"Is it yours? A girl had it at the garden and said she found it," I tell him, because if I was going to suffer so would that girl, equality!

Nie MingJue looks down at me and I can tell the exact moment he recognizes the toy in my hand.

His brown eyes blaze up and he opens his mouth, to shout at me probably, and I panic.

"Did you know birds have hollow bones? That's why they're so light! And why they can fly... If humans had hollow bones we wouldn't be able to move though, because our bodies are really, really heavy..." I babble.

"And, and, ants! Ants are really strong! They can lift up to twenty times their weight... And they're fast too, if people ran as fast as ants do then they'd be as fast as a horse!" I go to continue babbling when he bonks me on the head.

_Lightly._

"Shut up," He tells me.

I don't need to be told twice.

He extends his hand and I hand him the toy bird.

"*Quest completed!*"

There's this awkward moment of silence.
"A-Wu, get the kid a treat," He then tells a servant beside him," We're going home."

"As you wish, Young Master Nie," The servant bows, and the rest follow after their master.

After they're gone the servant turns to me and smiles," What would you like to eat?"

"Bun?" I weakly ask, too confused and definitely shaken from this experience.

The servant nods and leads me to a nearby stall, telling me goodbye after buying me a bag of buns.

I sit back down at the fountain, lost on what to do.

...

They were good buns.

Chapter End Notes

How many recognized the name A-Sang?
And why do you think NMJ got him a treat at the end?
Chapter Summary

Where one becomes a year older, birthday boy gets his wish, and dear Santa Claus, I know you might not have room in your sleigh, but I really want an undead friend for Christmas. Also, never mess with a momma's bear baby.

Chapter Notes

Not entirely content with the ghost scene, but I wanted to work with the three methods cultivators used when dealing with spiritual threats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Hark! Hark to the wind! 'Tis the night, they say, when all souls come back from the far away--the dead, forgotten this many a day!" - Virna Sheard

Chapter 9: Spooky stuff

You know when time flies by?

Because it does. Really, really flipping fast.

Today was halloween.

Or well, to me it was halloween, to everyone else it was just the last day of October. The equivalent to 'halloween' here happened either in mid-August or early September, because that was apparently the time where hell closed its gates and every single ghost decided to come party it up in the living world.

Culture here was odd, but it had incredible stories and anecdotes.

So, I was turning four years old today. Hooray?

I mean, I was happy I was getting older and could try and weasel my way to more freedom because I was a 'big boy' now, but it was also very hard to pretend not to notice the metaphorical hourglass running out of sand.

I didn't know exactly when Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren died. I knew Wei WuXian was four when it happened, but apart from that I was going in blind, and it was scary.

Not scary in the sense that I would have no idea of what to do if they were gone, because I had
basically left my ancestral house the minute I legally turned eighteen with only the clothes on my back, I knew I could survive on my own, especially since there was always the option of going to Yunmeng and let myself be found early by Jiang FengMian.

No, the scary part was the *not knowing* when exactly they'd die. The only thing I knew for certain was that they died during a night-hunt, but it was a small consolidation when they went on night-hunts *every other night*.

Usually when we were passing through towns, as it was easier to leave me in an inn than to try and find some quiet but still protected place for me to stay and wait from them. And as the hunts happened at night it was bad form to leave your toddler in the middle of a street out in the cold.

I digress, I was still trying to convince them to take me with them.

Not because I was worried about them not coming back but to learn, first hand, what I was getting myself into by wanting to become a cultivator.

Because I was going to be one. Ain't living in a world filled with magic and superpowers, cool flying swords and crazy monsters to grow up and open another cafe.

Although I'd miss cooking and brewing drinks. I liked the atmosphere of it, and I could still cook as a hobby (although brewing would have to wait until I could know for sure if I could find coffee beans). I wondered if I could handle spices as well as canon!Wei WuXian.

I liked spices, but I was more of a sweet tooth, give me candy and I would be your friend for life kind of person, and I had a limit to how spicy my food could be. Another thing I hadn't been able to test yet as neither adult wanted to give any spicy food to a toddler.

Understandable.

*But I was curious, damn it.*

Anyway, moving on.

As it was my birthday I was feeling confident in my chances of wheedling into one of their Night-Hunts, which was what I was doing at the moment.

"Please? Pretty please?" I did my best puppy eyes at Wei ChangZe, "I will be quiet and I will keep very close, I won't walk ahead and I won't play any games, *please*?"

Wei ChangZe was the easiest target, CangSe was an automatic no, but I could try to use the 'but dad said yes' card.

I'm sorry, ChangZe, but I really want to go.

He was visibly struggling to give me an answer. Part of him wanted to cave in at the sight of my big teary silver orbs, but the responsible!parent part of him was against the very thought of doing it.

Plus, we both knew CangSe would have "words" about this if he accepted.

"Ask your mother," He finally answered.

*Damn.*

I pouted at him, should have known he'd say that.
Then I grinned, two could play that game.

I skipped happily towards CangSe, "Mom, dad said to ask you something!"

The words tumbled out of my mouth with only some hesitation, I couldn't really address them differently but something inside of me twitched at the words.

They didn't feel right, it was hard, very hard, to not show any reaction whenever they called me their son, or child, and were generally loving parents.

*It was different that what I was used to.*

Oh, sure, all of my nieces and nephews had loving parents in my sisters and brothers-in-law. But that was different.

*Because they had never been my parents.*

Even my mother and father-in-law knew there were boundaries they couldn't cross with me and threaded very carefully around.

There had been more than once-too-many bad breakdown during my marriage with their son regarding those boundaries.

I wondered if I would ever fully get rid of them.

"What is it?" She asked, smiling.

"He wanted you to say whether or not I could go with you when you leave tonight," I hugged her legs and smiled up at her.

Her smile froze.

"Why couldn't he answer that?" She asked mildly.

"I don't know," I shrugged, unrepentant, "I asked him and he said to ask you."

She hums, and I just know that ChangZe won't be too happy with me, "Why did you ask if you could come with us? You know the rules, don't you?"

"But it's my birthday! I'm four today!" I pout at her, "I'll be real quiet I won't get in the way, pleaseeeeee?"

I hug her leg tighter and make puppy eyes.

"You'll do exactly as we say?" She asks me.

I nod really quick, "To the letter!"

"Then if I said you had to stay here while we go out?" She says.

I pout, "I'll stay here..." I answer, put out.

"Promise?" She smiles.

"Promise," I nod, and sigh because I really thought I had it this time.

"Then A-Ying can come with us," She decided.
...What?

I beam up at her," Really?" I grin.

"Really," She nods," So long as you do exactly as we say, do you hear me?"

"Yes! Yes yes yes yes!" I celebrate, jumping around the room.

"You sure, CangSe?" ChangZe pokes his head around the paper divider where he's having a bath.

"Oh? Weren't you the one who told him to ask me?" She gives him a look.

He smiles at her," You know I love you, right?"

I leave them to it and go watch the fallout from a safe distance away.

Ghosts were weird.

They looked human enough, if slightly see-through, but intellectually they were kind of broken.

As in, they repeated some words, complaint about something, or generally just sat there and stared at nothing.

It was weird.

Weirder still to see the two adults pull out paper talismans slap them upside the heads with it, and suppress it in its coffin or death place.

It was a reality check that no, this wasn't the world I was born in and how the hell am I supposed to find this normal.

"Why are they like that?" I ask them, looking at a nearby ghost lady that was wailing for her husband.

"Scary?" Wei ChangZe smiles at me.

"No," I shake my head," They just seem... sad. Why are they sad?" I ask him.

"Ghosts are formed when people have lots of resentment when they die, A-Ying," CangSe answers me," Resentment over not doing certain things or of how they died, for example."

"So they're sad because they died? But that lady is very old," I do my best not to point, 'cuz that was rude," And there's another grave beside her for her husband, so isn't he gone too?"

"She died before him, she doesn't know he's gone," ChangZe replies.

"Why can't we tell her and let her go meet him? Why do we have to put her to sleep?" I ask him.

He hums and doesn't answer, not sure how to answer at all.

CangSe smiles at me instead," Do you want to try and talk to her?"

I think about it," Can I?" I make sure it's okay.

She nods and I walk towards the wailing woman.
She doesn't really notice me, even when I'm standing in front of her, she just keeps crying and calling for her husband, curled up where she's sitting beside her grave.

"Ma'am?" I try calling her, and reach out for her," Can you hear me?"

She's not quite solid, but I certainly felt something when my hand went through her shoulder.

*The airs on the back of my arm stand on end.*

It works, and the woman stops wailing and looks at me, eyes clouded and face stained with tears.

"Who are you? Where is my husband? I need to find my husband." She speaks in a weak and scratchy voice.

"My name is Wei Ying," I answer," Who is your husband?" I ask her.

"He's Wu Gui, he is a carpenter," She answers," Have you seen him?"

"Oh? Does he make tables and chairs?" I ask her, not answering her question on purpose.

She blinks and smiles," The best tables and chairs in town, our son always complains he can't build them half as good."

I smile back at her," He'll be happy to hear you say that," I tell her," Why are you looking for him?"

She looks at me but doesn't answer.

"Do you know where you are right now?" I try then.

"I...I don't know..." She answers and a few tears start falling from her eyes, her face twists.

"No, no, don't cry, ma'am!" That's not what I wanted to happen," I heard something from your husband!"

She stops crying," You did?" She asks.

I lie and nod," He told me that he'll be here if you close your eyes."

She blinks," Close my eyes? Why only if I close my eyes?"

"It's a surprise!" I whisper to her," He thought you looked so sad today that he wanted to do something to cheer you up!"

She smiles widely," A surprise? Oh, I'm sure it's another bouquet of flowers, the silly man," She tells me.

"You've got to close your eyes and find out," I tell her," What kind of flowers do you think he has?"

She closes them," Roses and peonies, or maybe tulips," She tells me," He once filled the house with flowers, when we had our son, he was so happy."

"Keep you eyes closed!" I told her," Here he is, he's right beside you, can't you smell the flowers?"

*I begged a higher power for the trick to work.*

There was a lull in the night, a moment of complete silence, then...
"I can," She smiles," What took you so long? I was worried..."

I open my mouth to try and figure out something to say, but it wasn't needed.

"Oh, you couldn't decide what to pick? Silly, silly man, you know I'd love anything you'd brought me," She talks to herself," Let's go home, A-Zheng is waiting with his little wife."

She starts to fade away.

"Player leveled up!!"

"New Skill Acquired!!"

Part of me was confused as to how this actually worked.


"She just missed her husband," I murmur," Was that why she was so sad?"

"Maybe," CangSe tells me," Or maybe you just made her feel better long enough for her spirit to pass on."

That made sense, in a convoluted way, and I slumped against her.

"Are you sad, A-Ying?" She sounds surprised.

I brush away the tears from my eyes," No."

I don't sound very convincing.

The thought of what my dear Walter was doing right now crossed my mind when I thought of that woman, and then the rest of my family, and it made me feel small. I wondered if I'd leave a ghost behind in this world, filled with regrets over letting things happen when I could try to avoid them or curb their consequences.

I'd thought the night would end on a calmer note, maybe even an early night given that they were, in fact, accompanied by a newly turned four year-old.

I was mistaken.

"Stay right here, Wei Ying, do not move from this spot!" CangSe warned me before taking off to join ChangZe in fighting a couple of fierce corpses.

...Yes, you read that right, a couple of fierce corpses.

Someone wasn't doing their job properly if there were more than one in the area and people hadn't been warned about it.

I crouched closer to the ground and near some bushes so the corpses wouldn't see me and think I looked like a nice snack.

But, oh man, they looked awesome.

Creepy and very scary, especially under a weak moonlight and the state some of them were in, but very, very awesome.
I want one.

*We're not asking CangSe or ChangZe for a pet fierce corpse.*

Just a little one?

*No.*

I was getting my own fierce corpse.

*Wen Ning?*

...

I'll get a different fierce corpse and try keep that munchkin alive.

*Protect the cinnamon roll!*

All hail Wen Ning the cinnamon roll.

I take the opportunity to open my Player Menu and assign those Stat points I'd forgotten about.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
Title: None Level: 6
Class: None Fatigue: 20
Stats: 16 Points Available;
Intelligence: 7 Stealth: 6
Strength: 7 Charisma: 6
Agility: 7 Senses: 8
Stamina: 8 Luck: 6
Skills:
  - Martial
  Acrobatic: 2 Throwing: 2
  Climbing: 2 Brawling: 1
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
  +Mundane
Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Straw sandals ]

...I don't remember getting that many points.

Well, anyway.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3
Title: None Level: 6
Class: None Fatigue: 20
Stats: 0 Points Available;]
Intelligence: 9  Stealth: 9  Strength: 9  Charisma: 9  Agility: 9  Senses: 9  Stamina: 9  Luck: 8

Skills:
- Martial
Acrobatic: 2  Throwing: 2  Climbing: 2  Brawling: 1
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
  +Mundane

Equipment:
Common clothes (child)
Straw sandals]

That worked.
'Threat,' A chill went down my spine.

...What?

I closed my screen and turned around.

Not three feet away from me there was a fierce corpse.

Staring at me.

Oh, no.

Oh, no no no no.

It snarled at me.

I froze. Flight was, realistically, my only option, but running towards the adults (who were busy fighting more fierce corpses, need I remind you) without knowing the situation was a bad idea.

The fierce corpse tensed in order to come at me.

*Scratch that, it was a better idea than to stand here and be eaten.*

I took off running towards them.

"Mom!" I yelled.

"A-Ying, I told you to not-!" She stops mid sentence when she sees what's coming after me.

I didn't even see her move.

One second I'm running, the next she has me by the back of my clothes and is slicing the head clean off the reanimated body.

She puts me down and starts checking to see if I'm alright, which I am, just had the spike of adrenaline of a lifetime.
"He's never coming with us again until he knows how to handle a sword!" She's yelling at ChangZe.

Neither of us disagree with her.

But, bloody hell, I want one.

Chapter End Notes

Zombies are cool. I know Fierce Corpses aren't zombies, but well... They're as close as we're gonna get, people.
And this old lady wants herself a zombie.
But not her cinnamon roll, touch her cinnamon roll and die.
Chapter Summary

Everybody knows that the best time to brood is during timeout, the moment you learn just how awesome your parents are, that there's more truth in rumors than what people might think, and another checkpoint. Random Quests are random. First impressions stick and you made sure yours won't be forgotten.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Everything is funny, as long as it's happening to somebody else." - Will Rogers

Chapter 10: Who's afraid of the Big Bad Goat?

I was grounded.

Or, well, as grounded as you could be when you're traveling and the only method of travel you can take is either sat on the back of a donkey or on the shoulders of one of them.

That being said, I was left behind in the inn to practice my calligraphy or play quietly, and god have mercy on my ears if I asked, again, if I could go with them.

Which was reasonable, given the scare of the last time, but still... I had fun.

I had less fun when trying to write the characters ChangZe had assigned me to work on and fail miserably because I was used to one method of writing and no using a brush and 'lightly' pressing it down on paper to 'draw' elegant strokes.

Yeah, no...

Where were pencils and fountain pens when you needed them?

I guess they haven't been invented yet.

Note to self, then, invent fountain pens.

We were halfway to Gusu, and the weather was less cold and more humid. I had no doubt that once winter set in it would be freezing but there were still warm days and the trees had only just started changing. There was still time.

There will never be enough time.

I sighed, and put the brush down on the table, resting my head on one hand, my elbow on top of the desk.
I open the Story Arcs page, and I stare at the timeline, one of the knots was gone, in its place the black thread that made up 'time' turned red for a segment, before turning back again all the way to the next knot.

Around the red thread flowers bloomed and wrapped around it.

I focused on it and a heavily fogged memory of a Wei WuXian playing on top of his father's chest while his mother laughed behind them. The boy pulls something out of his sleeve and Wei ChangZe makes this scandalized sound while CangSe starts howling in laughter, tearing up.

Then the scene changes to how I lived through that scene.

I'd changed things... but in the end they stayed the same.

In both scenes, it was a nice day out with the family, happiness and joy, warmth, under the midday sun.

I open a side page to this one, called Memories, and there they are, like photographs glued on a wall. Little snippets of canon!Wei WuXian's childhood, one that he'd forget almost in its entirety.

Four years with his family, and yet barely twenty memories remained on this page. CangSe Sanren's quote, a memorable donkey ride, a shopping trip in a colorful town, lighting lanterns by a lake, the phantom taste of mooncakes on his tongue.

Waiting for his parents by a city gate, but they never come back.

The tickling clock hounded my footsteps, nipping at my heels, and I knew I had to think of something.

What to do?

Important things first, walking backwards from Wei WuXian's death, was the siege of the Burial Mounds, then Jiang YanLì's death, Jin ZiXuan's death, the isolation from the rest of the world, the Sunshot Campaign, Wen Chao and Wen ZhuLiu, the Burning of Lotus Pier, the animosity between the Jiangs because of Wei WuXian's presence.

I had no idea how to work out the last one, mostly because I didn't know if the rumors were true or not. The favoritism wouldn't stop just because I was different, and other than giving more support to Jiang Cheng and try to push him onto every situation Jiang FengMian was present, I was short out of ideas.

The Burning of Lotus Pier... And the war... I needed strength. Power.

*Alternatives.*

Once Wei WuXian lost his Golden Core he was all out of options of how to still be useful to his best friend and keep doing what he wanted to do, save people and protect innocents.

So I needed to become powerful and I needed to have options.

*Easier said than done.*

The next great obstacle would be the Jins, because if they played the same games they did in the novel then all my hard work would be for nothing.

The Wens... I wanted to save them.
I had hated reading that chapter in the novel, knowing that all they were guilty of was of having the last name "Wen" and be killed for it. The Holocaust ended a decade or so before I was born, but it was recent. It was real, it happened and it was... beyond dehumanizing.

*How many Wens killed were children?*

The thought strangled my heart.

I thought of all my nieces and nephews, of how small they had been nestled against my chest and how perfect their little hands and toes looked.

Wen Yuan had been born in the middle of the Campaign. Had nearly *starved* in a prisoners camp he was never meant to be in.

Anger coursed through my veins.

I couldn't let that happen again.

I could not stand by and watch as children were starved, tortured and murdered for their family name.

I had to save them.

*But how?*

"A-Ying? We're back," CangSe opened the room door," It's late, why haven't you gone to bed yet?"

I let her pick me up and tuck me in.

My thoughts swirled like blackened vines, creating a black hole in the middle of my mind.

How do I save them?

"I still can't believe you cut off his beard," ChangZe was laughing so hard the trees shook.

I was wheezing on top of his shoulders.

"It made him look so much more handsome!" CangSe justified," And he got so angry at me for it too!"

The infamous CangSe Sanren and her time at GusuLan Sect.

One word: Mind-blowing.

I was so growing up to become just like her.

"And you don't get to talk, I distinctively remember you and FengMian being caught red-handed trying to sneak a goat into his dorm room," She shot back.

I perk up," What? You did?"

ChangZe groaned," CangSe, why'd you have to remind me of that. In my defense, it was all FengMian's idea!"

"Was it?" I peek at him upside down.
"No," He smirks.

I grin back at him, exemplary role-models for children, right here.

"What about that time with the sword and melon?" CangSe asked.

ChangZe tripped," That was not me!"

"What happened?" I asked, turning to look back at her.

"Not age appropriate! You're too young to hear that story!" ChangZe vehemently refuses.

I'm old enough to be your mother, mister, now give me all the delicious details!

"How about I tell you of how your mother made her teacher give up on ever trying to get her to behave like a lady?" ChangZe offers instead.

CangSe Sanren behaving like a lady? The universe would implode.

I cross my arms on top of his head and settle down to listen to this.

ChangZe and FengMian had studied for almost two years in Gusu, mostly so that FengMian's parents could focus on political alliances (which would end up in him getting engaged to Yu ZiYuan), while CangSe Sanren joined them on their last year.

She was slightly younger than both of them but far outpaced most of the men of their generation.

Both FengMian and ChangZe had become enamored with her, and many thought that CangSe was sure to become the next Lady of Lotus Pier. So it came as a shock when she asked his manservant to marry her instead.

"FengMian was my friend, but your father and I just clicked," She laughed," FengMian accepted my decision and released ChangZe from his ties with the YunmengJiang in order for us to get married and become rogue cultivators."

"Besides, he was already engaged with Yu ZiYuan by then," ChangZe added," Yu ZiYuan never quite got over her dislike for her mother, though, so I wouldn't be too surprised if she hissed at us the next time we run into them."

"She's not so bad, ChangZe!" CangSe kept laughing," You'll get A-Ying confused!"

She really is that bad... And it makes the rumors surrounding your love triangle more incriminating.

There was a possibility FengMian wasn't as 'okay' with their decision as he might've made it sound. But clearly thought of both of them dearly if he was willing to let them leave, possibly forever, and not simply have CangSe move in with ChangZe at Lotus Pier.

*Probably because it would make it harder to ignore the fact it wasn't him marrying her.*

Or because Yu ZiYuan would've made everyone else miserable until they left.

*Bit of both?*

"Checkpoint Finished!"
Another already?

This Story Arc isn't going to last for much longer...

Tick-Tock.

Time's running out.

Whoever was creating these Quest names needed some serious help.

"Quest: Find the Old Goat!"

«You've found a pouch on the streets. It's a very important pouch. Bring the pouch back to its owner.»

"View Quest Objectives?"

[YES] [NO]

I could very well guess what were the Quest Objectives...

"Find the Old Goat Quest Objectives:"

| Find the Old Goat (Incomplete) |
| Delivered the pouch (Incomplete) |

"Accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I accepted and looked down at the pouch I had picked off the streets because it had given off some sort of glow.

Apparently there was indeed an HUD mechanic to the System, it's just that my Stats are so low that they rarely if ever showed anything.

I happened to walk too close to the pouch and it started glowing, the moment I pick it up, the Quest notification goes up. And now...

Now the words "Old Goat's Pouch (Quest Item)" float above it.

I was so done with situations like these... Why would a goat have a pouch?

Well, I could infer that it might be a person, more than likely was, but who the hell was called 'Old Goat'?

It wasn't even a rather eye-catching pouch, plain white with blue trim, but made of quality cloth.

I also couldn't open it, which upset me because, I was curious! Let me see!

The adults had gone ahead to look for an inn and then to go talk to the person responsible for organizing night-hunts in this town. We were a day or so from Gusu and it showed.

The dialect in this area was unlike any I had heard before, all soft-voice and sing-song tones. It was
Especially when I had heard Qinghe merchants selling their wares with big drums and showing very bloody pieces of mutton and pork on sale.

In comparison these people sounded like they'd make chewing you out seem like a poetry reading session.

*I much preferred the buff merchants.*

Anyway, there wasn't time to stand her and contemplate dialects. Until the previous Quest this didn't have a timer but I wanted to end this as fast as possible.

So, going under the assumption that this is indeed a person and not a farmer with a sense of humor, where does one go to find people.

*Market place?*

Market place.

I searched high and low around the market, even asked a few people who might've seen anyone looking for a pouch, but there was nothing.

*No one had lost a pouch.*

Not even showing it had jogged any memories, though there were a few people who saw the quality of the pouch, said it was theirs but upon not being able to open it gave it back, cussing me out.

*Idiots... Blame the four year-old, why don't you...*

The sun was going down, not quite dusk yet but wouldn't be too long now.

I left to go find the adults at the meeting spot we'd agreed with.

Here's the thing, I'm not a very observant person by nature. In fact, I went against basic survival instincts by not caring too much about what was happening around me.

Which was now a conditioning I had to break so as to not end in situations like this.

See, what I didn't notice upon running towards the meeting spot was that everyone was giving it a wide berth, as in, people were going through roundabout ways just so they didn't have to pass through that spot.

I didn't notice it yet it was *that* obvious.

Secondly, upon seeing Wei WuXian's parents talking animatedly with a group of people, I didn't stop for one second to recognize what they were wearing.

No, I just ran up to them and literally skidded to a halt upon seeing the face of the person they were talking with.

It was a tall and thin person, straight backed, he had a somewhat long face with a very distinct frown. His dark eyes had this odd glint of amber in them.

The long goatee and thin mustache just triggered my memory in a brilliant moment of word
association.

I know who this is!

"It's the Old Goat!" I blurt out.

It's Lan QiRen!

...

Did you seriously just say that out loud?

I take in the looks on everyone's faces.

...Just kill me...Please, just bury me in a hole somewhere...

Maybe increasing your Luck stats next time might be a good investment.

Shut. Up.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, personally, something has always tickled me funny about Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan's arguments. Is it really only jealousy over the attention the kids received (or didn't receive), anger over their arranged marriage, or was there actual truth in her words.

JFM could've loved CangSe and cherished her son for having something to remember her by (especially since WWX is said to resemble his mother greatly), but it's all kept quiet because no one is talking.

And here we start seeing some of AGF!WWX planning about future events, and their views on the whole Wen war situation (and post-war), keeping in mind that before coming to these world the OC was a very motherly (and grandmotherly, she'd totally feed you cookies until you popped) and those instincts aren't going to just turn off.

Instead they'll be pushed to the limit especially when dealing with Jiang family drama, Lan family drama and then in the face of cinnamon roll Wen Ning.

Also, yes, I had much fun when calling Lan QiRen, Old Goat.
Chapter Summary

Where there is a conversation, a promise and one can't help to overhear what the adults say behind closed doors.

Chapter Notes

Smaller chapter today for the monstrosity of tomorrow, I'm at 3k words and aren't yet finished.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"But surely for everything you have to love you have to pay some price." - Agatha Christie

Chapter 11: Love's complicated

"Wei Ying, what do you say?" CangSe was laying the 'upset mother' vibe quite thickly.

Not helped by the fact that Lan QiRen was still staring at me like I'd offended his ancestors by jumping on their grave or something.

You did call him Old Goat. To his face.

Ughhhhhhhhh...Don't remind me.

I'll never stop.

Ugh.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, doing an awkward bow as ChangZe had very firmly instructed me to do.

"And will you call that to anyone ever again?" CangSe asked.

"No," I answered.

Not, out loud at least.

We'll see about that!

Shut up.

"I'm sorry about him, QiRen, I don't even know where he got that name from," She told the not-amused man.
"Yes, well, might I suggest a talk about rudeness and common courtesy," He huffed," I can see that the apple didn't fall too far from the tree with this one."

Asshole.

CangSe's eyes kind of narrowed, and she must've bitten the inside of her cheek and counted down from a hundred to calm down, but she kept from replying back to his comment.

ChangZe gave off a fake chuckle," Boys will be boys, he's young yet so we're not too worried about it. Are you here for the night-hunt?"

Lan QiRen nodded primly," The disciples will be going along with a few seniors, I'll stay behind unless they need assistance. They need to experience night-hunts by themselves."

"I remember doing that in Gusu," ChangZe smiled more honestly," How is the Sect Leader Lan? I hope his health is better?"

Lan QiRen nodded in thanks," My brother has recovered from his bout of illness, he's spending the week with his sons."

He didn't look very happy with the fact.

"And how are your nephews? I believe one is around A-Ying's age, isn't he?" CangSe asked," And the older one, A-Huan? He should be about seven?"

"Yes, A-Huan is seven, A-Zhan is turning five in the winter," Lan QiRen eases slightly when talking about his nephews," They are doing well in their studies, prime examples of our Clan's teachings.

They're seven and five... What are you teaching them? How not to trip over their sleeves?

CangSe's lips twitched, she probably found that as funny as I did.

"Well, maybe one day they can meet A-Ying and teach him those good Lan manners," She says.

I looked up at CangSe with a horrified expression.

I thought you loved me!

Lan QiRen twitched, he wanted this devil-in-the-making nowhere near his precious nephews.

"Perhaps," He answered out of sheer politeness," He's just turned four?"

"Yes, a few weeks ago, we just came here from Qinghe," ChangZe replied smiling," It's very beautiful up north this time of year, but I'm sure the Cloud Recesses look even more amazing."

Stroke his ego, why don't you?

"Cloud Recesses?" I echo, and then turn to look at the clouds embroidered in the GusuLan's disciples robes," Why clouds?"

Lan QiRen looks down at me," This is the GusuLan's Sect symbol, and the Cloud Recesses is where our Sect resides," A firm believer of educating children as soon as possible.

I could work with that.
But we still find him a fuddy-duddy?

We still find him a fuddy-duddy.

"You live in the clouds?" I ask him, wide-eyed, "There's a house in the clouds?"

CangSe laughs and kneels down," They don't live in the clouds, A-Ying, they live on the top of a mountain. The place there is called Cloud Recesses because it's so up high that it goes through the clouds in the sky. But they don't live on the clouds."

"Ooh," I make a sound of wonder, then I smile widely at Lan QiRen," I'm going to climb the tallest mountain there is!"

He cocks an eyebrow at me," And why is that?"

"I'm going to climb the tallest mountain and reach the clouds and be like mom's Shizun!" I answer proudly.

"Your mother's 'Shizun'..." Lan QiRen repeats, before blinking," The Great Baoshan Sanren?"

I nod happily," I'll have my own mountain and I'll teach others like mom's Shizun taught her, and the mountain will be super tall and beautiful too!"

CangSe laughs and picks me up to rest on her hip," You're going to have to work hard to have your own mountain, A-Ying," She says.

"I'll work the hardest!" I cheer.

Lan QiRen doesn't know how to appreciate my greatness," To achieve the Great Baoshan's success one needs more than just hard work, discipline and self-control are tantamount."

I pout at him," I can do it."

To be fair, I wouldn't believe my own words either.

I wonder why that is?

Because I've clearly been spending too much time with you, obviously.

"We'll see," He turns his nose," Maybe you'll even get to come study at Cloud Recesses like your parents, see if you can show me that discipline and self-control then," He says.

That's a challenge if I ever heard one.

Well then... Challenge accepted.

"I will!" I puff out my chest," I'll be the best there is!"

ChangZe smirks," Just remember that bragging is not allowed on the Cloud Recesses, A-Ying," He tells me.

I pout at him then.

...I think we forgot about the 3000+ rules.

'Know the rules well, so you can break them effectively.'
More like 'Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.'

True.

Wei WuXian has to be the one who breaks Lan QiRen's perfect record of straightening out 'bad kids'.

I'm still awake when they come back from their night-hunt, but as I'm effectively wrapped on a blanket and laying quite still on the bed they do not notice and start talking in hushed voices with one another.

I pretend to be asleep, keeping my body limp and breathing relaxed.

There's nothing that tells you're awake and listening in than keeping perfectly still and your breathing quieter.

"How many years has it been?" CangSe was saying as she took off her let loose her hair," Nine, ten?"

"CangSe..." ChangZe sighs.

"He's still keeping her locked in that house, ChangZe!" She hisses at him," He has children now, didn't you hear that they took them from her as soon as they were born?"

Oh.

They're talking about Lan WangJi's mother.

And XiChen's.

"It's not our place to question what they do, CangSe," ChangZe tells her," And, at the time, it was the only way of keeping her alive and safe from the rest of the Clan."

"But it's been years, ChangZe, she's given birth to the Clan's heirs!" CangSe doesn't let the topic go.

I understand where she's coming from. The thought of being locked away in a cottage, all by myself, feeling a child growing inside of me only to have it taken away and only be allowed to see it once a month would've driven me to insanity.

Or suicide.

"The Lan's are quite set on their rules and teachings, CangSe," ChangZe says, tiredly," Let us hope for the next generation."

"Those poor boys, ChangZe..." She sniffs," I hope they find better luck in their love than their parents.

Ouch.

Between Lan WangJi waiting for over thirteen years for Wei WuXian to return, after seeing him go through the transformation of a lifetime and several near-death incidents; and Lan XiChen's sworn brothers effectively turning the Cultivation world upside down...

I wonder if they really had any luck in love at all, or if they were just repeating past mistakes.
Things will be better this time.
Let us try.

Chapter End Notes

Does the Burial Mound count as a mountain? I'm saying it counts as a mountain.

So, the Two Jade's mother... I doubt that no one was ever interested in the Lan Sect Leader's wife, one who was never seen, given that her sons were quite well known. Not only as heirs but as examples of what the Clan stood for. My take on this is that, the adults (or at least the generation of the parents) knew about the mother (or at the very least heard rumors) but because 'it was Lan Clan's business' no one ever said a word. And after the mother died, well... Why dig up old skeletons?

ChangZe here is more well-used to Clan politics, so he doesn't want his wife to get involved, CangSe isn't as accepting and views (correctly, mind you) that the practice is barbaric.

Then the thing with Lan WangJi and XiChen.

See, OC isn't sure how to proceed with Lan Zhan, won't be for many, many years and probably not push for it to actually be a thing for many more (not a spoiler since it was a given people, I love WangXian), but she knows there's no way she's not interacting with him in the future. She's on a 'wait and see' kind of approach.

Lan XiChen and Meng Yao. I am not convinced it was a romantic connection, I find I like them better as sworn-siblings than anything else. But, love is still love. And in this case, neither Lan sibling got very lucky in love.

Sure, LWJ got his Wifi in the end, but after all they've been through, it was a very bittersweet ending to the novel. Especially since so many bonds were broken.

Also, time-skip for next chapter!
Chapter Summary

Where the night is cold and full of terrors.
Where Wens are already screwing around with people's lives.
And Wei Ying to the rescue!
Not.
Also, never mess with a unicorn, they'll call up their gangster cousins.

Chapter Notes

So, there were so many points in this chapter that I could've just gone 'Cliffhanger, muhahaha' and left you waiting for another 24 hours or so, but I'm not that evil. Yet.
So, here you have a long chapter and tomorrow, or still later today depends on how functional my brain is for the rest of the day, there will be a smaller chapter. Followed by a slightly longer one because of timeskips and POVs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Our intention creates our reality." - Wayne Dyer

Chapter 12: With the best of intentions

You never realized how cold you could actually be until you're sent into a world where turtle necks, thick snow suits, and central heating don't exist.

Sure, there were winter robes, boots and the general mittens and scarves but that did not mean that it wasn't freezing.

We'd spent the last three months traveling from Gusu to a city near Qishan who, despite being known as the central-city of assholes, had a despairing amount of low level night hunts that the Wens were too good to take care of.

And they also used these low level night hunts to scout for potential talent but no one talks about that in polite company.

We had spent a few days in Gusu, then we'd went south and passed through Yunmeng but the Jiangs (let me clarify, Jiang FengMian) were attending a Discussion Conference and we couldn't stay long enough for them to return.

After Yunmeng we'd passed through Yiling, and I was way too excited to pass through this city,
and then went to Meishan, because why not?

Finally after Meishan they had decided to head towards Qishan, which was where we basically were right now.

I had been warned about straying in this city, because it wasn't safe and some child-friendly talk that totally didn't infer that the Wens could very well take me hostage or something because they had been ticked when CangSe refused their 'polite' requests to join them.

Really, I was actually amazed it took them burning down Gusu to realize the Wens were more than arrogant jerks and should've been dealt with years ago.

_Not that 'dealing' with the Wens worked out the first time._

Don't remind me, I get enough nightmares as is.

Thankfully, I haven't been too bored. Through each city, town or village we passed by there was always some sort of Quest that I could complete. And they varied in types of Quests, something I'd have to find and retrieve something, other times I'd have to deliver things, or like my last one where I just had to gather a certain amount of things and give them to the person indicated.

Gathering firewood for a couple of people wasn't my first idea on how to spend an afternoon but meh, I got something out of it.

And because I was just _that_ cute, the people usually gave me rewards (like treats or spare change) for it plus the Quest rewards.

It was good business.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 3  
Title: None Level: 8  
Class: None Fatigue: 0  
Stats: 0 Points Available;  
Intelligence: 10 Stealth: 9  
Strength: 11 Charisma: 10  
Agility: 10 Senses: 10  
Stamina: 10 Luck: 11  
Skills:  
-Martial  
Acrobatic: 2 Throwing: 4  
Climbing: 2 Brawling: 3  
+Social  
+Scholar  
+Arts  
+Mundane  
Equipment:  
Common winter clothes (child)  
Winter boots  
Warm gloves  
Wool scarf]

I'd been busy.
I'd scoped out some skills too, and pestered Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren constantly about night-hunts and the monsters they fought against, and when they would teach me how to battle it out too.

I wasn't being as successful in the last one as I had been hoping for.

ChangZe sometimes taught me how to throw a punch or kick, but after the last fight with a kid CangSe had told him that, on no uncertain terms, if he taught me anything else like that, bedroom privileges would be revoked.

I understood him, in this world there weren't even comfortable couches to sleep in and it was cold enough that I couldn't begrudge him the 'adult snuggles'.

I did, vocally, complain about them kicking me off the bed and into a small mound of blankets on the floor (and all the way across the room behind a paper divider) so they could have 'alone time'.

In public.

I could just picture a scandalized Lan WangJi's expression screaming 'Shameless!' at me.

It was true, I was entirely shameless. Especially if it got me that embarrassed look from the adults and my warm snuggles with CangSe (who had way too much fun with my nonchalant honesty) while ChangZe just gave up trying to get me to respect his 'manly' needs, spoken outside of CangSe's hearing range of course.

Anyways, I was still 'grounded' in someways, but had a lot more liberty to spend my time instead of just copying character after character, which I had to begrudgingly admit I was getting better at, and I was getting fond of paper origami, that silly rattle and making those straw dolls into the next Neil Armstrong and chuckling them whichever way.

Downside was that, with time, stats and skills became harder to level up by just repeating these motions. I needed to find more things to throw or to lift, climb or break to level them up.

Something particularly hard to do when you're either traveling or in a place where throwing, messing with or breaking stuff is frowned upon.

Why couldn't this world be like Legend of Zelda or some other cool video game where no one bats an eye at you breaking pots and crates to get coins?

I digress, I would flip my stuffing if some kid suddenly showed up and messed around my cafe for the heck of it, too.

Moving on, once the initial excitement and novelty of my current situation faded away, giving me way too much time to quietly panic and create countless plans on how to deal with people I haven't even met yet, traveling was... well, not boring, but certainly not too thrilling.

I wanted to go with them night-hunting, even if it was just squatting in the bushes and watching from a distance.

And not figuring out how to stuff a fierce corpse in my magic hammer space (it said living things, and these were dead, so it didn't count!)

*I'm pretty sure the System won't let you have fierce corpses pop out of thin air.*

Shut up, the System loves me!
Loves you so much it not only conspired for you to meet Nie MingJue but also Lan QiRen in less than desirable situations.

Extenuating circumstances.

And didn't it give you that Quest one time where you had to capture those loose cats?

...Cats are assholes, why did you have to remind me of that?

Because that's just who I am.

...

"Hey, did you hear about Wen Feng's night-hunt?" A voice from below me brings me out of my head.

I stop what I was doing at the desk and walk towards the open window of the room I'm locked in.

There's a bar, or whatever its correct designation is, right across from the inn, which is where my window is facing.

I look out and there's a small group of white robed men sitting down and drinking at one of the tables.

Their robes are edged with a red flaming pattern.

Wens.

Well, you're in QishanWen territory, it'd be weirder if you didn't see any Wens walking about.

Point.

"No, what did he do?" A rather worn-out man asks, he's toying with his liquor bottle.

"He says they ran into a Bo," The first man gossips, "Had three tiger pawns with it and had already gutted a group of travelers before they found it."

"Oh?" The worn out man pays attention at that, "They kill or capture it? Why haven't the villages heard of this? If the Bo is killed and the pawns are left alone, they'll go mad and start attacking every human in sight."

"Quiet down," The first man hissed, "Do you think Wen Feng is capable of bringing down a Bo? No, they chased it out of the zone they were in, let some other guy deal with it."

The worn out man quite literally slapped the liquor bottle down on the table and was nearly foaming at the mouth in rage," Is he stupid? A complete imbecil? You don't 'chase' a Bo out of its territory, it comes back as soon as the invader is gone and will be incredibly violent to the next cultivator that walks into it!"

"Wen GuanYu, what's wrong with you?! Keep it down!" The first man grabbed the front of the other man's robes and pulled him down back into his seat," Listen, Wen Feng is closer to Wen Ruohan's lineage than you are, if you start anything with that man you are going to lose. Think of your family!"

"I am thinking of my family," This Wen GuanYu tersely tells the other," And I'm thinking of someone else's family, where did this Bo appear?"
The first man frowns and doesn't look like he's about to answer, Wen GuanYu gives him a glare, "I swear to the Great GuanYin, I will never brew you another bottle of liquor unless you tell me where the Bo appeared right now."

That did the trick.

"The forest just outside the city, up the mountain," The first man answered.

That sounded familiar...

Not from the novel... And not from any random tidbits of fact the adults liked to spout to little children.

Where had I heard it from?

"You don't mean...!" Wen GuanYu paled, "Where tonight night-hunts is headed!"

Oh, right, ChangZe and CangSe were going up the mountain tonight!

...

My eyes widened, this couldn't be it, right?

They couldn't die here tonight, right?

My eyes stuttered in my chest, blood freezing in my veins, and my sight kind of swum.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," The first man shrugged it off, but his eyes betrayed him as he looked away, "S not like you and I could've done anything to stop them."

"They could've been warned!" Wen GuanYu hissed.

"Warned about what?" A second man, who had been sitting quietly up until now, spoke up," Wens don't run away from problems, they deal with them. You warn them about a danger, in Wen territory, that the Wens haven't dealt with yet and it will bring scrutiny down on whatever else there might be lurking in the shadows."

"Forget about this, GuanYu, and go home," A third man told him.

Wen GuanYu frowned and his hands turned into fists but he did not say another word, not even a goodbye and he stood up and walked away.

*Not all Wens are like Wen Ruohan or Wen Chao.*

No... But they were all tarnished with the same brush.

I offered a small prayer up for him, hoping that he at least made it past the war.

If he did, I'd do my best to save him also.

"How long do you think it'll take to reach the mountain top?" A man from down below asked.

"I don't know? The snow's thickens as you go up, it slows you down, so maybe three four hours?" Another replies.

"How fast does the Bo find its prey?" The other asked.
"Faster than that, I'd assume," The other answers.

"Poor bastards," The other says.

I praised myself for not starting to shout at them the minute those words connected in my mind. Nor did I throw something at their heads (preferably something heavy) or insult them in any way.

But I won't praise myself for panicking.

Because I *Panicked*. With a very noticeable Capital P.

Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren had left an hour or two ago, odds are they'd find the Bo before any warning could be sent out to them, damn the lack of instant communication, and the probability of this being when they died was high.

They are going to die.

Instincts warred inside of me. On one hand I wanted to let canon be until I could fight it back, but on the other...

They are going to *die*.

I swore extensively in my mind and tried to somehow open the door.

It was locked, of course, but maybe I could force it open somehow?

*Too much time, the clock is ticking.*

How the hell do I get out of this room?!

My lungs couldn't get enough air in them, I was truly on the verge of a panic attack.

*The window! Use the window!*

I run to it, there's a roof just outside of it, slanted at an angle as is normal, but still too high from me to jump down from.

*Tree!*

I turn to look a rather thin tree with willow-y branches at the edge of the roof.

That could work.

I pulled myself up to the window sill and carefully made my way to the end of the roof, on the side of the inn, thankfully only slipping on iced tiles once and not falling off of it.

Then I'm standing at the very edge of the roof and there's about a feet or two of distance between me and the tree, upon a closer look it looks quite brittle.

*Can't turn back now, jump!*

'Skinny tree, skinny tree, don't break and fall on me,' I chant to myself and jump.

It doesn't break, but the bark is slick and I can't get a good grip so in my desperation I grab onto the willow-y branches before I go splat on the ground.

The thin branches cut into my hands as they halt my descent, I hiss and blink out a few tears out of
my eyes.

I look down and see that the ground is quite close, so I let go of the branches and drop into a pile of snow.

In hindsight, I should’ve brought my gloves when I made this erratic decision.

Too late, go go go!

I take off towards the city exit, I remembered the path they took to get here and I remembered seeing the entrance to the forest.

If I was lucky the forest had a trail I could follow.

And if you're unlucky?

Scream really loud and hope not to fall in a ditch.

Sounds like a plan.

As luck would have it, there was indeed a trail.

That's as far as my luck went.

The moon offered little light to guide myself by, and as a city girl myself the closest I'd been to a situation where I was alone in a forest at night was during a camping trip and I had to use the bathroom.

And even then I didn't go very far because f! that, I wasn't going to lose track of the camp.

Now here you are, all of four years of age and venturing into a forest that you know is the home of some horned asshole of a horse that has tigers has his lap dogs.

Shut up and just warn me if you see anything.

Like a person running really fast towards you?

What?

I look up and see that, indeed, a man is running like hell is nipping at his feet towards me. Or well... Not towards me, towards the exit that was a little ways behind me.

But the guy had a lantern.

Trip him.

I did.

Guilt swirled in my stomach as he fell and I quickly grabbed the lantern and ran but since the guy just got up and kept running towards the exit I stored it into some corner of my mind and moved on.

The lantern helped tremendously, even if I made me a very easy target to spot because of it.

You could always drop it and run.

If a tiger spots me there's no way in hell I can run fast enough to outrun it.
Fine, be that way.

There's silence.

Or well, as silent as a nighttime forest can be. There's always birds or other nocturnal creatures roaming about.

*And screams.*

Screams?

Oh, no.

Oh, no no no no!

I started running towards the screaming (not always a good idea) but sound echoes in an empty mountain, even if the snow kind of muffled it, and it took me a while to find the source of it.

And by a while I mean I got turned around and when I get to the scene of the crime there's nothing I can do.

There's bodies on the ground and the snow is stained red.

My dinner ended up on the snow too.

The worst part was the smell. The heavy copper stench stuck with you, it was so heavy you could taste it on your tongue.

I tried not too look too close at the bodies, only the bare minimum to see that none of these people were either ChangZe or CangSe.

They were still alive.

*You need to get back on the trail.*

I cursed and turned around to leave before I paused.

I turned back towards the bodies.

A very *bad* idea formed in my mind.

Unfortunately I wasn't the most morally sound person.

I went through their pockets.

Everything and anything I took and sent to my Inventory, if it had no limit then it could hold all of these stuff long enough for me to figure out what that 'stuff' is.

There was a cultivators sword.

*Heck yes.*

It was almost twice the size of me.

Still took it with me.

Found a smaller dagger (about the size of my arm, holy hell these weapons were huge!) and I gave
it a few experimental swings to see if it was workable.

"New Skill Acquired!"

I'd take that as a yes.

You need to get back on that trail now.

On it.

I'd already cleaned out the bodies, and tried to get the blood off of my hands, so there was nothing more for me to stay.

Finding the trail was hard, especially when you only have a little lantern to light your way, but I kept moving upwards so I'd inevitably find my adults.

In the end, as is my luck, I did.

Just as they were about to be attacked by a pair of tigers.

I open my mouth to shout but in a split second three things pop into the forefront of my mind:

1. The tigers are being controlled by the Bo;
2. The Bo being the white horned horse with wicked looking teeth and the black brush tail that was quite close to me;
3. The Bo couldn't see me from where I was standing.

I'm in his blind-spot.

I didn't think twice, I chucked that lantern right into it's back.

"You ugly mug of a donkey!" I yelled," Leave them alone!"

The lantern shattered on its back and it's head swiveled to face me.

It didn't look too happy.

"A-Ying?" CangSe's eyes widened.

"What?!" ChangZe nearly looked away from the tiger pouncing on him.

This wasn't good, I couldn't distract them.

They can't die because of me.

"Why you looking at me for, huh? You think there's any other ugly mule here other than you?" I point at it.

Its eyes blaze in anger.

Great, it understands speech.

"Oh, you offended? Sorry, I don't deal with overgrown ponies having a temper tantrum!" I yelled at it.
"Taunting Skill leveled up!"

You're gonna die, kid.

The Bo opened its mouth and let out this ear piercing shriek.

Then it started trotting towards me.

I booked it out of there, using my small size to dive under logs and bushes, whilst my weight made it less likely for the snow to give way beneath me.

The Bo had to keep raising it's legs high in order to trudge through the snow.

I had no such problem.

No, you have a different problem. One in the shape of a murderous horse.

Either help me out or stay silent!

You're going to have to get its head.

The words were kind of heard but not understood.

Huh?

You have a puny little dagger, noodle arms and you weight about 34 pounds soaking wet, you're only getting one shot at trying to take down that thing.

And you want me to target the head?

You've got to bring it down in one stab, and you don't know where it keeps its heart.

I sorta got the point.

But the head? You forgot about the giant horn it has?!

I wasn't the one who decided to taunt it!

What else was I supposed to do?

Not trigger its murderous instinct or offend it!

'Dodge,' Something screamed at me.

I dived to the floor and slid down a small slope.

A powerful hoof stabbed the place I had been standing.

Holy mother of god.

Run.

I ran.

I ran until my lungs were burning from the cold and I had lost any sense of direction, my brain was fogging over.
Distress and exhaustion. I couldn't keep running for much longer.

I had to face it head on.

My sight froze and for a moment everything turned grey and darkened, fragmented.

"The Player is about to enter a danger zone, the System advises the Player to exit the danger zone."

Nope.

I'm killing that damn thing and then I'm going to look for those two, I'm going to make sure those two make it back to that damn inn and I'm going to have them yell at me for being reckless and stupid and, and-

I am not letting them die here.

Get out of my way, System.

My sight returns to normal.

Actually, everything seems slightly clearer than before.

Adrenaline.

Oh, nice.

The Bo walks out of the bushes in front of me. It's eyes lock into mine and I can feel the sheer hatred oozing out of its being.

It snorted and kicked at the ground with its hooves.

Aim for the head.

I took a deep breath and tightened my grip on the dagger.

I'm not dying here today.

The Bo started running.

I met it half way.

All it took was one second. One fraction of a second. A single swing of an arm.

As it ran the Bo lowered its head to stab me with its horn.

I waited until the last possible second to dodge and swung my arm with all the strength I had.

It connected. The Bo went down.

And so did I.

Blood poured down my face, the left side of it felt like it was on fire, and I shoved snow into it in an attempt to stop the pain.

It hurt.
I couldn't help but cry, this body was exhausted, terrified and in pain, of course it would start crying.

I was also completely alone in the darkness and cold.

Lost.

*I told you not to lose track of the trail.*

I couldn't even summon the energy to snap back at it, I just sat there in the snow and cried, clutching at my bleeding face.

"Player leveled up!"

"Player leveled up!"

"Knife Handling Skill leveled up!"

"Mob drop sent to inventory!"

"Checkpoint finished!"

I glared at the glowing words, barely readable through my tears.

If that meant what I thought it did, someone was going to pay dearly for this.

"A-Ying!" A voice suddenly echoes from the mountain.

*CangSe.*

"Mom!" I screamed.

Mom... The word still didn't quite belong there, but I ignored it.

"A-Ying! Call out, honey!" She yelled again.

"Mom!" I screamed," I'm here!"

"Where?" She called out," Call out!"

"Mom!" I yelled, and then coughed.

My throat hurt.

My vision fogged again.

*Your adrenaline is crashing.*

"A-Ying!" She sounded so close...

"ChangZe, he's here!" She yelled," Oh, gods... A-YING!"

Everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes
So, I was going through chinese creatures and I couldn't decide which one to use (because I had a different one in mind but it looked absolutely straight out of a cartoon and AGF!WWX would've just kind of stared at it and went 'huh?') so I settled on this one. Chinese have weird creatures...

So, AGF!WWX might have said that he'd stick to canon, but faced with the very real threat of losing them because of someone else's pride/neglect was just too much and he panicked. Whether they were meant to die that day or if it was just yet another random checkpoint canon!WWX has no memories of, I'll leave that up to you to decide on.

About the 'looting corpses', well... They weren't going to need it? Listen, listen, I'm just kidding. AGF!WWX is not normal. Okay, he is decently adjusted but not normal. And their survival instincts go on overdrive when under pressure. An NF song quote comes to mind; "...they ever push me I'm gonna swing (...)"

So, yeah, it's not socially acceptable behavior but nor is grave-robbing and canon!WWX readily admitted to that. And so long as no one knows, who's it harming? (Hey, author, he might be creating ghosts! Shhhhhhh....)

Also, Wen GuanYu is a canon character, I just named it because I didn't know if they had an actual name.
Learn to let go

Chapter Summary

"I lived b*tches" isn't always the best answer to give upon waking up, especially if you've nearly been stabbed by Annabelle's toy horse.
In where parenting is stressful, where helicopter parenting is appreciated but not wanted, and where there's an argument.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, looking at the comments everyone was hoping for a big (read: massive) argument between the parents and a recently awake WWX.
But... I always write one chapter ahead of the other (and I've already finished the last chapter of Arc I) and so, I didn't write in that argument.
Although, if you really, really want to see that scene, I guess I could write it as an outtake and make another fic just full of snippets and side-stories?
Won't be chapter length scenes (hopefully, my brain does wander) but I'm open to the idea? Thoughts?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"I would have given anything to keep her little. They outgrow us so much faster than we outgrow them." - Jodi Picoult

Chapter 13: Learn to let go

I lived!

Ahah... Yeah, not funny, I know, CangSe and ChangZe didn't find it very funny either.

"Stop poking at it, A-Ying," CangSe grabbed my hand before I could touch the bandage on my face.

*It had missed the eye!*

But it was going to scar.

*Girls dig a good scar.*

Not on four year-olds, they don't.

It had been two weeks since the 'Incident', and the adults hadn't gone on another night-hunt since, having mostly being taking care of me and deciding to teach me more about beasts and cultivation.
And they were only doing it because if I was reckless enough to chase after them through a mountain, at night while it was snowing, and nearly be impaled by a demon horse, then by the Heavenly Goddess of Mercy I was going to have more at my disposal than a simple dagger (which I still had and hadn't been questioned about its origins) and random trivia they sometimes told me.

That said, they weren't teaching me how to swing a sword or anything.

No, they were training me in something much, much worse.

"Your calligraphy needs a lot of work, which I expected since you're so young," CangSe sighed," But let's at least identify Talismans properly, okay?"

Talisman making.

Don't get me wrong, I found the seals incredibly cool. And versatile and ingenious and about a bunch of other adjectives too.

But?

But I hated writing with brushes.

Painting with brushes? Sure, I was all for it, but writing? No, I needed my damn fountain pen.

Do you even know how to make build a fountain pen?

I'll figure it out.

Says the person who can't write more than twenty characters and has the reading comprehension of a toddler.

"How's work going, buddy?" ChangZe sits down beside me, ruffling my hair.

They'd been very touch-y and overbearing ever since the accident.

Not that you mind it.

No, and I don't blame them either, I recall being the exact same when Colin had the bright idea to lean out of a third floor window.

Walter caught him, thankfully, but my heart nearly jumped out of my chest.

"Good," I answered ChangZe, copying the small design meant to alert me if there were evil beings around.

ChangZe nods and leans back a bit, keeping an eye on me working.

"Where are we going next?" I ask out of the blue.

The adults blink and look at one another," We were thinking Lanling, there are lots of villages and cities nearby that welcome rogue cultivators."

I hadn't been to Lanling yet, despite having passed through its territory when we when from Qinghe to Gusu.

"Are we leaving soon?" I ask them, two weeks had been by far the longest we'd stayed in one place. Which I understood given that we'd all been injured from the 'Incident'.
"If you're feeling better," CangSe reasons.

I pout at her," I'm fine..."

She gives me a gimlet stare and I look back down at the paper," I'm sorry..."

She sighs," I know, A-Ying, but I'm still very upset that you followed after us."

"You didn't know about the Bo," I had to point it out," I thought I could find you before it did."

*Which obviously didn't work.*

"And if it had found you instead?" She said," What would you have done then?"

*Hey, we took it down...*

Do not remind her.

I bit my cheek and didn't say a word, the bandage on my face was enough to prove her point.

She sighed and placed a hand against her face, she sounded really tired," You have to understand, A-Ying, that night-hunts aren't a place for children. There are many, many beasts out there who would not think twice before attacking you."

I knew that. On some level I knew that, I did understood why they kept me from it and why they tried sheltering me but I wasn't a child. Not really.

I was used to being left to my own devices with a tower of books and pens and paper, told to entertain myself and not 'act out'. I was used to being punished, *harshly*, for 'acting out' and then left by myself all over again.

When I left to start my own life, I was all alone in a world of billions of people, none of them who cared who I was and what I was going through. It wasn't until Walter and his family entered my life that I started to experience what it was like to have someone backing you up, watching out for you and protecting you.

But by then I was already set in my ways of independence, I couldn't trust them to the extent a normal person would. I always had to have keys to every door on the house, I had to have my own space no one else could enter but me. I had to have the freedom to roam and be myself.

I'd mellowed out over the years, true, but there were times where I'd screamed and trashed against their bonds because something inside of me was terrified of going back to that 'childhood'.

When the children were born and I got to watch them grow, I'd mellowed out even further, calmed down enough that their parents felt it was safe enough to leave them in my care for weekends or small vacations abroad.

*I was safe enough that no one batted an eye at a teenager moving into my spare bedroom to learn art and serve as a helper in the cafe of sorts.*

But I still hated having things kept from me, things that directly *affected* me. Furthermore I hated being told I was not allowed to do something for my own good, without giving me the chance to prove that I could handle it.

*You got hurt.*
So did they. Any other four year old would have died, I lived.

I wasn't _powerless_. I wasn't _weak_. I could _do_ this.

I _needed_ to do this.

And their love for me was smothering the last bits of my patience. In the months we'd spent traveling I'd develop some kind of wanderlust, the need to keep moving and not settle down, the thirst to learn more.

I wasn't going to let _one_ setback stop that.

And neither were they.

"I..."I clench my hands,"I don't want to be left behind... You won't come back, and I'll be alone..." I told them.

"A-Ying, we already told you..." ChangZe sighed and leaned closer.

"You could have _died_!" I yelled,"You could have died and what then? Where would I go? Stay here waiting forever?"

The room is quiet, CangSe looks at me and her grey eyes are tearing up.

"So you want to come with us?" She shakes her head," You can't, A-Ying, you're still too little."

"I want to learn!" I shout," I want to know what to do if you don't make it back!"

ChangZe leans back and looks at CangSe, who's staring up at the ceiling as if begging for answers.

"We could start meditation..." He suggests to her," And basic forms of combat, I could probably teach him how to make arrows and a bow."

"But he isn't strong enough to pull back the string! He barely reaches the counter of a stall, what is he against a beast? Not even a snack!" CangSe hits the top of the desk.

"I _can_ pull back the string!" I tell her," I'm not weak!"

I would put all my stat points on strength to prove that if need be.

CangSe gives me another stern faced stare but I do not back down.

"I can learn! I can learn _anything_! I can _help_!" I tell her," Why can't I learn like you and dad did?"

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, ChangZe stays quiet not sure who to back up.

One some level he got that I wasn't kidding. I was serious about this, and like any man he didn't mind his son wanting to be like him.

Even if he still thought I was too young, he still believed I should, at the very least, know enough to get by.

"You're still so young..." CangSe chokes out," When did you grow up so fast?"

I felt that.

I really, really did. Watching your child grow up is the most heartwarming and heartbreaking thing,
because no matter how much you want to protect them and keep them with you...

"You'll listen to everything we tell you, do you understand?" She tells me, "And if you complain just once, I swear to GuanYin, I will make you work twice as much!" She warns me.

*You've got to learn to let them go.*

"I will!" I promise.

I will learn all that I can from you.

I won't *stop* moving forward.

I won't let you down.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, the thing with AGF!WWX I don't know if I've fully made it known is that they have issues. Past childhood trauma and social isolation, they really had issues and they'll become plot-relevant later on, but what I wanted to show was that, because of those issues, they had to learn how to look out for themselves. Especially once they left 'home' and were basically homeless until she got a job and somewhere to sleep in. AGF!WWX knows what it feels like to be homeless (in a city full of nicks and cracks where one can find shelter from the elements) and knows with absolute certainty that she doesn't want to go through that again.

Problem is, she can't exactly do that unless she can fend for herself (because in this world there's no poor house or soup kitchen, and kids literally starve on the streets) and so, despite understanding what it is like for a parent wanting to keep their child 'innocent'... They're looking at the bigger picture. They need survival skills, they need combat skills, and above all they need to improve themselves. Not just for the years that WWX lives on the streets, but for the long haul. Because as soon as Part II is over (around 3 years) there's Arc III where it's life in a Sect, and then Arc IV is Gusu.

And we all know what happens after he goes to Gusu.
Rumors and Bad Press

Chapter Summary

Where the parents weren't kidding when they said they'd put you through the ringer.
Where people like to gossip.
Where the unbelievable happens.
And where the telephone game doesn't work long-distances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Old rumors never die; nor do they fade away. They simply lay dormant for a while until the next appropriate time appears." - Terry Ann Knopf

Chapter 14: Rumors and Bad Press

A lot changed in just a couple of months.

We were spending less time in cities and more time out in open fields. From dawn to dusk, and some nights even beyond that, ChangZe and CangSe would push me to my limits.

I was taught how to use a bow, a small one ChangZe had made specifically for me, and I could pull the string back but my aim needed work.

I was taught meditation, something I struggled with because my brain was never empty.

I was taught how to get out of holds, how to fall, how not to fall, how to push or pull something. How to hide and not be heard, how to track down beasts and animals, how to listen.

CangSe drilled talisman and spiritual theory into my skull, it didn't matter if I couldn't use that knowledge straight away because my writing and talisman making skills were sub-par at best, she taught it and I had to learn it.

I also got better at handling the dagger, which was more of a glorified holy butcher knife in the hands of the adults, and how to target weak points.

I studied Yao, and Ghosts and Spirits, how to identify them and which to run from pretty fast.

After the first month of this, and witnessing that I was very serious about my resolve to follow them, they took me on a night-hunt. It was a very simple night-hunt and very low-level and they basically spent that night guiding me through the what and what-not's to do in night-hunts.

I guess it was a first for many to see a small child being taught this, and in such hands-on approach, because the story of how two rogue cultivators took their young son with them on night-hunts spread like wildfire.
Seriously, some people had nothing better to do than gossip.

If anyone had connected the dots that those two rogue cultivators were Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren no one was telling.

Whenever I found a break I just slept, my body ached and I seriously thought I would die from the punishment it was being put through but I still got up whenever they told me to get up.

I was six months away from turning five when I woke up one day and felt that something had changed.

*It was easier to breathe.*

Not just breathe either, no, my body felt like water, flexible and just easier to move.

I took a look at my stats, for the first time in months, and knew why.

```
[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 4
  Title: None Level: 12
  Class: None Fatigue: 15

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 14 Stealth: 11
  Strength: 16 Charisma: 11
  Agility: 13 Senses: 14
  Stamina: 16 Luck: 12

  Skills:
  +Martial
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
  +Mundane

  Equipment:
  Common clothes (child)
  Common boots

  Weapon:
  Blessed Dagger
  Talisman (3)
  Small Bow (15)]
```

A lot had changed in just a few months, and it was starting to show.

We reached Lanling at the end of May, to join in on one of the spring night-hunts.

"I don't know how anyone can just walk around and ignore the fact that more than half of the children or teenagers walking around are his bastards," ChangZe muttered to CangSe as they walked through the streets.

I'd gotten a bun from a stall and was, politely, eavesdropping on their conversation.

They knew I was listening but at this point in time, after I'd listen to them argue and get into fights
about what was and was not appropriate for a child to hear, coupled with the fact that they were teaching a four year-old how to track down animals during the day and beasts at night, they'd just given up and treated me like a small adult.

It was fine by me.

"People see what they want to see and ignore reason even if it's right under their noses," CangSe told him.

Yes, they do.

Beyond the hatred that the Wens got, and the fear Wei WuXian brought on them, there was also the fact that they immediately started pointing fingers at the first suitable target and ignored all attempts of setting them straight.

Once Wei WuXian was cleared of any wrongdoing they just moved their sights to hating Jin GuangYao.

I wondered where he was right now. I wasn't sure about his age, if he was the same age as me, older or younger. My bet was on younger since his mother brought him to Lanling when he was a baby, coincidentally during the birthday of Jin ZiXuan (which they both shared), but it never said if it was Jin ZiXuan's first birthday or just any other birthday.

For all I knew Jin GuangYao could possibly be a newborn right now.

I couldn't worry about him too much, I was much more worried about one Xue Yang and his future sociopathic tendencies and hero-worship of Wei WuXian.

I wasn't one for judging anyone straight-out of the bat, but I hated Xue Yang.

And I couldn't bring myself to try and see him as someone needing help, I'd much rather help Mo XuanYu and, heavens help me, Jin GuanYao (who would orchestrate my death, twice) than help Xue Yang.

"Knowing his wife I wonder how she hasn't killed him yet," ChangZe said," And there was this story a couple years back about him throwing out a woman down the steps of Carp Tower," He adds.

Forget that, Jin GuangYao is at least two years old. But I forget exactly where he is now.

Is it important? It's not like you can take him by the hand and ask him, pretty please, to leave you out of his hypothetical future scheming.

You're right, but it made me feel better if I don't run into someone I know will try and kill me.

Technically you already have, didn't Nie MingJue help out during the siege?

Everyone and their mothers apparently helped out during the siege, and if they didn't they at least had a party at my expense.

"A-Ying, we're going to check in a room at the inn and rest until it's time to head out," CangSe tells me.

I nod and finish eating my bun, hurrying to help her carry the bags into the room, a chore I had been assigned in order to help my arms getting stronger.
I just thought they needed an excuse to keep me busy and not trying to sneak out to practice using the dagger or bow.

The timeline had one final knot.

I had to begrudgingly admire the beauty that was the timeline, as the segments that changed color as I changed things illustrated what I had done different.

Case in point, the last checkpoint I'd passed through now had that stupid looking horse standing smugly above the line with two tigers pouncing on one another.

I closed the window and went to check my Inventory, there were two Qiankun Bags, a cultivator's sword, two bags with money and a piece of Bo's flesh.

I kid you not, there was a piece of raw frikin flesh in my inventory under the tag 'mob drop'.

*Don't forget to mention you're supposed to eat it.*

I am not eating this.

*Not even a tiny little bite?*

I am not getting this anywhere near my mouth.

*Where's your sense of adventure?*

My sense of adventure draws the line at eating mysterious pieces of meat which I do not even know how got sent into my inventory as the corpse of that thing was *perfectly* intact.

*You're no fun.*

Shut up and go to sleep.

"Here, A-Ying," CangSe puts something around my neck, I pick it up and see that it's her pendant.

"It's Shizun's pendant!" I tell her," It's yours!"

"Just for tonight," She smiles," For good luck. Your dad and I will be watching, but we're not interfering, tonight's all on you."

*Oh.*

Well, no pressure, right?

*Wrong, you can bet they'll spend the next few days commenting on all the things you did wrong.*

So, won't it be in your best interest to help me?

...

*Nah, I'm just sit quietly and see you flounder without my genius.*

You're a big fat liar.

*Hey! At least I'm not as wrinkled as a raisin!*
Excuse me? My skin as smooth as a baby's!

So you're a baby-faced old woman?

...

Just shut up...

For the first time in Duan YiJun's life he could say he was left speechless.

There was a kid, a tiny little kid smaller than his two little sisters back home, going on this night-hunt.

He had this knife tied on to his belt, which looked more life a small sword in the kid's hands, and a tiny bow on his back with a small quiver of equally tiny arrows.

Everyone had pointed at him and told him to go back home, only for his parents (and holy hell that was the famous CangSe Sanren!) to step forward and explain that no, he wasn't leaving, he was joining us.

Apparently today was his first trial run at a night-hunt by himself.

Who in their right minds took their small child night-hunting?

And hadn't there been rumors about a couple of rogue cultivators doing that exact same thing for some months now?

Was it them?

The answer had to be yes because the kid knew exactly what to do once the sun went down and all kind of beasts started coming out.

At first everyone still kind of tried to keep the kid from going after any beasts but after losing track of him for a few minutes and finding him plucking arrows out of a Yao surrounded by three other fallen Yao, they'd left him to it.

That kid was going to grow up to become a monster, he just knew it.

Who could say they'd started night-hunting before their baby teeth had fallen out?

Throughout June and July stories spread of a child going on night-hunts with its parents, carrying a knife and a bow and arrow, with a pendant around its neck.

A very well-known pendant.

In a flash everyone suddenly had opinions about CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe's parenting, the glaring scar on the side of my face doesn't help matters either.

Seriously, people had nothing better to do than talk behind other people's backs.

And they couldn't even keep facts straight.

While I joined in on night-hunts I was always accompanied and they'd pull me out of any situation they thought was too dangerous for me to face, like fierce corpses that could do more than just hop
around, and any beast that had consumed more than three humans.

In terms of strength I believed I could take them on, but I wasn't going to push my luck and get sent back to the inn to reflect on my actions.

So I didn't dare challenge the status quo.

I did dare, however, to kick the ass of anyone who badmouthed my parents in front of me.

Oh, this shrimp looking kid is saying my parents are idiots who shouldn't be having kids? Well, you know who's going to get a kick in the nuts?

And you, yes you stupid bald headed mouse, what did you say about my adults' skills? You're going to serve as bait for me!

I was a vengeful little thing, sue me!

Nobody badmouthed Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren and got scotch-free.

Jiang FengMian couldn't believe the news he heard about his friends.

"Taking their four year-old night-hunting?" Yu ZiYuan turned her nose at the messenger," Have they no care for the safety of the child?"

"They say he's learning, Madam Yu," The messenger spoke a little hesitantly," They keep the child close to them but otherwise let it hunt down prey by itself."

Yu ZiYuan scoffs," Fools, the lot of them," She sneers," They are asking their own death, and the death of that child!"

"Where are they headed? Did they mention it?" Jiang FengMian asks the messenger.

"I believe they said something about staying close to the more rural areas of Lanling and Gusu, sir," The messenger replied.

"Did they seem healthy?" He then asked.

"Yes, although there was a concerning scar that has raised some questions about its origins," The messenger answered.

"A scar?" Jiang FengMian frowned, cultivators didn't scar very easily, as they healed faster than that.

"On the child," The messenger shifted from foot to foot," A rather big scar running down the side of his face, barely missing his left eye."

Yu ZiYuan snorted," How they haven't been stopped yet it's a wonder, how can they allow their child to be injured and still drag it on night-hunts?"

"My lady, please," Jiang FengMian tries.

"Do not dare, FengMian," Yu ZiYuan stands up," Mark my words, those people are recklessly asking for their own death and dragging that child down with them."

She leaves a conflicted Jiang FengMian and an awkward messenger behind in the room.
Truthfully, Jiang FengMian can't imagine what his friends are thinking, bringing the small Wei Ying with them on night-hunts.

He knows he certainly wouldn't bring A-Cheng along on one until he was at least ten years old.

Chapter End Notes

WWX is a little s*it to anyone badmouthing is his parents (which he still hasn't outright stated, but he has now called them 'his' adults, so progress!)
And can you just take a moment to imagine a tiny little WWX with a tiny little bow and arrows looking all stern-faced as he hunts down fairies and magic goats?

As for JGY. I don't know how old he is in canon. I know he's younger than LXC, but how much younger is unknown to me. Since he shares a b-day with JZX I decided (that in this fic) he's a year younger (but as hasn't shown up yet, if you do know how old he's supposed to be, I'd appreciate it).
Xue Yang. Oh man, where to start? So, I think the pinky issue was his start of darkness but something had to have always been there for it to go to such limits, furthermore, WWX is around 8 when Mo XuanYu and Xue Yang are born, he can't do nothing about them until the war is over (and by then it's already too late for one of them).
Plus I can hold grudges and what he did to XCX and SL, plus A-Qing, I won't forgive him for.
To be the devil's advocate here for a minute, it's not that the people are wrong, per say, bringing children (especially, small, tiny children) into potentially dangerous situations, where people can die, is considered 'bad parenting'. That said, they are being careful about it, and the kid isn't really a kid mentally and knows better than to run off and 'be cool'.

Yu ZiYuan, mother instincts. I won't say anything else lest I spoil Arc III drama.
Chapter Summary

We're in the endgame now.
Where there's a family day, lots of love, and agony.

Chapter Notes

Surprise chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Bear the inevitable with dignity." - Anonymous

Chapter 15: Inevitable

September crept up on us while we were busy dealing with night-hunts and training.

We were passing through a city when we saw the streamers and festive decor and realized that it was time for the mid-autumn festival. I was astonished to find that it had been a whole year since I woke up in this world.

Since tonight was the festival they decided to spend the day as a family and let me have the night for myself, playing street games and run around with the other kids until it was time to light the lanterns.

I easily agreed to this, it was nice having a break every now and then, and just relax. And since this was a bigger city than the ones we'd been lodging at, with how frequently we were taking on night-hunts and stayed in inns less frequently, we could stock up on some commodities.

I was growing!

And also because someone had a nasty run in with a pair of clawed ghosts.

Whatever.

So we got some new robes for me, longer than usual so I could grow into this pair, and just... spent the day as a family.

ChangZe carved a flute for me, but my fingers were still too small to reach all the holes, so I couldn't really play many notes, and only really simple melodies.
Deciding that it'd be fun to mess with him, CangSe went and got me a Xun, which was another type of chinese flute similar to an ocarina.

That one I could actually play, since it was roughly the size of an egg, and since it counted only as 'playing a flute' the skill was the same as the dizi.

Win win situation.

Not for ChangZe who saw the Xun as a personal offense and constantly talked about the beauty of the dizi.

True, I would have my own Chenqing in the future, but right now I didn't mind the Xun.

Who knows, it's always good to have a backup flute in case of an emergency.

After some shopping and goofing around, because if I got to have a day off so did they, we went and got a room at an inn and after settling our stuff when out to eat.

I had fun watching the performs act several traditional tales of this time of year, with lots of color and dancing, whilst eating good food.

After eating we went around stalls and played a few games, I left them alone for a few hours to go play ball with a group of children whilst they had some quiet time for themselves, and only came back when it was starting to get dark.

It was weird, sometimes, acting like a kid. Especially since I'd gotten into the habit of being myself as I did whenever I went on night-hunts or had training with ChangZe and CangSe, so the kids heard me talk and saw how I acted then stared at my scar and proceeded to ask a ton of questions.

Telling them I was a tiny cultivator going on night-hunts got me being called a liar multiple times, but it was funny to see their faces when I actually had proof of going on night-hunts, like showing up at their house to sell talismans or settle down some ghost.

Those were good times.

My scar got me a lot of attention, which I found unexpected, given the lack of care for orphans and street urchins, but I figured they just wanted gossip on the adults I was with and how exactly I got it.

No one knew about the Bo.

Well, the Wens might suspect, but the primary suspects for taking it down had to be the adults and not the child. They'd at most think I got injured and they killed it because of that.

I thought it was best for no one to know I had, somehow, taken down a Bo at the grand old age of four.

If only to spare me the jealousy of Jiang Cheng, who I just knew would create a storm in a teacup for me having already night-hunting experience before coming to Yunmeng.

I could always just shrug and say I don't remember getting it.

Anyways, once it got dark we went to buy lanterns to light.

That was fun too, since there were just so many!
I ended up picking a small lantern painted with fish and lotuses. CangSe, of course, picked a mountain one, and ChangZe picked one that had bamboo shoots.

I found it quite simple and empty but I guess that's what he preferred out of the thousand other lanterns there were for sale.

Once it was time, we lit the lanterns and prayed to the moon.

CangSe told me to make a wish.

I wished to change my future, to change it for the better, change it and protect all those people Wei WuXian hadn't been able to protect.

After all the lanterns were but pinpricks of light in the distance, ChangZe picked me up and we bought several mooncakes to eat back at the inn.

They were cut into small slices and shared between everyone.

I liked the sweet ones, even if I found the flaky pastry a bit of a hassle because it fell whichever way when you cut it, and it was amusing to see CangSe playfully rib ChangZe for having no talent for cutting the pastry neatly.

Then we just talked.

And talked.

And talked.

They told me stories, some I hadn't heard yet, some I had. They reminisced about the good old days of their youth and how I'd come about. Then they told me about all the places they'd take me when I was older, more dangerous night-hunting sights and mountains.

I asked, again, where Baoshan Sanren lived, hoping to at least pass by the foot of the mountain one day, but CangSe told me it was a secret.

I didn't pester her again, but I pouted for a bit, put out because I really, really wanted to know.

She'd laughed and pulled teasingly at the pendant around my neck.

What was supposed to be a 'one-time thing, for good luck' ended up being permanent, the name 'Baoshan's token' floated in front of my eyes in glowing blue letters every time I picked it up.

When I'd asked why she'd given it to me, she'd said something along the lines of 'passing on a legacy' and then quickly changed the subject.

Having me wear the pendant around my neck during night-hunts, given that it was such a well-known symbol, was like making a statement.

'This child is the best, an apprentice of the Great Baoshan Sanren, he follows in her teachings.'

I hoped I proved that statement true.

Whenever I went on a night-hunt the other cultivators all got in my way, because of my age, because I wasn't supposed to be there, because I obviously still had time to make a name for myself whilst they had to hurry and get noticed by greater sects.
Plus, I didn't even have a golden core so why was I there anyway?

I was working on one, but those things took time to actually form. My suck-y talent for meditation didn't help matters either. I could stay still, but I just couldn't empty my mind, it was constantly running, constantly thinking and improving and *aggravating* me.

I'd figured I'd just work around the usual method of meditation by using some other techniques I'd read about back in my old life.

There were quite a lot of meditation techniques and I was sure one of them involved minds with messy thought patterns.

And most importantly, I wanted to know more of how energy flowed in this world. There were many types of energy, and I was unsure if there were more than one method of harnessing it.

It was possible, given that Wei WuXian had learnt, created, a method of harnessing resentful energy. Maybe there was a different method of harnessing energy, in general, that was still unknown because people only harnessed one half of it.

Yin Yang and all that jazz.

I didn't know enough to try it, though.

CangSe and ChangZe were adamant that I create a stable base with my meditation before starting to mess around with actually harnessing energy.

They were probably right and I'd screw my meridians or whatever they were called.

We told jokes and laughed a lot, as the night went on I just got *tired*.

CangSe cooed and cuddled with me in bed, messing with my hair I'd always complain about getting too long, and then went to join ChangZe at the table, whispering to my near-asleep self that she'd be back soon.

I woke up to a loud notification bell.

I rubbed at my eyes, confused on what was going on, to see the words:

"Checkpoint finished!"

"Story Arc completed!"

I frowned at the words, brain still addled from sleep, and sat up on the bed. It was still dark outside, but the moon was starting to lean down the mountains, dawn wouldn't be here for a few hours still.

*Where are the adults?*

I looked at the bed and saw that it was empty, no one other than me had slept in it. I got up and searched around the room, the bags were still here, as were the shopping we'd done earlier today, but the swords were gone.

*They went out.*

I went to say something along the lines of 'How could they leave me behind and go night-hunting!' when I saw the notification again.
I stared at the words for a moment, processing them through, before I felt like a bucket of ice cold water was dumped on me.

I fell to my knees in the middle of the room. Gasping for breath.

The words floated in front of my eyes but they grew distorted as tears just started running down my face.

I knew what they meant now.

I understood what they were telling me.

Wei WuXian's parents died when he was around four years old, during a night-hunt, and the child waited by the city's gates for days waiting for them to come back.

'I'll be back soon, A-Ying,' CangSe's whisper echoed in my ears,' Rest, my love.'

A keening sound left my throat.

They were gone.

They were truly, irrevocably gone.

Gone, gone, forever.

I never got to say goodbye.

"Painful though parting be, I bow to you as I see you off to distant clouds." - Emperor Saga

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, this is the End of Arc I.
I'm already working on Arc II and I have (at least) on chapter ready to go. I don't know if I'll post it right away or wait a bit to see if I want to change anything.
The chapters will kind of become longer, but I only really want to write long chapters at around Arc III (the Jiangs) or Arc IV (Gusu), because otherwise it will get messy.

So, yeah, you guys knew this was coming, right?
At least two people used the word 'inevitable' when talking about Wei Ying's parents, and I'm not proud to say I did that evil laugh at that.
Sorry?

Oh, the Xun. I had plans on getting him an occarina (because I have one and I can't play worth crap so let my character live my dream) but then I found the Xun, and some really cool music, so I just gave up and gave him that.
He'll have Cheqing, no worries, he'll just have that thing up his sleeve as back-up.
You never know.

Before I forget (current skills):
Martial - Acrobatics: 4; Climbing: 4; Brawling: 5; Knife-handling: 3; Archery: 2;
Throwing: 5;
Scholar - Investigation: 3; Astronomy: 1; Foraging: 3; Spiritual: 3; Meditation: 1;
Talisman-making: 2;
Social - Taunting: 3; Storytelling: 3; Etiquette: 2;
Arts - Singing: 1; Flute: 1;
Mundane - Language: 6; Writing: 4; Animal-handling: 1;
Hope I'm not forgetting any...
Chapter Summary

First chapter of Arc II, here we go again!
In which there's a breakdown, lots of angst, a rash decision, and I'm making myself
King of my Mountain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her. But once they are in hand, he or she alone
must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game. - Voltaire

Chapter 16: Alone

I was all alone.

That's the thought my mind kept coming back to, once the tears stopped flowing.

I was all alone.

It was a numb thought. A fact my mind supplied me, except there was no emotion behind it.

I was all alone.

"Talent Tree Unlocked!"
"Player Store Unlocked!"
"Advancements Unlocked!"

I look up from the wooden floor and stare at the floating words above me, glowing in blue light,
dancing to the bell-like sound of notifications.

For some reason, they fill me with anger.

It burns deep inside my stomach, a ball of fierce resentment towards the words, towards the System.

What good came of some stupid new features to my stupid Player Menu if they came too late to
protect two people who did not deserve to die?

I was turning five years old next month.

Wei WuXian's parents died when he was around four years old, during a night-hunt.
I'd changed something. I *had* made a difference already.

Yet the outcome was inevitable.

Wei WuXian's parents were dead.

I couldn't save them, I could only *delay it*, and now...

Now I could only mourn them.

Mourn the two people who I had spent a year living with, traveling with, being cared for, loved by, for a whole year.

You never notice how little time you had with the people you cared about until they are gone.

Gone, gone forever.

I was all alone.

I hit my fist on the floor once more and silently scream. I couldn't wake up the other guests staying at the inn, who would believe a distressed child crying that its parents were dead, when proof of their deaths would only come with the rising sun?

They left everything behind in the room. All of their belongings were exactly where they had been when CangSe had laid me down on the bed... Had Wei WuXian's parents done the same, when they originally died?

If so, had Wei WuXian kept them?

Lost them?

Or...

*Taken as collateral.*

Anger.

Without thinking twice, I grabbed a hold of the bags and sent them to my Inventory, watched as they disintegrated from view into glowing blue specks of light that faded as swiftly as they appeared.

In this life, they wouldn't take their belongings.

At the same time, I did not think I could bear to see the trinkets we'd bought earlier that day, nor the items I knew they'd always carry with them. Wei ChangZe's flute, CangSe's calligraphy set and the bundle of paper she'd write on, letters and pages upon pages of script I could not yet decipher.

It hurt.

*Where to go from here?*

I sat down, barely refrained from rocking back and forth as my chest constricted once more with emotion, clutching at my head. My fingers gripped at my hair, keeping me focused on the present.

Once the numbness passed, and it *would* pass, I would break.
Even now my carefully built walls around my heart were crumbling down, piece by piece.

I couldn't break here. I had to leave.

Where would I go?

All of my plans, ideas and ramblings I had created months ago seemed unreachable in my mind. No matter how much I tried to grasp one of them, they all just slipped through my fingers like sand.

*I couldn't think of anything.*

I let go of my head and stared down at my hands.

They were shaking.

For the first time in a long while, I truly felt like a child, a small, weak, and scared child that called out to its parents in a trembling voice.

*‘Come back! Please, come back!’*

I flinched at the memory.

*That's not you.*

No, not anymore.

*We're better than this. Get up.*

I was all alone.

*Get up. Stop panicking. Think.*

Think... Think what? What was I doing?

I am all alone.

*Stop this! Get up! Think! Think, damn it!*

My body moved on its own, slapping my hands together, producing a loud clap, hard enough that my palms stung.

The sound brought me back out of my head, the pain kept me focused.

I couldn't break here. I couldn't stay broken. I needed to think of a way out.

A solution. I needed to stay one step ahead of the problem.

*Think!*

I opened the Player Menu and immediately afterwards opened the Story Arc timeline.

As expected, beneath the now knot-free line stood a different line, this one filled with tiny little knots here and there. Despite my better judgement, I looked up at the uppermost timeline and saw that, where once stood one last knot, were now three little red figures raising lanterns to the sky.

My vision swan as my eyes watered.
Stop, think!

I shook my head, clearing it, and focused once more on the problem at hand. I opened Wei WuXian's new memories, a board filled with still-images of running through streets, of bullying children of different social classes, of others stealing his food, of dogs biting and snarling, of shadow-y figures attempting to grab him as he ran.

Of waiting by a golden city's gates for people who'd never come back.

I growled.

A low, resentful sound that came from deep within me.

That wasn't me.

I would never take insults and abuse piled on top of me lying down.

Never again.

I was better than this. I was stronger than this.

I had prepared myself for this.

I knew what I had to do, I knew I had the skills to survive this.

To thrive and be free.

I was all alone.

I would meet them again, someday, surely.

I would meet them again and share with them all that I had seen, how far I had gone, and show them all that I had mastered.

I would keep their dreams and hopes alive, I would built a world with a better tomorrow.

I would show them all that I had changed, one day.

One day...

The pendant around my neck slipped off the front of my robes and dangled, the light coming from the window catching on its metal feathers.

I was all alone, but I would keep their memory alive.

I would keep them in my thoughts, always.

I got up off the floor and looked out the window, dawn wouldn't be coming for a couple more hours.

I had time, but I mustn't waste it.

I went around the room and made sure that I wasn't forgetting anything and leaving it behind.

After leaving the correct amount of money to pay for the room, I went out the window. It was easier to walk across the roof and scale down a tree when it wasn't iced over.
I ruefully thought back at the first time I did this, and stared at the moon once my feet touched the ground.

*Things would be different from now on.*

This was the start of my new life.

And I’d be damned if I was going to waste it.

---

I took the donkey with me.

It was a rash decision made in the heat of the moment when I passed by the stable to say goodbye, and couldn't bear to leave the animal ChangZe and CangSe had had with them on their travels, who'd be there when this body was born.

It was a dumb and rash decision, I neither knew how to ride it nor was it a good idea to make it obvious I was a child traveling alone.

When I made it to the city gates, the sun was just barely starting to light up the darkened night sky.

I thought about finding their bodies. Of seeing how they'd died. Of finding what killed them.

In the end, I couldn't go through with it.

The images of seeing them lying there, bloodied, broken and lifeless, would haunt my dreams for years. I didn't dare to imagine how much worse it'd have been if I knew exactly what had happened to them.

Sometimes, it was best to stay ignorant.

I'd persuaded the donkey to follow me quietly, despite it knowing who I was, and of me knowing its mellow temperament, I had never actually led it. And it was in a donkey's nature to detest novelty, t'was why they were known as 'stubborn' creatures.

Thankfully, despite it giving me a sour look, this donkey wasn't as spoiled as the famous Lil'Apple.

I opened my map, thankful that my previous travels meant it was relatively clear, and saw that there was a cave temple not too far from where I was now. Walking at a slow pace, because my small stature and short legs didn't allow for any other pace, we'd make it there just before sundown.

There was food in the bags, of that I was sure, and the donkey could eat grass for the night.

Once I was at the temple, I would think of long term plans.

Once I was at the temple, I'd let myself break.

Until then, I had to keep walking. Keep busy.

*Think. Think. Think.*

Nothing would be the same after this.

*There was no going back from this.*
I was all alone.

I had been in cave temples before, ChangZe didn't care much about them but CangSe had brought me to several during our travels. She'd talk in hushed whispers in my ear about the Gods and Goddesses living high in the Heavens, their stories and names.

For some reason, there was always something in the air that made me shiver.

Whether it was because some higher power knew I didn't belong in this world. Hadn't been born in this world and had many other Gods and Goddesses in my memories, their stories so different yet so similar.

I still found myself staring at 'normal' things of day-to-day life wondering what the hell they were.

I could only say I was grateful for being male and not needing to squat over a pot to use the bathroom.

Even if being a male had given me pause for about two minutes before I distinctively remember thinking 'nope' and just ignored it.

*Mind over matter, if you don't mind it, then it doesn't matter.*

Or so I had heard.

There wasn't anyone inside the temple when I walked in, the caretaker having obviously left for the night, and I tied the donkey at the entrance near a well, having drawn a bucket of water for it to drink from and made sure that there was enough fresh and healthy grass near it to eat.

The nights hadn't yet turned unbelievably cold so I didn't have to worry about that either.

Soon, it would be a different matter.

I'd walked back inside the temple and found myself a small niche behind the offering altar to settle down for the night. The sweet smell of decaying fruit and incense wasn't the most pleasant odor, but I'd withstood worse smells and lived through them without complain.

I tossed and turned for a while, mind a complete mess but still numb from today's events.

I wondered if their bodies had been found already.

I wondered if they had remembered the small child at the inn, and thought of ways to explain to it that its parents were gone.

Reviewing Wei WuXian's memories once more, I knew the answer to be different from my daydreams.

After much debating, I brought their bags back out of my inventory, numbly watching them materialize out of thin air.

I knew why the System warned me about using its features around eye-witnesses.

They were easy to abuse and exploit.

And only made myself a bigger target.
What would Jin GuangShan do, if he knew there was someone who could hide anything and carry anything, as long as it wasn't living, without a trace?

He's certainly torture them to find out its secret, and kill them once he found out it couldn't be replicated.

I shook those thoughts away and reached forward for the bags.

ChangZe's was less bulky than CangSe's but heavier. Inside there were all the trinkets of the day before, brand new robes he never got to try on, and all of his tools. I remembered how he'd sit me on his lap and guide my hands on how to carve, or repair, a bow, how big and warm his hands were on mine.

CangSe's was disorganized but still minimally neat, her calligraphy table was by far the heaviest thing in it, but there were also books on various subjects and lots, lots and lots of loose papers.

I gave up on trying to organize them and just sighed, it was so like her to have a bag this messy and complain when I packed my things similarly.

My hand brushed against a wooden box and I pulled it out of the bag. Its lid was decorated with lily pads and lotus.

I opened it and saw dozens of hair ribbons, of multiple colors, inside.

CangSe never wore any hair ribbons, letting her hair loose or tied in a bun with a hair clip.

ChangZe always tied his bun with a ribbon, and lost them all the time.

I broke then.

When faced with such undeniable proof of just how much they loved each other, when the world had been busy gossiping about how 'bad parents' they were for letting me learn how to survive by myself, how to protect myself and learn through living and not by simply listening on lectures and reading about it from books.

The very real pain of knowing how much they cared for one another, complemented each other and had loved me just as fiercely dug sharp shards of glass into my innards.

It made me grieve for the family I had left behind when I took a chance on this world. Of the man I loved, the children I had cherished as if they were my own and was so proud of.

It made me aware of just how young Wei ChangZe and CangSe Sanren had been when they died.

_Barely into their mid-twenties._

So damn young.

They never got the chance to watch their child grow, find its place in the world, and watch their family grow.

There was no doubt in my mind that, had they lived for a few years longer, there would've been more little Weis following after Wei WuXian.

I don't know which thought hurt most.

That Wei WuXian had been left alone.
Or that he might've had to look after children younger than himself when he was barely a child himself.

I cried. And cried. And cried.

Until all my tears were gone and I was left feeling numb all over again.

Where to go from here?

I open my Player Menu, and go to the new features I had unlocked, staring at the lists of techniques I could learn, at all the things I could buy out of literal nothing, and couldn't help but feel bitter resentment build behind my throat.

It felt like being handed a meaningless trinket after being forced to run through a marathon.

How was this supposed to make up for making me lose my family?

What was this supposed to mean?

Hey, don't feel bad, here, now you can figure out how to learn how to throw fireballs out of your hands!

I muffled my angry screaming into my hands, raging and growing fiercer with fury.

Think.

I took a deep breath, thought about ChangZe's lessons on meditation and calmed myself once more, with much difficulty.

I moved on to the Quest Page and saw that there were hundreds of new available Quests. Once you opened that page the map flooded with little bubbles letting you know where the Quest could be accepted.

They were all clustered around villages, towns and cities. Very rarely did one stray off the path and would be found virtually in the middle of nowhere.

A plan started to take shape inside my mind.

A black hole with dark tendrils grasping at ideas and thoughts, shaping itself into goals and patterns.

I couldn't save them because I wasn't ready.

I wasn't ready to lose them. Wasn't ready to be alone. Wasn't ready to accept that I had a role to play in this world.

I let myself be deceived by the easy days in the sun, and forgot about the darkness creeping towards me.

There would be dark years ahead of me.

And I had to be ready for them.

There wasn't a choice anymore.

I had to get stronger. Faster. Cleverer.
If this System wanted someone to play a game with, I'd show it.

I was going to *bend* the rules of this game to my will and not the other way around.

I was going to play to *win* this.

And I knew just where to start.

I drew a course of travel, to pass through every single village, town and city, through every single Quest bubble that appeared on this map.

My end goal?

**Yiling.**

I would have my mountain.

And I would build it so strongly, so powerfully, so beautifully, that everyone would stare at it in awe.

I promised them that.

Chapter End Notes

So, here's a few things I need to say before they actually become relevant:
The Talents and Advancements might appear to be OP, and the Store is really 'unrealistic' with how much he can actually get out of it, but bear in mind that this is a world where the actual classification of 'Walking Corpses' is Vampire Zombies. (You can't make this stuff up people, just what?)

And I believe I already mentioned this before, but he won't be able to use these 'features' all the time, the inventory already is easy to see, and even easier to abuse, but the talents especially will make lesser men jealous. Or suspicious, or angered, or even slightly worshiping.

The reason why these features exist is because The System runs on a different set of rules/guidelines on energy, and therefore implies that it wants its Player to do the same. AGF!WWX has no idea, all he knows is that the System warned him not to let other people know he can pull stuff like this.

As for the Store, he can (and will, eventually) buy food and necessities out of it, but he won't actually do it often. As he says in this chapter (I think it's this chapter, might be the next one, oops) getting shelter and provisions is fairly easy, the hardest part is staying alive when traveling, because of beasties and what not.

We'll mostly see the Store when WWX wants to get new equipment or finds out he can learn new stuff from the Store.

Finally, Advancements. These are like achievements he can activate. He'll get a notification that this Advancement has been unlocked, and he can choose to get it active (it has its benefits) or not.

But, there's also Disadvantages, these ones are invisible to him until they activate, and these activate automatically. It's possible to deactivate them through a series of actions, but some of them are permanent (like losing a hand, ya' ain't getting it back).
I think that's all for now, I hope you're all excited for Arc II, because here we go!
Chapter Summary

Where plans are drawn, a barter happens, and why you should never mess with a lady.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Ability is what you're capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do. Attitude determines how well you do it." - Lou Holtz

Chapter 17: Get Burnt

The donkey was a liability.

It didn't take me long on the road to figure that out. Already I had had to quickly divert my path in order to lose bandits or common thugs, unfavorable people had given me long stares on the road, first passing their eyes to me, then moving to the donkey, and finding them back on my face.

Particularly my scar.

True, they might think I'd stolen it (technically I hadn't, since it was mine now, but trying to explain that to people wouldn't fly) but that only made it worse.

A kid traveling alone was already a risk.

A kid traveling alone with a donkey? It was an 'easy' target.

And I could feel the heat of their stares on my back.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

I couldn't keep it.

I was sitting on the side of the road, a day and a half away from Lanling, and staring at the sky, hoping it would provide some answers.

It didn't.

*How does one get rid of a donkey?*

I wasn't going to kill it, nor was I living it on the side of the road, donkey or not it belonged to ChangZe and CangSe, had been theirs for ages, and it deserved better than that.

So, realistically, my only option was to sell it.
A farmer or a traveling merchant would benefit from having such a mount, wouldn't they?

*How exactly does one sell a donkey, when they are physically four years old?*

I grimaced but ignored it.

So, I'd sell it. Sell it for what though?

It wasn't like I didn't need the money, but Quests were a good source of coins and the Store had virtually anything I could possibly need (though I wasn't sure how I felt about eating food that appear out of nowhere) and there was still some time before winter settled in and it became hard to find worthy game to hunt.

Speaking of hunting, night-hunts was also a fairly easy option to make some money.

Even if the people organizing the night-hunt couldn't pay in cash, they could offer accommodation, food or other services.

So food and shelter were easy to come by, I also knew inns and taverns would let entertainers stay for free if they kept their guests busy or attracted more clients with their acts. Even if it was only a pile of hay in a stable, it was better than sleeping out in the open (which I wasn't opposed to as long as it was summer and it didn't look like it'd rain).

Whilst I wasn't the best at playing the flute, yet, I knew my fair share of stories, legends and myths to knock the socks off any age range.

And it was even better when I could spun tales of 'fantastical' creations that were as mundane as sliced bread to me.

Actually... I could be the first person to introduce pizza to this world.

The System would surely hate me for that.

*Or maybe give you an achievement.*

Congratulations, you've set the world into its fast-food trend?

*Maybe.*

So, shelter, food and money wouldn't be a problem for now. Although, wasn't it best to prepare for the future?

*So sell it for money?*

I thought about it, really thought about it, and shook my head.

I'd sell it for supplies.

Rice, beans, wool cloth, things like that.

Provisions.

I had to plan ahead, weeks if not months in advance. How to get from point A to point B, what I'd need, what I had, and what I'd have to get.

That little trail of thought brought another memory to the surface.
I still hadn't checked what was inside those Qiankun Pouches I'd pocketed before I went and fought that Bo.

I could've hit myself for not remembering them sooner.

Though I would argue it would be hard to do so when under the watchful gaze of the adults following the 'Incident' and me being utterly spent from training, it was still something I'd completely forgotten about.

Maybe Wei WuXian's bad memory is contagious.

Shut up and knock on wood, asshole.

I brought them out and opened one.

I blinked.

There were medical supplies, or so their tags said, talismans, and other cultivator tools.

The other bag had similar contents.

I pulled everything out and sorted them into piles, checked which talismans I knew about, and how to use them, and stuffed those with the rest of my talismans. Then I sent all the medical supplies to my inventory, to quickly get them out if need be, and placed all the other random cultivator tools inside one of the pouches.

I then sent that one to the inventory and attached the other, empty, pouch to my belt. Either I'd find an use for it, or it'd serve as bait for pickpockets.

I mentally sorted out which talismans I had with me and which ones I knew how, reliably, make by myself. There weren't a lot, I screwed up my calligraphy too often and my hands were too shaky.

I needed to stop that.

Steady hands and quick fingers.

I considered my position on the map and picked up the donkey's lead again, there was a farming village not too far from here, I could put my bargaining skills to good use.

"A donkey that old isn't worth more than a single bag of rice!" The red faced farmer was blustering at me.

I gave him an 'are you an idiot look', guy had been trying to rip me off for half an hour now. Every time I said, well okay, bye then, he proceeded to try and get me to accept his deal.

This idiot wanted the donkey but wasn't willing to 'pay' the correct value for it, more so when he was trying to take advantage of my 'age' and trying to trick me into believing the donkey was old.

Sir, with no respect for your less than stellar intelligence, donkeys can live up to thirty years, in the wild not domesticated, and this little guy isn't even on his first decade.

"And I've already told you, that's your opinion," I repeated my words, again,"And I'll try some other place, have a nice day, sir."

I went to lead the donkey away and the man grabbed the lead.
"Kid, you're not getting more than a bag of rice for the thing! Just accept what I'm giving you!" He told me.

Oh no he didn't.

I turned to face him very slowly, my eyes glaring straight into his, their grey color frosting into cold silver.

"Let. Go," I told him, my scar was startlingly visible on my face," I am not selling it to you for a bag of rice, good day."

The man lets go of the lead and watches me walk off.

He's going to be trouble.

I'm counting on it.

People like this guy came in the hundreds, and I was sure that in a world like this, they would be a lot more obvious than from where I came from. When I'd first started living on the streets, broke and filled with wide-eyed naivety, they had hounded me, trying to take every little thing I owned, and there wasn't much mind you, before I'd learned of their wily ways.

They wouldn't trick me now.

You're going to trick them.

Play with fire and you're going to get burnt.

Anyways, turns out the guy is actually some big shot in the village, so word of him wanting to rip me off on the donkey and my refusal to sell it to him quickly spreads. Which in turn means that no one will buy the donkey for fear of the repercussions the guy would mete out, so I ended up taking the donkey back with me.

Really, if the next town over also tried to rip me off or just refused to buy the donkey, I might just suck it up and keep it.

Learn to ride the damn thing on my own.

...Why don't you?

I didn't really have an answer for it.

Maybe it was some form of coping mechanism to handle the onslaught of emotion that came every time I thought about the adults, keep everything they owned out of sight and move on from them.

You think it will be that easy?

No. But I was willing to try.

The donkey made an snorting sound, as if it could read my mind, and gave me a look.

I smiled tiredly at it and patted its neck, my fingers curling slightly in its pale fur. Let it be known that animal therapy does wonders for one's soul.

I pondered slightly on what to do next, then looked to the sky above me and decided that now was
the time to get a move on and find out a place to stay the night.

Tonight would have to be under the open sky, that idiot was trying to be inconspicuous and following me around.

Seriously, being treated like a stupid child would get old very fast...

We walked for a while until we came upon a large open field of tall grass. The donkey wasted no time in starting to munch at it, so I just shrugged and started clearing an area to settle camp for the day. On any other occasion I'd add some 'sensory' talismans, the kind that would be very loud if breached, but I forgone those. It wouldn't do if the idiot got scared off before I could have a 'talk' with him.

An honest talk.

You actually think he'll do it?

Idiots like him are easy to spot.

And I was correct. Shortly after the moon went up and 'children' should all but be fast asleep, I heard a rustle in the trees and the tell-tale noise of branches snapping under feet.

Seriously, how stupid can you be?

I remained perfectly still on the ground, feigning sleep, whilst my hand slowly traveled under my pack and curled its fingers around my dagger.

I wouldn't kill him, goodness no, but I wasn't opposed to giving him the scare of a lifetime.

Besides, no one would believe him if he complained that he got beat up by a little kid.

If they did, then all that showed was just how much this idiot deserved it.

I let him get close to the Donkey, heard it bray and the guy shushing it harshly, which only made it bray harder. If I wasn't already awake, then there was no way for me to remain asleep after that, I internally sighed and remained pliant on the ground.

I heard the guy mess around with the lead, but he couldn't get the knot I had made out of it, and so he decided to follow the rope to see where it was tied to.

Just as I had predicted.

It's just so nice when things go according to plan, isn't it?

The best feeling.

So, there the idiot went, following the rope to see where the knot was.

Around my foot.

An obviously 'bad' place to tie a leash as the donkey could just take off and drag me, or so many would think. A) The donkey was well aware I was awake, it had known my adults, for Heavens sake; and B) This donkey was perfectly content staying still and just eating its grass in peace.

And so, like any person with brain cells and who didn't know the donkey personally, it could be described as a 'dumb' thing to do.
Unless it was a trap.

Idiot~

Guy crouched down to get the rope around my foot and I sat up, lightning fast, and hit him on the side of the head with the dagger.

He was out like a light.

That was easier than I had expected.

Fun too!

Should I feel bad for doing this?

Do you want to feel bad for doing this?

No, not really. Mess with me and find out what happens.

Then don't feel bad for it. Screw him, he was asking for it.

I shrugged. To each their own.

Also, waste not, want not.

I went through his pockets.

A coin pouch, a set of keys (I let him keep those, wasn't about to rob his house, I had standards), and a bag of rice.

Asshole.

Did he really think he could come here, take my freaking donkey, leave behind a measly sack of rice, and that I'd just go on my merry way?

Oh, screw it. I was keeping the damn thing.

And the rice.

Of course, this gentleman was nice enough to bring it to us and everything!

Chapter End Notes

AGF!WWX will hit you if you try to rip him off, knock you out and search through your pockets. You've been warned.

This chapter has also been split into two, so chapter 18 starts shortly after that scene. Whilst chapter 19 starts a few days after that one.

And once again, chapter 19 will be divided into two...

I don't know why I bother giving numbers to my planned chapters when 7/10 times they end up growing too length-y and I have to cut them.

And when I say cut I mean that Arc II chapters won't go past 3k and when they do they get split into two. All the chapters of this Arc should even out at 2k words. Yay,
longer chapters!
Chapter Summary

In which society is filled with assholes and bad people, where Wei Ying wants nothing to do with your bullshit, and F! this, I'm moving to the country side.
On the bright note, being popular feels nice.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, fair warning, there's an encounter in this chapter that might ruffle a few feathers. I'm not 100% happy with this, mostly because even I was so far out of comfort zone writing that, I didn't know where to start.
It's minimal, like... 10 or 15 lines, maybe less. So yeah...
Hope you enjoy the chapter?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"There's no fear when you're having fun." - Will Thomas

Chapter 18: Street Rat

I reached the town of Zhengzou, just near the borders of Lanling, and I could immediately tell I wasn't going to have a good time here.

Maybe it was because CangSe and ChangZe had sucessfully 'sheltered' me from seeing these sights or because I'd had a filter removed from my eyes now that they were gone, making it incredibly easy to see the street urchins and orphans running around between alleys and houses.

Worse still was seeing obviously hungry children being grabbed by their arms and thrown away from stalls by men twice their size and thrice their girth, yelling at them to stop scaring away clients and to get their dirty hands off of their merchandise.

There was an obvious disconnect between my culture and theirs.

This wasn't how you treated children!

I wanted to go up to him and shout at him, give him a piece of my mind, but my tongue was tied.

Tell him off and I'd be in the wrong here. Because they were street rats, filthy and sneaky and a bunch of liars, they deserved everything coming to them.

Something buzzed at the edge of my senses and my hand moved before I could process it, grabbing the wrist of a kid slightly older than me, attempting to grab the Qiankun bag at my waist.
I stared at him and felt empty.

I let go of his wrist and watched him scamper off.

Would I be like this?

No, of course not. Even if I was an Oscar worthy actor, my patience has limits, and I have better use of my time than to spend it trying to steal buns off a cart.

*Like finding a place to keep the donkey at while you go complete some Quests.*

I groaned all the way in the back of my head.

It'd be so much easier if I just sold the thing.

*But you're too fond of it now to do it.*

So I'm a bloody sap, sue me.

*Where's that Quest?*

I opened the map and let it guide me on where I needed to go. In the five minutes it took me to get there, I'd already grabbed two other would-be-pickpockets and gave a mighty kick to the shins of a guy who tried to grab the donkey's lead out of my hand.

He shouted expletives at me and was 'shocked' when I shouted better ones back at him.

*Please*, like I wasn't thrice his age and an educated lady at that. These people didn't know the art of cussing someone out.

The Quest itself wasn't a particularly fascinating one, just fetch this and that before the time runs out. And they had a place I could keep the donkey in whilst I ran the errant.

I did have the feeling that the System intervened more in this world than what I'd first assumed, because there was this disconnect when people gave me Quests, like there was something not quite right with them.

Like they weren't really talking, just reciting lines in a script.

*And maybe because they don't think twice of asking this and that of a random child, when you still get awkward looks on the streets because your face doesn't match how cute you are.*

Screw you.

*Don't think too hard on this, lest you have an existential crisis in the middle of the market place.*

Mind over matter?

*Mind over matter.*

---

I ended up bawling my eyes out about three hours after I'd run a few simple Quests, seeing a couple picking up their child off of the ground and raising him high in the air.

The gaping hole in my chest hurt.

So I started bawling.
In an alley.

At least it's not like you have much face to lose by having snot all over you.

I ignored it.

The donkey was tied back at an inn, who agreed to let me sleep on the hay stack out back, so I didn't have to worry about anyone trying to get it from me right now.

I kind of just sat and cried for a bit.

Or well, that was my plan before this bastard appeared.

"Hey, little boy, are you alright?" Someone asks.

I look up, rubbing at my teary eyes, and see a man standing above me, nicely dressed in clean robes and smiling in a friendly way down at me.

Warning bells started ringing in my head.

This guy was bad news.

My skin pricked and the Stranger Danger vibes the guy was giving off had my instincts yelling at me to get away from him.

Or stick the dagger in a soft spot.

"I'm fine," I answered and went to get up.

He laughs and puts his hand on my shoulder.

Oh, no he didn't.

"Where are your parents? It's getting late to be out by yourself," He tells me, and his eyes are definitely shifting around to see if there are any adults nearby.

Stab him.

"They're waiting for me," I lie," I don't need help finding them," I tell him and push his hand off of me.

"Now, now," He tries to put some more pressure on my shoulder," That isn't polite."

I kick him in the nuts.

Guy goes down with a whine.

"Player leveled up!"

"New (Main) Quest Available!"

"Do you wish to view this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I ignore the notifications for now.
"It isn't polite to approach little boys with bad intentions," I mock him, "Didn't your mother taught you that?"

The guy only groans and glares at me, clutching his family jewels.

"Try and touch me again and lose your hand, asshole," I spit at him.

He just lays there, rocking on the ground, and I quickly make my way back to the inn. Despite my faking it, and I was angry, I felt uneasy.

My skin crawled in revulsion.

I was getting out of this shit town, right now.

I'd be better off sleeping in some cave or even in a fucking tree.

*Should've shanked him.*

I snort.

I'll keep that in mind.

I get to the inn and give him some excuse about how I wasn't staying there for the night, really sorry to bother him, and grabbed the donkey from the stables.

The sun was already down and it was evening, not the safest time to travel, but I could care less about that at this point.

The first beast that thought I made for an easy target was getting disemboweled.

I wasn't messing around.

About two hours after I left the town and found a small empty cave to stay in for the night, making my camp and getting cozy with a small campfire. I finally sat down to see what the notification was all about.

First thing first.

I open the Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 4  
  Title: None Level: 15  
  Class: None* Fatigue: 30  

  Stats: 18 Points Available;  
  Intelligence: 16 Stealth: 14  
  Strength: 20 Charisma: 14  
  Agility: 16 Senses: 20  
  Stamina: 20 Luck: 13  

  Skills:  
  +Martial  
  +Social  
  +Scholar  
  +Arts ]
With how things seemed to be going for me, I decided that my Stats would be monstrous by the time this Story Arc was done and over with.

I quickly distributed my Stat points and pop on over to the Quest Page.

There were still some Quests to be done on that town but I decided to stay away from it for now. And opened the new Quest notification.

"Quest: Player Class Selection"

«Player has reached Class Selection level.
Player should arrive at the nearest Class Selection sight and complete this Quest.
Classes have specific Skills that can be unlocked automatically.
Classes can be changed any time but Skills unlocked will be lost.
Player can multi-class at specific levels or conditions.»

"Accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I stare at the words for about a minute before pinching my cheek.

I hadn't fallen asleep, at least.

This can't be real.

This never happened in the...-

Novel? Yeah, I thought we'd already established that our situation isn't even remotely close to the plot apart from the canon timeline of events.

Goodness gracious, I really was stuck in a video game.

Well, what are you waiting for? Accept it!

I sighed, and clicked yes.

The map now had a rather big bubble colored red right above Lanling.

Into the den of beasts...

They don't know who you are yet, odds are they won't try to kill you!

At least, I upped my Luck Stat.
That only means the world will try and heap more 'unlucky' stuff towards you.

You're just a ray of sunshine, you.

Says the person who knocked two men out in less than a day.

Touché.

Whilst I had agreed to take on that Quest, I decided to wait a while before going on to tackling it. Lanling wasn't very far off from where I was, and it'd take me a day at most to reach it, so I decided to go to the 'poorer' villages and see if they needed any help with Spirits or had any night-hunt available.

It was mid-autumn right now, but winter set early in this land. And once it set there were places that because virtually unreachable unless you flew. So many smaller villages were left to fend for themselves during these months, relying only on local cultivation clans and rural sects.

Any help offered would be well received, I was sure.

And I was.

Except for the tiny problem about my age.

"You're a cultivator?" The grizzled man laughs," You're smaller than meh grand-kids!"

I smile wider at him, my scar pulling at my cheek, and let him laugh.

"I heard you're leading a night-hunt tonight, I was asking if you're allowing rogue cultivators to also participate?" I repeat my question.

He gave me a patronizing look," Listen kid, night-hunting isn't a game, it's dangerous and you could get hurt."

I gave him a gentler smile, and pulled my pendant out of my robes.

The man stared at it for a few moments, and I was all but ready to explain what it was, before his eyes widen and he quickly looks up at me again.

Gotcha.

"I am the son of CangSe Sanren, I follow in the footsteps of the Great Baoshan Sanren's teachings," I tell him, bullshitting my way through the conversation," I am asking you, elder, if you are allowing rogue cultivators to participate on this night-hunt."

The man stares at me some more, alternating between me and the pendant, before there's a spark of recognition in his eyes. He bows his head slightly, the bare minimum really," Rogue cultivators are allowed on this night-hunt, but my clan cannot afford to support outsiders with equipment or tools."

I smile at him and nod," Do not worry, I have my own tools and equipment. May I ask if there's any stable I can pay to house my mount?" I ask him, gesturing at the donkey patiently waiting a little ways behind me.

"The inn has a stable, they'll let you keep it there for the night for a small price," He answers.
I thank him and walk towards the inn, leading the donkey.

That went better than expected.

You'd be surprised on how many places you can enter if you behave as if you belong there.

"Who's that kid?!" I heard a startled cultivator yelp.

"I heard the chief say that he's a rogue cultivator, CangSe Sanren's son, you know... The Baoshan Sanren's disciple!" Another answered him in an awed tone.

"He's already taken down three frost spirits, and I think I saw him strike a hungry ghost without even turning around," The first one said.

"Kid's on a whole different league... These prominent Sects and their great disciples aren't normal... Kid can't be more than five years old..." Another cultivator told them.

"Dear Heavens..." The first one let out a sigh, "Any chances of him joining our clan?"

"Are you stupid? What the hell would we have to offer him?" The second one scoffed.

"He'd bring so much glory to our clan," The first groaned.

"Keep dreaming," The third one snorted, "And pay attention to what you're doing! I'm not telling auntie you got injured because you weren't paying attention!"

I left them to it, weaving in and out of trees and readying my bow to let my arrows fly. Even under the night sky with little to no light I could see, and the cold air stung my skin.

It was hard to breathe, but it was good practice.

I'd already been at this for two hours, and the night was barely beginning.

"Stat leveled up!"

I grinned.

The next spirit that was unfortunate to cross my path would've gulped in fright if they could.

I loved this.

"So there we were, right? Surrounded by this wolf pack," A man was telling to an eager crowd around the table of the tavern, "Qi She is already down, blood pouring out of his leg, Ming Yu has lost his blade and is trying to watch out for my back, when all of a sudden, this kid comes flying out of nowhere, and just starts shooting out arrows." He told them.

More than three pairs of eyes turn to stare at me, sitting at one end of the table and eating my free meal, thanks for saving the men, and give me appraising looks.

They're drunk and flushed pink.

Every once in a while, the guy telling the story would stop and repeat what he'd just said, none of the other guys bothered to correct him.
I found them amusing.

"And, and... Man, you had to have been there," The first man shakes his head in disbelief," The wolves just run, they notice their numbers going down so they just run..."

The men nod at me with respect.

"How about you tell a happier story?" The barmaid asks them," Or some song, I don't know. I don't want to go to sleep only to dream of wolves attacking me!"

The men laugh and jeer but decide to go along with her and start telling jokes and rhymes before quickly getting bored.

"Hey, kid," One of them turns to me," Ya' know any songs?"

Drinking songs? I know a few.

I ponder on what to tell him, most of the ones I know won't translate very well into chinese.

*I know just the one.*

A tune filters in my ear, and I have this unholy vision of the whole tavern drunkenly belling out the lyrics.

I grin widely at the men.

"Oh, I know one," I answer.

"Well, what are ya' waiting for?" The man laughs," Sing it out loud!"

"Oh, I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts~ There they are a standing in a row~ Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head~ Give them a twist, a flick of the wrist, that's what the showman said~!"

'Singing Skill leveled up!'

Turns out I do, indeed, have a talent for rousing drunks into singing silly songs.

I got a free room for the night for the free entertainment of seeing twelve odd drunks trying to string their words coherently in order to follow along with the song.

*God, I love Monty Python.*

I might just stay a while doing this.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I love Monty Python. I really, really do. And Princess Bride. And Disney. So there will be a lot of drunken singing moments in this story, and canon characters will be hit by a tidal wave of pop culture that leaves them going wtf, while WWX is laughing so hard in the background, he's on the ground struggling to breathe.

Also, never cuss at a lady, odds are, she knows how to cuss better than you.
Intelligence: 18 Stealth: 17
Strength: 20 Charisma: 17
Agility: 19 Senses: 20
Stamina: 20 Luck: 20
Be Better

Chapter Summary

Where the world keeps turning, a mystery presents itself to fuel rumors evermore, and one bad apple should not poison the entire basket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." - Mahatma Gandhi

Chapter 19: Be Better

News of CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe's death spread around early winter. It wasn't that it took long to identify the bodies, their swords were recognizable as their looks nowadays thanks to the frequent rumors of their parenting, but that their child hadn't been found with them.

Apparently it was thought that their son had been with them and perhaps had went after the beasts who killed them. The news hadn't spread until someone finally revealed that their son had gone missing from their inn room, with all of their belongings gone as well.

It was obvious that a child couldn't possibly carry three packs out of a room, which was locked when the innkeeper went to check the room, and disappear into the night by itself.

Or well, they could.

*If they had a Game System that allowed them to store things in a hammer space.*

By then, I'd already been traveling for a while. Rural villages and poor towns, never straying too far from Lanling.

Today, I decided, I would go check on the Quests there, the sooner I got them done the better. And I really wanted to find out more about Classes.

Donkey, as I had taken to calling it, yes I was *that* unimaginative, and I had been working on letting me ride it.

The first attempts had been amusing but proved fruitless. Donkey wasn't used to being ridden like one would a horse, content to being led by a lead and carrying packs. You could sit on it while he was being led, but you were out of luck if you thought he'd walk at all with you on his back and no lead.

Many apple bribery had been used to get its mind to change.

I could ride it for short distances, and perhaps longer still, but I got too sore for sitting on its back
and ended up walking a lot of the time.

As I traveled in and out of villages, and the news of my adults deaths spread, there came word of Jiang FengMian leading searches in an attempt of finding me. With how much attention their deaths had brought, their bodies had been burnt and their ashes sent to YunmengJiang, as per their Sect Leader's orders.

LanlingJin, the Sect responsible for overseeing that city had easily agreed, and even opened their borders for Jiang FengMian to search their territory for the missing boy.

There were even whispers of disciples being sent to nearby towns and villages to search for him.

I pondered on letting Jiang FengMian finding me sooner, even entertained the thought of just showing up where he was at and asking him why he was making all sorts of noise about me being missing, but I quickly decided against it.

I had my goal to reach and, just like my adults deaths, it would be inevitable that I'd be found and brought to Yunmeng.

But not yet.

Not now.

I still had much to do right now. Had only just begun my march to a better future.

In the end, I sat in front of a mirror and thought of ways to make me less recognizable.

My scar was a blessing and a hindrance. It was very visible and easily recognizable but, at the same time, the exact scar wasn't known by the world at large. All they knew was that CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe's son had a scar on his face.

I didn't have to worry too much about it, what I did have to worry about, though, was how closely I resembled CangSe.

The same grey colored eyes, the same slightly fuller lips that always settled on my face as a small mischievous smirk, and the same head shape. I had ChangZe's nose and hair though, along with his smaller ears and long fingers.

I'd grow to be as tall as him, as well.

As such, I needed to take some measures to make sure I wasn't easily spotted.

I brought out the box of hair ribbons and took out a gentle blue one, although I did considered taking the bright red one. One day, I decided, but today wasn't that day.

I loosened my hair and re-tied it properly in a high pony-tail, using my dagger to cut the ends that passed below my neck. Hair that grew too long was a snag when it came to night-hunts. All it took was a beast grabbing a hold of it and I'd go down.

I was strong, yes, but I had to work with my strengths. And my height wasn't one of them.

I looked back on the mirror and poked at the scar. I'd never let my eyes stare too long at my own reflection. In some ways, I still found it foreign.

Gone was the blond-ish hair and green eyes, the slight overbite and the peach colored skin.
All those years, wrinkles and weights were gone.

In its place stood a child with too wise eyes and a fire lit behind them.

This was Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian.

And I’d stand atop my mountain and look down at the world one day, and see the sun rise above it in peace.

*One day.*

I poked my scar again.

There wasn’t much, if anything, I could do about it. Time had made its color fade from the angry red it had been to a white paler than my own skin. I was sure that once summer got here and I’d spent my days and nights out in the open, hunting and crusading as my plans were, that it would grow more obvious. Placing a bandage on it would only bring more scrutiny at it, it was best just to let it out, in open view.

I’d keep the pendant hidden, unless I had to use it to make people stop acting all high-and-mighty on night-hunts.

These past few nights had been interesting, it got my mind off of things, to just lose myself running through darkened forests and track down malicious spirits. Yao that decided to take the shape of animals in order to ‘escape’ notice, were by far the most entertaining to hunt.

Often they'd hide in between actual animals and trick you into attacking the wrong thing.

They forgot, though, that the eyes are the windows to the soul. And theirs betrayed their intelligence.

I didn't tell that to the odd number of cultivators gaping at me and trying to figure out how I always knew which one was the correct yao.

If they were at least three times my age and couldn't be bothered to be observant enough to guess, then all I’d say were a few words of advice and let them either sink or swim.

Harsh of me, I think.

*Not really.*

So you say.

There weren't any Quests left on this village, nor in the villages surrounding it, so it was time to leave.

Donkey was already tacked with a fine set of old tack from a thankful farmer, whose cattle was being afflicted by a particularly vicious Hungry Ghost, and all I had left to do was thank the innkeeper for letting me stay, say goodbye to the cultivation clan of the area and set back on my travel.

But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.

*Morbid.*

Shut up.
Lanling hasn't changed since the last time I was here.

*Around winter time too.*

The map told me that the Class Selection Quest would be happening somewhere just past the city's north gates, in the direction of Qinghe, which was where I would be heading next, after finishing up all the Quests I had in this territory.

I would quickly go through the ones available here and move on, four Quests and I wouldn't return here, not again.

I paid for an opening in a stable, Donkey would stay there while I went around and did my thing. It'd be faster to weave through the crowds if I didn't have an animal trekking after me.

Finding the first Quest, one for a baker woman who needed to deliver a basket of bread to a household on the other side of the city, was easy and I made use of my stamina to finish it quickly.

If anyone was surprised with how a tiny little kid could carry a basket almost as long as his arm, full of bread, and still run fast enough to rival hunting dogs they didn't say anything aloud.

The second Quest was more like a scavenger hunt. The man gave me a map, or more specifically a piece of paper with crudely depicted buildings and symbols, and told me to go find the materials he needed.

I gave him a deadpan look but I went anyways.

Took me almost three hours to get them all and my good humor was fading fast.

The sun was high in the sky and it burned. Winter sun burnt more than in the summer, because you didn't feel just how hot it was due to the cold.

I was running towards the last Quest in this city, before tackling the Class Selection one, when a kid, near the same age as me, dressed in bright golden robes crosses my path. I'm running too fast to stop in time and I bump into him.

We both fall over in a heap of limbs.

*Urgh.*

I get up first and pull him up by the back of his robes.

"What's the big idea, just showing up all of a sudden?" I rub the back of my head, "Sorry, for bumping into you, I was going too fast to stop in time."

The kid makes a disgusted noise and turns to face me.

It's not a face I recognize, I've never seen him before, but the vermilion dot on his forehead makes my opinion of him drop several degrees.

He wasn't a good looking child, too puffed cheeks and a big nose, not to mention the bit of a belly rounding the front of his robes.

Please let this not be Jin ZiXuan. If he says he's Jin ZiXuan then there's no way I'm not bursting into laughter when I see him in Gusu.
"How dare you!" He squeaks hands clenched in fists at his sides.

I raise an eyebrow at him.


His face turns red as a tomato.

"Taunting Skill leveled up!"

Seriously...

You have a talent for this, I see, no wonder everyone hates you in the future.

"I'm-..." I go to apologize when the kid just screeches.

"A-Feng!" He yells, "Punish this urchin!"

Urchin? Kid, I'd question your eyesight.

And punish? Who the hell is this A-Feng?

"Right away, Young Master Jin," A man quickly comes over and pulls a whip out of his belt.

...

Oh, he better not dare to.

"You're a stupid urchin!" The kid mocks, "How dare you touch me with your lowly hands!"

...If this was Jin ZiXuan I'd find a way to convince Jiang YanLi to find love elsewhere.

He got better, and this might not be him.

Might.

I stood my ground and glared at the kid," I apologized," I told him," And I could care less about who you are, you try to have your servant hit me, and he's going to carry you back home unconscious."

I swear I'd punch the kid into the next week if he tried to pull this on me.

My eyes betrayed no lie, and I see his countenance falter.

A sharp sting on my back makes me buckle. The sharp whistle of a whip follows.

"How dare you speak to the Young Master like this!" Another servant appeared from behind me, carrying another whip," Street rats like you should grovel at the feet of your betters!"

Another slash of the whip. I brought my body down low.

Rage bubbled inside of me, and I hid my face from view so they could not see my eyes smoldering cold silver embers.

Calm down. Think this through.
I took a deep breath, the damn servant slashed at me again, and the air strangled in my chest.

I was done thinking.

I jumped up, grabbed a hold of the man's wrist and twisted, twisted until I heard the sharp snap of bone, and the man howled. Then, lightning fast, I turned around and landed a punch squarely on the cheek of the kid, controlling my strength so that I wouldn't accidentally hurt him more than his body could handle.

I then looked straight into the remaining servant's eyes.

He paled.

"You never saw me," I tell him.

"New Skill Acquired!"

He quickly nods.

I leave, disappearing into the crowded streets, and pretend I don't hear the howling of the fallen servant and the crying of the bratty young master.

Whoever that Jin was, he fucking deserved it.

This won't help you in the future.

I bit my tongue.

I already knew that. Anger got the best of me.

How dare he!

In the future, many will turn against you. Will you do the same as Wei WuXian did?

History repeats itself... Round and round it goes... A vicious cycle.

I took a deep breath and pressed my head against the cool stone of a building.

No... No, I wouldn't... I wouldn't let my emotions get the best of me...

I would do better. Be better.

Then bow your head. Learn to bow your head and take the hits.

Use the pain as gunpowder, and your will as the wick.

When the time comes...

Blow them all out of the water.

Be better.

Chapter End Notes
So, some canon changes for you guys. CangSe and ChangZe's deaths here were more than a footnote on MDZS's world history. Everyone is talking about it, screaming foul play.

Thoughts?
And word of God says, that's not Jin ZiXuan. I'm not that cruel, no that little muffin is being lazy back in his room acting all princely and shtuff.

Also, funny story. I keep complaining how my planning for chapters always goes wrong because scenes get too word-y?
Yeah, chapter 19 is already eating two other chapters... Urgh.
Chapter Summary

Where Donkeys tell no tales and there's an anticipated night-hunt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter 20: Class Selection Quest

I'd gotten the last Quest in the city done and retreated back to the stable where Donkey was in to nurse my wounds.

Once my anger had left my body and I'd stopped moving the cuts on my back started to sting. Making sure that there was no one else in the stable I positioned myself where no one else would see me and took off my robes, leaving my back exposed.

I used the water tank the stable had to see my back.

Three bleeding slashes cut across my back.

I growled, deep in my throat before I took a deep breath and held it in.

I couldn't let my anger get the best of me.

Could not.

Calm. I needed to be calm.

Breathing in, I let my conscious float for a minute before bringing the world back into focus. I opened my inventory and brought out the medicinal remedies and bandages I knew had stuffed in it.

I cleaned the blood using a clean bandage and applied a salve that said it was meant for cuts.

I burned.

My eyes involuntarily teared up and I glared at the ceiling.


Crying isn't a weakness.
No, but I sure as hell wasn't showing up at a night-hunt with red teary eyes and expect to be treated with respect.

*Actually... Since Jiang FengMian is looking for you, won't they stop you or try to keep you there?*

...

I finish applying the bandages and getting my robes back on before opening my Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 4
Title: None Level: 17
Class: None* Fatigue: 50

Stats: 20 Points Available;
Intelligence: 27 Stealth: 27
Strength: 28 Charisma: 27
Agility: 27 Senses: 28
Stamina: 29 Luck: 27

Skills:
+Martial
+Social
+Scholar
+Arts
+Mundane

Equipment:
Common clothes (child)
Common boots

Weapon:
Blessed Dagger
Talisman (10)
Small Bow (25)]

I thought on just how many Stat Points I was making with Quests and night-hunting, and spared the time to consider just how my stats would look like after all this was over. On average, splitting the territory by the Great Sect governing it, there were around seven rural villages, more or less five decently sized towns, and three larger cities.

There were always four Quests available in each of those stops, and they all rewarded Stat points at their completion. Rural villages offered one SP per Quest, towns usually gave three SP, and city Quests gave five each.

That made... A lot of Stat Points.

I blinked.

Did my Stats even have power caps? Like, would I be unable to increase them past a certain point?

*Or maybe, you'll become a mortal God.*

I would not. Impossible.

*You never know.*
Knock on wood, I already have too many things to worry about. Godhood will not be one of them.

*You do know the point of Cultivation is to become Immortal, right?*

...Well, to each their own. I want to make it past twenty-five and live in peace!

*You say that now~ You never know what the future brings!*

Shut. Up.

I quickly distributed the new Stat Points, making sure to level them all out before investing in Luck.

Gods knew I’d need it.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 4  
  Title: None Level: 17  
  Class: None* Fatigue: 50  

  Stats: 0 Points Available;  
  Intelligence: 30 Stealth: 30  
  Strength: 30 Charisma: 30  
  Agility: 30 Senses: 30  
  Stamina: 30 Luck: 30  

  Skills:  
  +Martial  
  +Social  
  +Scholar  
  +Arts  
  +Mundane  

  Equipment:  
  Common clothes (child)  
  Common boots  

  Weapon:  
  Blessed Dagger  
  Talisman (10)  
  Small Bow (25)]

I liked to see the Stats all rounded up in even numbers. Even if after this one Quest they'd probably go back to odd numbers.

Speaking off odd numbers, I needed to make more talismans and get more arrows. I'd been making them at my leisure but I needed to make more now before going out to fight I don't know what.

Bigger concentrations of people usually meant meaner spirits, stronger and more vicious. One couldn't rule out crime and human nature when considering what they'd find on night-hunts.

And I needed warmer robes. My previous winter robes had started to be too tight and frayed at the edges. These ones I was wearing too, would have to be replaced, my various forays into night-hunting in woods meant that the cloth was wearing out faster than it had previously.

*You diving under bushes, tree trunks, climbing and jumping all over the place like a demented*
monkey doesn't help either.

I roll my eyes.

I opened the Store and eyed the equipment being sold. There were a lot, but most were either level-locked or way too expensive. The ones with various protections sewn in, holy robes or just made out of some spiritual creature's hide were ridiculously pricey and I doubted I'd ever buy them.

But it's nice to have options.

True.

I spied a decently priced pair of winter robes and got them, getting the notice that they'd been automatically sent to my inventory.

Boots?

I looked down at my feet, they were worn, yes, but still feasible. I shook my head, opening instead the weapons section of the Store.

I made moon eyes at all the shiny blades.

You do have a sword.

Which I can't use because of my tiny noodle arms.

You won't be able to use these either then.

I huffed.

Let a woman dream.

I scrolled down to see the ranged weapons section. The bows here, all of various materials and qualities, were also ridiculous expensive and I was glad ChangZe had taught me how to make my own.

Arrows, on the other hand, were a dime a dozen.

Once again, they all got sent to my inventory and I closed the Store.

Pulling the new robes out of my inventory I saw that they were a dark color, not black but maybe a very dark green? They had a small fur lining on the collar and sleeves, which were tight against my wrists and not flow-y like most. The robes also brought a set of sturdy pants.

I heard a confused bray and looked up to see Donkey staring at the clothes in my lap.

Oh, yeah, he can't see anything I do with the Menu and its back was turned when I brought out the salves.

I gave it an impish smile and brought a finger to my lips, opening the Store again and quickly getting an apple out of it.

It appeared in my hand as I brought it out of the inventory.

Donkey's eyes gleamed.
Clearly, we'd reached an understanding.

*Your social skills never cease to amaze me.*

You're just jealous of my awesomeness.

----------

I got to say, the System deserved more recognition for its work.

The clothes were very comfortable. And warm. And, oh goodness, I loved the fur lining.

*And the easy to get bribes for Donkey.*

Shhh...

Night was starting to fall and I'd walked to the spot where the Quest was supposed to start. Already I saw a few cultivators waiting for the last few stragglers to show up.

I'd gotten some looks but I pretended not to see them.

I made a quick last check to see that I had everything I needed, and recounted my arrows and checked the string of my bow before placing it back. I counted my talismans and looked up to see the position of the moon. It was just starting to peek out of the distant mountains, but that just meant the spirits would soon come out to play.

"The night-hunt has to start soon, or else we'll be running against time to catch all the prey before the sun rises," I commented aloud, a slow drawl to my words," Who else is missing?"

The cultivators give a look, up and down, seemingly confirming that a) I was a kid, and b) I was talking to them.

"Just another group of disciples from LanlingJin," One replied," They always show up when they want to."

"So why is everyone left to wait for them," I raise a brow," This is a night-hunt, one open to the public if the notice I read was correct, its a *courtesy* to wait for the disciples of the hosting sect, not a *necessity*.

"They're LanlingJin..." One murmured, shifting from foot to foot.

I roll my eyes, and start walking into the forest," Stay here and lose your prey, it's your choice. They complain? Well, they should've been here on time, then, like everyone else!" I tell them over my shoulder.

"Kid, they'll make your life a living hell," One tried to warn me.

I laughed.

"Let them try!" I told them, stopping and turning to look back at them with a wide grin on my face," I'm not someone they want to mess with."

I then resumed walking.

None bothered to stop me again.

"Who's that kid?" I heard one whisper.
"No idea," Another replied.

"Could he be that kid from the rumors?" Another wondered out loud.

There was a beat of silence.

"Holy hell, you mean he's CangSe Sanren's kid? Wasn't he missing?" One gasped.

I laughed under my breath.

My adults would be so proud.

---

"The Class Selection Quest will begin momentarily"

The notification floated above me, along with a small countdown clock, already turning red as it ticked down.

I was in the middle of a clearing, breathing hard as I'd spent the last hour running around chasing yao and beasts, when the notification had appeared.

I calmed down my breathing as I had been taught and did some basic cooling down forms so I wouldn't cramp up.

*ring* *ring*

I looked up to see a screen appear above me.

|Class Selection Quest Begins!!|
|Completion requirements: |
|Defeat Highlighted Yao 0/20 |
|Defeat Boss level Beast 0/1 |

|Bonus Points if the Player defeats the Hidden MoGui|

I blinked at the words but shrugged. If they were helping my by highlighting the Yao I had to track down, then they only helped me. As for the boss level beast... Well, I'll deal with whatever came my way.

And the Hidden MoGui.

*What the hell is a MoGui?*

I shrugged. I'd never heard of it.

Suddenly, through the corner of my eye, I see something glowing. Immediately I nock an arrow and twist on my heel, shooting whatever it was in a single graceful motion.

A Yao covered in glittery blue glow goes down and dissipates.

*One down!*

I look back at the count.

|Class Selection Quest Begins!!|
|Completion requirements: |
I had work to do.

The moon was right above me, illuminating the forest with cold white light, and I was searching for the final three yao I needed before turning my sights on the Boss Beast and the MoGui.

I knelt by a tree and poked at the ground, the dirt had been moved, recently too, but with the other cultivators running around it was hard to tell if it had been the yao or someone else trying to hunt them down.

I sighed.

How the hell did cultivators track down creatures before Wei WuXian created the Compass of Evil?

*With difficulty, it's why everyone wanted a Compass when they came out.*

Shush you.

*Well, I don’t know what else you want me to say! That cultivators have like a sixth sense? That they feel the world around them?*

...Feel the world around them?

I mused along that thought.

The common string of knowledge I had of those yoga or meditation manuals, and trust me there were a lot, was that the world was made of energy and all you had to do in order to find balance with your energy and that energy was to... Become tuned in?

The details escape me, Cynthia would certainly know more than me.

I huffed and rested my back to the tree, closing my eyes.

Anything was worth a shot once. If it worked great, if it didn't then there was something wrong and something needed to change.

I took a deep breath, and let it out after a few seconds, slowly regulating my breathing and heart beat.

I let all the sounds around me be the only things I could hear, ignoring all other noises, and tried to do something.

Reach out with my own energy? How did I find my own energy?

Inwards... Look inwards?

How does one look inside themselves?

I frown, having lost focus with my rambling.

*Another approach then.*
*Ding*

I ignored the notification sound, I didn't feel in danger and I doubted it wanted to give me any tips.

I controlled my breathing again and this time focused on my chest.

That's where the energy focused in, right?

No... That's not where it forms into energy.

*The navel.*

I focus inwards, deeper into myself, and have the slight impression that there's a tiny little orb of light in the dark. I try to reach it but it escapes right through my fingers.

*It wouldn't work like that.*

Hmm...

*Lure it?*

I cupped my hands in the darkness of my mind, figuratively speaking, and thought about the energy resting in my palms.

Imagine... Imagination is power or whatever the saying went.

Energy... It'd be warm and liquid, flowing through me fingers, always slipping past them. Always moving.

Always, always, always moving.

Never stand still.


*Drip...*

I open my eyes, there in my cupped palms is a bright golden orb of light, small and slightly wispy, revolving in them like water in a water bowl. Little drops of light drip from my cupped hands and into the darkness below me.

Like ripples in a still lake, the bright energy creates afterimages of the world outside of my mind.

Golden trees are visible for a mere second.

Rocks.

Grass.

Birds hiding in the trees.

A chill suddenly runs down my spine and I can *feel* the being running towards me.

Dark vermilion energy swirls around it like smoke, and I taste blood on my tongue, cooper stench thick in my nose.

I don't think twice before moving.
Dropping out of my mind with nigh a thought, I crouch low to the ground, let go of my bow and pull the dagger off of its sheath at my waist. Before it reaches me, because I can see it, dark and malevolent, I spin on my feet and coiled like a spring jump in its direction.

I drive the dagger straight through the ball of resentful energy I can see, right in the center of its being, and watch as the smoke around it stills.

Fades.

And then its true appearance reveals itself.

Dark leather-y skin and empty orbs for eyes, a long red tongue lolls out of its mouth, unable to fully close due to its jagged teeth.

It drops to the floor. Dead.

"Player leveled up!"

"Meditation Skill leveled up!"

"Advancement Unlocked!"

"Bonus requirement Completed!"

I let out a breath I didn't remember holding in, staring at the floating words, and gazing, wide-eyed at how everything is so bright and clear.

I look at the Quest screen.

|Class Selection Quest Begins!|
|Completion requirements:|
|o Defeat Highlighted Yao 17/20 |
|o Defeat Boss level Beast 0/1 |
|Bonus Points if the Player defeats the Hidden MoGui (Completed)|

So that was a MoGui...

I don't think I liked how it felt too much.

Felt?

Had I felt it?

Was this how being attuned with the world felt like?

I take another look around me, see how everything around me has its own glow, weak or star bright, and am in awe with it.

If this was what it was then I was sure in my heart that I didn't want it to stop.

Did every cultivator felt like this?

Saw like this?

Try as I might I couldn't answer that.
Not unless I asked.

If they did no harm done.

If they didn't... I was petty enough to want to keep this sight all to myself.

Something shone in the familiar powdery blue glow I'd been chasing before and I tumbled on the floor like a ball to reach my bow and took off after it.

I could see so clearly.

It felt great.

It felt freeing.

*Light.*

I smiled.

Chapter End Notes

So, funny story, I am terrible at math. And when I say terrible, I mean, really terrible at math.

Anyways, I had this plan where each Quest gave Stat Points because WWX needs to get strong someway, right? Yeah, I forgot to take into account just how many Stat Points I was apparently creating. 740 Stat Points for Arc II... -.-'

Safe to say that WWX will probably be OP for a long time, which was expected really, what I didn't expect was he becoming OP at the grand old age of 7.

Ugh, I'll just up the Stats of all the other characters, say cultivation messes with "normal" attributes and call it a day.

I'm not even going to try and rectify my math, I already have enough chaos happening in my plot.

As for the final scene in this chapter, it continues in the next chapter because Chapter 19 apparently decided to turn into 3 separate chapters. (Like, kill me)

Also, I think you guys will really like the next chapter, it has some really funny scenes.
Chapter Summary

Tonight's the night. And it's going to happen again and again. Has to happen...
Where being awesome is terrifying for bystanders, where voices can't appreciate awesomeness, and oh god, I'm too old for hangovers.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I do have fun picking references to use in my chapter.  
Yes, I was indeed rather sleep deprived when I wrote this. 
Did I enjoy writing it?  
Hell yes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Ecstasy is the energy of spirit. When life flows, ecstasy is natural." - Deepak Chopra

Chapter 21: The High of Victory

Everything went by so fast.

One moment I remember being near a river, just grabbing the last Yao needed for the Quest, and then the next I'm running so fast through the forest I feel as if I'm flying. I pass by stunned cultivators who's eyes trail after me, feel the golden fire lit inside their chests and I try not to blink. Too afraid that the light will be gone the next time I open them.

Still, I need to blink, the cold air stings my eyes if I keep them open for too long.

I'm looking for the Boss Beast.

I don't know what it'll look like, but by being a Beast I can eliminate all the crawling yao and other spirit creatures going around.

I already had my prey.

I just needed to find it.

Would its energy be as wretched as the MoGui's? I hoped not.

Would it be as powdery glowing blue as the yao? If it did it'd be easier to find, at least.

Anticipation flooded my veins.
I couldn't stop grinning.
I couldn't help it.
The world was so much... *more*, than it was before.
It was beautiful.
Something crossed my path and I twisted out of its reach, somersaulted over it like an expert athlete.
I blinked.
I could never do that.

"Acrobatic Skill leveled up!"

*Huh?*
I did that?

*Dodge,* a whisper told me and my body threw itself to the side, a powerful swipe of sharpened claws barely missing my ear.
I look to see what attacked me and gulp.
It was a bear.
A bear with glowing red eyes and dark vermilion smoke swirling in its chest.
This was the Boss Beast.

*How fun.*
I totally didn't find that quip funny.
But my lips stretched into a grin nonetheless.
How fun indeed.
It roared, the stillness of night broken and birds startled into flight.
I back-flipped onto my feet and crouched, making sure I had my bow at the ready and still out of the way in case I needed to run.
I roared back at it.
This was my prey now.

---

Cao XuYin was a guest disciple of the Jin Sect, his family was holding out hopes that he could bring glory to their name and elevate their house to a noble one. His brothers were still too young to study cultivation, but he was hoping that the Jin Sect would welcome them too.

That said, despite his more humble roots, he knew good cultivation techniques and forms. The Jin Sect spared no expense at making sure their disciples didn't disgrace their good name, nor did they make a fool of themselves in public.
They were taught to be in control of their emotions, if only as to not let their opinion of others known.

Cao XuYin couldn't keep that control anymore at the sight before his eyes.

His friends and him had decided to track down the child that had apparently joined in on the night-hunt. It had entered the forest before they had, and as such needed to be made an example of.

When he had heard of the child he'd scoffed, sure that they'd find the child crying somewhere after seeing what a real yao or ghost looked like.

This... This wasn't what they expected to find.

"A monster..." His friends beside him gulped," That's a monster..."

Another friend shushed him, sweating and clutching his sword in a white knuckled grip.

Cao XuYin couldn't stop staring.

He wasn't sure how to feel right now.

In awe?

Scared?

Sick?

He could barely think at all!

How was this possible?

There, in the clearing below them, was a creature that one would hear about in legends.

A six foot bear with claws the size of meat hooks, teeth and muzzle stained with blood.

They had heard its roar from the other side of the forest, and many smaller cultivation clans had looked at each other and decided they'd had enough night-hunting for one day.

His friends had laughed and jeered, called them cowards, but Cao XuYin was sure that, had he seen the bear walk in his direction, he'd have left too.

Not that the bear was a problem anymore.

Because it was dead.

Killed by the kid they'd been tracking down.

Cao XuYin soul could've escaped his body with how low his jaw had dropped.

The kid, if it could be called that, didn't look human.

Blood was dripping from his chest, having clearly been struck my the bear, and from his nose. His hair was completely loose and a mess of leaves, twigs and dirt, as if he'd been rolling around in the bushes.

It was highly possible he had been.
But the most inhuman part of him were his eyes.

_They were glowing._

Unnatural glowing orbs like two pools of liquid silver.

It's mouth was open in a gasp, panting hard, and in its hands were a broken bow and a bloodied knife.

The wooden bow had clearly struck the fatal blow, sticking out of the bear's neck like a mockery of an arrow.

Suddenly, as if shaken out of a stupor, the monster jerked and stared straight into Cao XuYin's eyes.

He screamed.

His friends screamed.

They ran out of the forest before it thought of chasing after them.

Cao XuYin would never forget this night. Never.

And if anyone ever asked him why flinched whenever grey eyes looked over him, he'd just mumble something about a stupid nightmare.

Because the being he saw that night could be nothing less than a _living nightmare._

My vision was fogging at the edges.

It was hard to keep breathing and walking.

But I needed to keep walking.

I needed to get back to the stable. The Quest was done.

The world was back to it's gloomy darkness.

Nothing was glowing anymore.

I wasn't sure if I was sad that the lights were gone, or worried about how hard it was to breathe.

_This is what happens when you go past your limits..._

Hey! I was awesome! Did you see what I did back there? I went like wah! And then Zah! And it was so cool...!

_You sound drunk. How are you drunk?_

I'm not drunk!

I'm offended you think so lowly of me!

_No, you're not drunk. You're high._

High? Oh, yeah, high as a kite on the glory of victory! "VICTORY!"
Stop shouting.

"I'm not shouting!"

Yes, you are.

"I am?"

Stop talking. Just get back to the stable and go to sleep.

Oh?

Yeah, make sure you don't bleed out during the night or something. Bye.

Hey! How rude!

I tripped over my feet and barely managed to keep myself upright.

I swear that tree just laughed at me.

Just keep walking.

Why do you sound like that?

Because of the torture that is hearing your thought patterns in this state.

...I don't get it.

Of course you don't.

Don't you dare sigh at me!

I dare, I did, and I will again.

Meany.

How eloquent.

I'll show you eloquent you xyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy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yyyy
Awww...

Not.

Why you!

I curled up in a ball and groaned. Donkey brayed and nosed my head but that only made me groan harder.

I felt like crap.

Ah!


*Says the person who told me last night to speak clearly!*

Shut. Up.

Laughter echoed in my ears, I peeked open one eye and shut it closed immediately again. It was too bright.

*The light! It burns!*

Shut up!

I groaned and rolled over to my stomach. Donkey started messing with my hair. I waved out a hand to make it stop.

*It didn’t.*

Urgh.

I rolled back onto my back and slowly opened my eyes.

"Donkey," I sighed," Why must you hate me so?"

It snorted in my face.

I rolled my eyes and got up, having to quickly grab onto the donkey to keep standing when my vision swims. The light outside tells me it's about midday, so I'd been asleep for at least six hours.

*Nice nap.*

I take a deep breath to prevent myself from replying.

A ring to my right makes me turn and stare at the open notification.

"Class Selection Quest Completed!"

"Do you wish you view your result?"

[YES] [NO]

I pressed [YES] and blinked as the screen enlarged to show a caricature of an archer.
"The Player's Class has been decided as [Archer]!"

«Archers are skilled bowmen. Generally independent and used to working alone, archers are stealthy, graceful and accustomed to fighting at a distance, unless they have a secondary weapon for close combat. They can be analytical and calculating in nature, having great upper body strength and a more slender built. Historically, archers have been recorded to have been very effective in melee, due to their extensive conditioning and strength.»

"Does the Player accept this Class?"

[YES] [NO]

So... I can refuse?

Will you?

No, I don't have the brain power to question the System right now, archer sounds perfect.

I accept and have the loud notification bells going off in my ears.

Ah!

Why does the world hate me? What did I do to deserve this?!

You exist, clearly.

I roll my eyes and ignore the 'careful, don't strain yourself' filtering through my ears to look over the new notifications.

"Advantage Unlocked!"

"Player leveled up!"

"Player can unlock one Talent connected with their Class!"

Advantage... Talent?

Oh, yeah, you unlocked another advantage back there, didn't you?

I blinked slowly, trying to remember. Honestly after the lights showed up my mind is essentially a blur.

"I think so...?" I hum.

Well, no use wasting time about it.

I open my Player menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 4
  Title: None Level: 19
  Class: Archer Fatigue: 10
  Stats: 6 Points Available;
        Intelligence: 30 Stealth: 30]
Strength: 30 Charisma: 30
Agility: 31 Senses: 32
Stamina: 32 Luck: 30

Skills:
+Martial
+Social
+Scholar
+Arts
+Mundane

Equipment:
Winter robes (child)
Common boots

Weapon:
Blessed Dagger
Talisman (4)
Small Bow (12)

I just evened out the Stats yesterday! What the hell!

*You're getting stronger, isn't that a good thing?*

It's a good think but what the hell!

Women...

I quickly add the newer Stat Points and open the Advantage Page.

Whereas before there was a blank page, there was now a list of unlockable 'perks', and the two top most perks were glowing.

*Keen Sight* and *Sixth Sense*

I blinked.

"Does the Player wish to activate this advancement?"

[YES] [NO]

I clicked yes.

I didn't feel like anything had changed.

*Maybe you have to sleep on it, like with the Stats.*

Possibly.

I closed the window and moved on to the Talents.

If I found the Advancements Page full, then this one easily dwarfed the other. Thankfully this one was at least divided with sub-sections.

A Talent to do with my Class, huh...
That's easy.
I opened the [Ranged Combat] section.
There were only three Talents available.
From what I understood, the number beside the name of the Talent were how many points it took to unlock it.

*Then if you can get one for free, there's only one worthy to choose.*

I click on the last Talent, "**Pin the Fan (5)**".

"**Does the Player wish to unlock this Talent using the Class Selection reward?**"

[YES] [NO]

I accept and see the Talent name turn bright blue, the sign that it was unlocked.

*How many points do you even have?*

I look to the bottom left corner.

19 Talent Points Available.

...A lot.

*Spend them.*

Why?

*Because there's got to be something worth unlocking! Like that one right there!*

"**Hawk's Precision (1)**".

"**Does the Player wish to spend 1 TP to unlock this Talent?**"

[YES] [NO]

I sigh.

It was going to be a long day.

*Hey...*

What?

*What are alignments again?*

What are what?

*Alignments. That section is divided by them.*

I look to see what it was referring to.

Giving it a quick once over, I pinch the bridge of my nose.
Why was it, that whenever I thought things would be easier from now on, they grow needlessly complicated.

*Because you have shitty luck.*

Shut up.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, first things first: Advantages are perks that are constantly active (when activated) and cost nothing to maintain. Talents, on the other hand, are attacks or specific actions he has to consciously think about using and have costs, either stamina to keep running or have a drawback/backlash for continues use. Also, Talents have Skill level requirements. These go by ranks (from 0 to 6+) which I'll explain further at the end.

Advantages Unlocked: Keen Sight (Water) - "You can spot details of objects at a much greater distance than others can, and you pick up small visual details that others might overlook."

Sixth Sense (Void) - "You have an instinctive sense of supernatural beings, and you can feel the presence of spirits and similar entities even when they have not chosen to reveal themselves. This feeling is ominous in the presence of beings with evil intentions, and neutral when the beings are simply going about their business as usual."

Talents Unlocked: Hawk's Precision (1) - "This technique allows the Player to have higher accuracy while using a bow, the accuracy keeps increasing with the level of Archery Skill, the Senses Stat and with practice."

Pin the Fan (5) - "This technique makes it so that the Player has incredible accuracy and power behind his shots, further increased by Skill and Stats. Even if the shot fails and does not kill the target, there's a chance they might become incapacitated and vulnerable to the second attack."

Now, Alignments are explained in the next chapter, so I won't bother explaining them here (sorry).

As for the Skill levels required:

Rank 0 = Skill level 0 (Lack of Formal Training)
Rank 1 = Skill level 3 (Amateur)
Rank 2 = Skill level 5 (Apprentice)
Rank 3 = Skill level 7 (Professional) *Side note, once the Player gets to this level, he can mentor others in the Skill*
Rank 4 = Skill level 10 (Advanced)
Rank 5 = Skill level 12 (Mastery)
Rank 6+ = Skill level 15 (Enlightenment) *Level 15 is Max out Level*

So that means, that AGF!WWX can use the first Talent, but not the second, as his Archery Skill is only Level 5 right now.
Alignments

Chapter Summary

Where Wei Ying will learn how to make fierce corpses and the System can't stop him; Why it's a bad idea to take down a six foot bear when you're four years old; and where one should heed warnings given.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"You are energy, and energy cannot be created or destroyed. Energy just changes form." - Rhonda Byrne

Chapter 22: Alignments

There were five Alignments, Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and Void.

There was virtually no information about them to get from the Talent descriptions and it had nothing to do with different types of energy, as I had first thought when the name 'Void' came up.

Apparently they were just attributes the perks and Talents had?

You'll never know if you don't ask.

'Help, Alignments,' I sigh.

«The Five Alignments of Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and Void, balance the world's energy as a whole. Each of the Alignments represent a character's natural inclination toward a certain approach to solving problems, rather than exclusively representing mental or physical parameters, these express their propensity toward certain ways of seeing the world and facing challenges.

Fire: Represents ferocious, direct, and inventive personalities. This approach is explosive and intense, with characters aligned with this element being passionate, curious, physically quick, occasionally brusque, and fast learners. They work to get results no matter the cost to themselves or others.

Air: Represents graceful, cunning, and precise personalities. This approach is subtle or layered with nuance, as the character moves too nimbly or speaks too obliquely to be pinned down. A character aligned with this element is often eloquent, physically and socially deft, and shrewd.

Water: Represents adaptable, powerful, and perceptive personalities. This approach is balanced and reversible, with characters aligned with this element being naturally affable, physically flexible, observant, and easygoing. They work to achieve results without overextending themselves or underperforming.
Earth: *Represents an aptitude for taking a steady, thorough, and grounded approach to problems. This approach is cautious and considerate, with characters aligned with this element being physically tough, mentally resilient, and reliable. They work to get results without suffering losses or taking unneeded risks.*

Void: *Represents a centered, unflinching personality; can also represent the "flow state". This is an enlightened approach, accepting the nature of all elements yet allowing none to dominate the others. A character aligned with this element is spiritually sensitive, wise and introspective. A well-balanced Player seeks to maintain all five Alignments in their actions and know which approach to use in any given situation.*

I blink at the length-y text above me, and tilt my head to the side.

So... This is energy?

Not a single strand of energy, but a whole. How one approaches a given situation, huh?

*And the Void is nothing.*

And everything.

*So what is Demonic Energy?*

Good question.

Canon!Wei WuXian said that if Spiritual Energy is energy, then Resentful Energy also had to be energy. If these alignments spoke about *Spiritual* Energy then Resentful Energy had to have the same alignments.

But if they were one and the same, only viewed from different sides, one good one evil, what made them different?

*Maybe they're missing something?*

Or... I look at the words again.

They have *too much.*

*What?*

Unbalanced. Void is the balance of all, but people aren't balanced. When they die they have to leave something behind in their energy, in their resentment, and when it all comes together... it's unbalanced.

"Demonic Cultivation is not Available to the Player"

I glare at the warning.

"You put me in this world to become the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation! Why can't I learn Demonic Cultivation?" I grouch at it.

"System warns the Player about the dangers of Cultivating without instructions."

"It's not like I'm going to have a teacher anytime soon!" I hiss at it.
"System is locking access to all Resentful Energy fonts."

"Oh, c'mon!" I throw my hands up, "You can't be serious!"

*I think it is.*

Whatever, see if that stops me!

*If it locks you out of studying Resentful Energy, what are you gonna do about it?*

Theorize. It can't stop me from figuring out what Resentful Energy is even if I can't study it properly. And it's not stopping me from cultivating *normally* either.

*You're gonna get screwed over for this. Try not to die.*

The System loves me too much to actually let me die.

*Huhuh, keep telling yourself that.*

You're growing rather sure of yourself, aren't you?

...

What? No response?

...

Fine then.

I close the window and start going through the Talents again.

The more Talent Points it took to unlocking the Talent, the more advanced it was, and therefore the more skill was needed to use said Talent successfully. As it was, even if I got that "Pin the Fan" Talent, I wouldn't be able to use it all all for now, as my Archery Skill wasn't up to par.

What would I need most now?

Combat Talents? Social Talents?

I figured a child didn't need to know how to trip someone using words alone. I'd have time to learn that when I actually started to interact with people who needed to be tripped up.

So, focus on combat.

I didn't have any specific weapon, so the best thing to do was going with the basics.

There were a series of General Combat Talents that sounded useful, and after I got all those I could potentially use now or in the near future, I got a few Spiritual Talents and one or two Social ones.

Once it all got up together they looked like a lot, but then I looked back on all that remained and how much they costed and realized that when the War happened I might still half more than half of these left to unlock.

And somewhat bothered by the fact that some Talents had warnings telling me not to use them in front of other people.

*Do you want to be made into a bigger target?*
No...

*Then why are you moping about not being able to make yourself a bigger target.*

But that one sounded so cool...

*How many other people do you know can walk on water?*

...

*I thought so.*

You're so mean to me today.

I quickly patch myself up, again, and make sure that I look presentable enough (my poor robes, how cruel can life be?) before stepping out of the stable. Hopping to buy some breakfast and pay the stable owner for the night before setting off in the direction of the last settlements in Lanling territory before going north to Qinghe.

Interestingly enough the marketplace is practically buzzing with activity.

I wonder why that is?

I weave in and out of the crowds and get myself a small bag of buns before finding somewhere I can people-watch in peace.

*And eavesdrop.*

It's in public, in plain sight, and they're talking out loud, if they didn't want others to hear them then they should just stay silent.

They could be having private conversations.

Gossiping more like.

"Hey, have you heard?" A woman catches the attention of another, near a cloth stall," Have you heard what happened in last night's night-hunt? The whole city is talking about it!"

"What?" The other woman leans in closer.

"They say a group of rogue cultivators ran out the forest, saying there was a monstrous beast living in it, the Sect sent in another group of experienced cultivators to go check it out," The first one spoke.

*I think I know where this is going.*

Shush.

"What did they find?" The second one pressured the other," Was there really a beast?"

"Yes! An enormous bear! They took it back to their Sect, no one knows how such a Beast got so close to the city without being detected," The first woman nodded.

"Alive?!" The second one yelped.

"No, silly," The first snorted," Dead, the beast was dead when the cultivators arrived."
"Well, who killed it?" The second one asked.

"A kid." The first answered with a wicked grin.

Knew it.

Oh.

You're actually surprised?

To be fair, the night's a blur for me, and I only remember feeling as if I was walking on Cloud Nine.

Yeah, well, your 'walk on Cloud Nine' included taking down a six foot bear Beast with a puny wooden bow and your glorified dagger.

...Seriously?

Seriously. You better start running out of the city.

Why?

"A kid? You're joking! That's not very funny," The other woman pouted.

"Not joking, remember those rumors a year or so back? Yeah, the same kid is at it again, except this time there's no parents with it," The first one frowned at the end of the sentence," I think Sect Leader Jin sent a messenger to YunmengJiang late last night, and has his disciples searching the city for the child now."

Oh.

Yeah, run.

Oh, no.

Run.

Oh, no...

RUN DAMMIT!

I jumped down from my spot and casually walked back to the stables at a hurried pace, I met the owner on the way back, paid him and quickly got Donkey out. It must've sensed that something was wrong because it didn't protest much.

"We're going to have to hurry," I tell it," Once we're out of the city, we have to get as far away from here as possible, I'll give you apples later!" I promised.

That cheered it up.

I'll laugh at you if you're found out at the gates by Jiang FengMian.

Knock on wood, asshole!

We didn't get caught.
Thankfully.

And quickly made our way to the next city, we wouldn't be stopping here for long. I'd just do the Quests and move on to the next one before nightfall.

I only stopped briefly once out of the city to give Donkey the promised apples, keeping an eye on my funds. It was all well and good but I really didn't like spending those coins for things like apples.

You're not hurting for money.

No, but it's better to have more and not want for it, than to want for it and have none.

Once I make it to the city I leave Donkey tied to a common post with hay and water for the mounts of travelers. I didn't really have any packs on him because I didn't need to, although I might need to have some dummy luggage.

"I'll be back in a bit," I pet its neck, enjoying its soft fur on my palm.

It snorts and noses my hair, before turning to munch on the hay.

I open my map and start walking in the direction of the nearest Quest. These shouldn't be too hard and I'd be out of here in no time.

As usual, I forgot to take into account human intervention.

"Watch'a got in yer pockets!" A kid, maybe ten or twelve, with a crooked nose and a busted lip stands in front of me with his arms crossed.

There's another big kid behind me and three smaller kids making a circle around us.

I give the kid a look.

"Nothing that belong to you," I tell him," Are you going to let me pass, or do I have to push you?"

Kid starts laughing." What are you going to do, huh? Whatever it is that you have is ours now!"

I sigh at him," Step aside and I'll forget about you, don't and I'll give you a black eye to complement that busted lip."

Kid snarls and goes to grab me, I quickly crouch dodging his weak attempt of a punch, and punch his gut.

Kid goes down, spluttering and coughing.

The one behind me tries to come at me and I sidestep him and have him trip over my foot, flopping over the first kid. I turn to the other three kids and eye them.

They run, I'll let them walk.

And if they come at you?

Kids make fists and start throwing them, trying to hit me.

I grab one of their wrists and use it to throw him into the second kid, before grabbing the final kid by the back of his collar and hoisting him up, shaking him like a misbehaving puppy.
"I don't know who you are, what you are going through, or what you have or haven't got, but let me make myself clear," I warn him," Do not mess with me. Do not mess with anyone who warns you previously that they'll hurt you if you try. Be smart, not stupid!"

I let him go and see him take off running out of the alleyway I'd been using to get to the next Quest.

"Checkpoint Finished!"

How lovely.

I shake my head and just resume my walk to the Quest point, not sparing another glance to the kids on the ground.

It made upset that I couldn't do anything for them. What could I possibly do, looking like a five year old? Create an army of street urchins? Stay in one place to look after them?

I couldn't.

And it hurt.

They're children, what was wrong with people? Why couldn't they see that they needed help? Support?

It's a different world we're living in.

It's a crap world then.

You'll change it.

I took a deep breath.

I would.

One day.

I would make a difference one day.

I would make the world a better place.

How?

Where to start?

What do I need?

Thoughts, and thoughts, and thoughts swirled in my head, always branching out and flowering with ideas and plans.

An image taking shape behind my eyes.

Red colored lanterns.

Houses.

People.
A mountain.

I promise.

Chapter End Notes

So, the Talents that WWX unlocked where (by category)
[General Combat] Soaring Slice (1) - "Player hurls their weapon at their opponent, to activate they must have a readied weapon in a one-handed grip."

Striking as [Air, Earth, Water, and Fire] (1) - They're four different attacks, simple ones, but in four different styles/types. In short Air gauges the enemies defenses when they know a hit won't land (so as to not waste an attack), Earth strengthens the body or weapon to withstand an attack, Water, only after analyzing the opponents defenses, can try to find an opening, slip in and deal a critical blow, while Fire allows the Player to enter a state of hyperfocus for 30 seconds, overpowering the opponent in order to cause them to make a mistake or an opening in their defenses.

Tactical Assessment (2) - The Player chooses one alignment (Air, Earth, Water, or Fire) and then activates this technique. AGF!WWX can't use this Talent yet, and it can only be used once per conflict.

[Spiritual Earth]
Cleaning Spirit (1) - "A support technique that bolsters spiritual resistance in the Player and target." Basically the Player uses their energy to regulate their state of mind when under the influence of malevolent spirits, can also be used to help others withstand their influence.
Earth Needs no Eyes (1) - "A support technique the Player may use to increase their vigilance. Depending on their Senses Stat, they'll be able to 'see' everything alive in a perimeter around them."

[Spiritual Fire]
Body is an Anvil (1) - "If successful, the Player can withstand a direct attack and increase their defenses at the same time."

[Social Air]
Rustling of Leaves (1) - "Use this technique to spread a rumor, if successful, that can't be traced back to you." Can't be used yet.

[Social Earth]
Stonewall Tactics (1) - "The Player can use this technique to shield their allies, having the enemy forces focus on them, if successful, the effect lasts until either the conflict is over, or the Player drops the technique" or dies.

[Social Fire]
Truth Burns through Lies (1) - "The Player can use this technique to assess a target's story, if successful, the Player learns if there is a statement the story hinges on, and determines what it is, and what you would need to do to verify it or disprove it." Useful Talent, but WWX can't use it for now. And it needs Skills higher than those of the Target's.
All in Jest (1) - "The Player can use this technique to either push an expected reaction out of the target or to slide in an insult, ensuring that the target cannot reply in the same vein without looking bad." Good Talent, can't use it.
Sometimes, instead of looking for zebras, you should think of horses.
Or, a completely normal day for Wei Ying where there are no monsters trying to eat him and no one planning his demise.

"Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon."
- Jon Krakauer

Chapter 23: Normal Day

I had hoped, when the news first broke out, that seeing as I was alive and well (or as well enough as you could be to go night-hunting) that the searches for me would stop.

Or maybe not stop but not be a crisis big enough that every Sect, minus one obvious exception, had said they'd keep an eye out for Wei ChangZe's and CangSe Sanren's child.

It was wishful thinking apparently.

The news that I had taken down a six foot bear, while I was under the influence of a ton of adrenaline and remember none of it, spread like wildfire and immediately started what I'd call a witch hunt after me.

I'd been found by a group of farmers hunting game one afternoon, and after telling them that I didn't want to go wherever they told me to go just because I was a kid, and that I, truthfully, didn't know any of those people, they agreed to let me hide out in their village for a while.

My talismans and night-hunting for them for free, didn't hurt matters either.

I was debating on whether to keep going north to Qinghe or to wait for Spring, maybe do the nearest Qinghe territory villages, then spend Spring in Gusu before going north back up again. Then I'd hit Qishan and it's neighboring areas.

It would only leave Yunmeng left, and I planned on being in Yiling when the Story Arc reached its end.

Speaking of Story Arcs, I opened the page to see the timeline.

I'd already unraveled two knots, both of which had been encounters with other street urchins, and odds were the remaining knots would be similar events.
This Arc wasn't proving to be very exciting in terms of possible situations.

*But it's probably the only one where you have this much freedom.*

True.

I jumped over another large jutting root and looked back on the three hunters following after me. They'd asked that I accompany them to the mountains as there were stories of people going missing up there.

I easily accepted, and was flattered that they'd asked me, so I left Donkey back at the village, living the good life in a stable with sweet straw and cool water, and was currently trekking up a mountain with mud everywhere and rain splattering off the cape of woven fibers that were naturally waterproof (I was amazed, not gonna lie) that an aged woman had made for me.

As thanks for a previous night-hunt where I returned soaked to the bone and did not complain when a woman asked me to go back out and find her missing son.

Kid had thought it funny to go fishing in the rocks dead center in a river and got stuck when the rain caused the river to swell.

I'd had to have an adult actually pull him out as the System gave me a very stern warning that 'mentally' knowing how to swim wasn't the same as 'actually' knowing how to swim in this body.

I felt cheated.

But then again, the water was ice cold this time of year and I was in no rush to actually 'learn' how to swim. It could wait for the summer.

So, I got a nice little cape for my troubles.

One of the men cursed behind me after slipping on the mud.

I sighed, closing my eyes to focus on the small dripping ball of energy inside of me. It was hard to do so with my eyes open and on the move but I reasoned that my meditation skills still need work.

It's hard to keep it running for long, let myself drown in the feeling of the world around me and I'd pay for it the day afterwards. And it was pointed out to me that it made my eyes glow, which was creepy. To them, not to me, so I had experimented on how long it took for my eyes to start glowing and would stop just before they did, take a break, and then try again.

*Sounds exhausting.*

One day, I will find a way to make you physical if only to give myself the opportunity to strangle you.

*One day... In the far, far, far off future.*

You never know~

"Goddammit!" The man cursed again as his boot became trapped in the mud.

The other two helped him and I surveyed our surroundings, so far nothing had moved but animals and critters. *Sixth Sense* hadn't picked up on anything, but then again, *Sixth Sense* only warned me about beings that were already within three feet of me, so I couldn't rely on it much.
Get better, or stop complaining.

I rolled my eyes, and focused on my surroundings again.

The forest in the mountain here was beautiful, as was much of the country side in this world, and fall had made many trees lose their leaves, the ones that didn't, the evergreens, stood proudly and strong when compared to the naked ones.

Winter would soon set upon the land and this whole place would be covered in white.

I was going to turn five soon.

I blinked at the thought.

It was nearly October, the weeks would fly by once I'd started traveling again.

*Donkey won't like plowing through the snow, though.*

We can't hole up somewhere during the winter. Once everything is covered in snow, spirits become more active as night falls sooner, and the cold makes it dangerous for any travelers to resist being caught unaware by the weather, surely they'd try to find shelter, and become easy prey for beasts and other creatures.

*You've given some thought to this.*

I'm always thinking.

"We're almost there," The oldest of the three informs me," The pass we want to reach is just after that peak there," He points at a rock about a mile away from where we are now. I can see the rock clearly thanks to *Keen Sight* but the man could probably only guess as to its exact location.

I nod," Everything's quiet around us, I can't feel anything following after us either."

He sigh, relieved," That's good, we were worried because of the stories, but thanks to you we might bring a feast back to the village and not get lost in our way down."

*He's stroking your ego.*

Hush you, he's being a gentleman.

"Just remember to stick close to me and warn me if you walk away, I can't keep my eyes on you at all times," I warned.

He laughed," Wouldn't dream of straying too far from the person who scared away all the frost spirits from the winter crops."

I hadn't actually scared them away... I'd planted talismans near the crops so that whenever they got too close to them they'd feel the temperature rise. Humans could probably shrug it off and not even feel the subtle shift, but frost spirits, as their name indicated, were extremely sensitive to warmth.

It was a better solution than to be constantly on the look around the crops for the little buggers, when they were at the height of their mating period.

*So you fudged the details and just kept the villagers believing you were scaring them off.*

I told them the talismans kept them away!
Just not what the talismans did exactly.

... 

Hence, you fudged the details.

I don't have to answer you.

"Why did it have to rain this hard?" The youngest, who kept tripping over roots, slipping on the mud, or generally making an inconvenience out of himself, whinged.

"Would you prefer rain or snow? Or worse yet, hail?" I asked him with a grin.

He groans while the other two laugh.

"You're used to mountains?" One asked.

I shrug." Not really, it's just that this weather isn't bad."

Anywhere where you can go an entire month without rain and have decent summers is a place where the weather 'isn't bad'.

"That's true," One of them said," Years back we had a winter where the snow piled up as high as the houses, we kept shoveling piles of it but there was so much snow..." He rolled his shoulders, probably remembering having to shovel for hours.

"Think this winter will be that cold?" The youngest asked.

"No," I shake my head," You had a mild summer, July wasn't unusually warm and neither was August particularly cold," I tell them," This winter doesn't seem like it's going to be a long one."

There's quiet.

I turn to look at the man behind me and notice them staring.

"What?" I blink.

"How do you know?" The youngest points out.

"'If a cold August follows a hot July, it foretells a winter hard and dry'," I recite," Or so the saying goes..."

The men blink," Never heard of it."

I smother a smirk, no I didn't think they would've.

"Oh? How about, 'For every day of fog in August, there will be a snowfall'," I tell them.

They're eyes widen," Really? But this August we barely had any fog!" They exclaim.

"Well, then you might be in luck, this coming winter!" I laughed.

"What else, what else?" The youngest tries to run up to me only to slip on the mud, again, and fall face down on it.

I snort and quickly turn around so he doesn't see me try, and fail, to stifle my amusement.
To take a break from my previous run-ins with various beasts and man-eating monsters, it turns out the problem this mountain had was far simpler than anything spiritual.

"They fell off?" The man beside me stared at the chasm.

"See the sun?" I pointed at the horizon, "While it's up you can easily see that the pass is quite thin, and it makes it easier to recognize when you're coming near this part of the trail. At night, when the men come back to go down the mountain, if they don't hurry and pass through here while the sun is still up, they don't notice how thin it actually is."

There was a story similar to this one back where I'm from, actually.

"They just fell?" The second one sent a prayer to the men's souls while the youngest just looked pale.

"Might consider placing lanterns or signs to warn others from walking here at night," I suggest to them, "Maybe some ropes to let them know where the path ends. Lanterns won't do you much good especially with how strong the winds are up here."

"I can't believe it was something so simple as them falling off the trail..." The oldest man looked saddened.

"It's actually quite common," I tell him, "There was once a road known for having its people go missing during a specific time, I don't remember if it was during the night or during the day."

They turned to me, so I kept the story going as we walked back down.

It wasn't a particularly good story, even if it had dumbfounded investigators for years. In the end, the bad lighting or optical illusion that made it seem like the road was going straight meant that people simply drove off the cliff.

I don't even know why I remember that.

*Your brain is a weird place.*

Can't argue with you on that one, it has *you* in it.

"Why don't you want to be found?" A older kid asked me as I sat down to eat the stew his mother, or aunt I heard he had an aunt living with them, gave me.

"Do you want to be a cultivator?" I asked him.

"If I could, of course, cultivators get to go on these adventures, fight beasts and all the girls love them," He tells me, dead serious.

I laugh.

"True, but they can only do that when they're all tall and stuff," I tell him, "If the man who's looking for me finds me he's going to tell me I can't do what I'm doing. He'll probably lock me somewhere to 'study' to become a cultivator."

I had no doubts Jiang FengMian would chain me to Yunmeng if I so much as casually mentioned going on a world trip with no one else for company other than a trusty donkey.

"So you don't want to be found because you don't want to study?" He grins.
I nod, sure, let's go with that.

"Will you ever see what he wants from you?" He asks me.

"One day," I say," But not now, I want to go to Gusu and Qinghe and then I've got to go all the way around the north mountains!" I cheer.

"What are you going to do in all those places?!" He asked, stunned.

I grinned at him mysteriously.

"Secret~" I answer.

He pouts," Not fair, you've got to tell me..."

Kid's got some good puppy eyes, I'll give him that.

"I'm looking for something," Is my vague reply.

He frowns," You've lost something?"

I shake my head," It was never mine to begin with, but it will be one day," I tell him.

"What?" He presses for an answer.

"Can't say," I laugh," It's a secret, remember!"

"But I wanna know~" He whines.

I only laugh harder.

"Maybe one day I'll come back and tell you," I say to him.

"You're leaving?" He blinks," But it's almost winter!"

I nod," Donkey and I are going to be traveling all winter," I sigh," Can't stay in one place for too long, sorry."

"But you'll come back?" He asks.

"One day," I shrug, then I give him a teasing grin," Why? Are you going to miss me that much?"

He reddens.

"Who's going to miss you, idiot?!"

Chapter End Notes

And another chapter for you guys, because I ended up finishing chapter 25 sooner than I expected. Also, I had plans on making this Arc small, a lowly ten chapters, but I haven't yet finished three of my planned ones...

But chapter 26 should be the last part before a timeskip and another fated meeting with a canon character.
Profit

Chapter Summary

In which the System plays at being polite; planning ahead; and it's nice to be a kid sometimes.

Chapter Notes

I finally finished chapter 26 and can finally move on with the timeskip, so here you go, another chapter! I'm going to make myself a cup of tea and go watch a series or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Light gains make heavy purses." - George Chapman

Chapter 24: Profit

"Player leveled up!"

"System upgrade pending!"

I panted, trying to calm my breathing, as I read the notifications floating above my head.

The words didn't make sense to me? Upgrade pending? What?

You don't have time to be thinking about that now.

I shake the fog out of my head and take off running once more.

It's been two weeks since I'd left that mountain. And it is officially October.

News and sightings of me still hadn't died down although most commoners really didn't care as long as I didn't get in their way, they'd point and tut at me but would otherwise go on their merry way.

The weather was unsurprisingly warmer as I slowly approached Gusu territory.

I'd really wanted to head to Qinghe straight away, as this meant I'd have to pass through Lanling again when I went north, but I was advised not to try to travel alone in the winter with only a donkey. If I had a horse, the farmers had said, I could very well go on my way, but a donkey? It'd be safer to go south and go north in the Spring.
So that's what I was doing.

Heading to Gusu.

Maybe you'll run into the Old Goat again.

You'll never let that go, will you? It's been almost a year and a half!

I'll never let you forget.

Unbelievable.

And you can't be thinking he has either. A name like that? Spoken with such confidence? He'll never let you get away with that disrespect.

Urgh.

It was night time, and I was, as usual, night-hunting. This time in a bamboo forest.

It made for an interesting experience.

A shiver went down my spine and I immediately twist around and fire an arrow at the beast that had been creeping towards me.

That is useful.

It is... Even if it gives me the creeps every time I realize just how close those things get to me.

Improve. Get stronger. No whining.

Says the professional whiner residing in the back of my head.

You wouldn't make it past a week without my advice.

I roll my eyes at it and just retrieve my arrow before continuing on my hunt. Today's goal was to level up my archery and knife skills, because those were the ones I needed most right now.

But I also had upped my talisman making skills when I had the time, and meditation.

When you have the time and not just fall asleep when you return from your usual frolicking under the moonlight.

I yawned.

I needed to figure out a schedule.

No kidding.

I sighed, and pulled at the bangs peeking out of my half-undone ponytail. I considered redoing it but looked at the moon instead, it was starting to set so dawn would be here in four or five more hours.

I brought my stats out and, after checking them over, decided to call it an early night.

I needed sleep more than I needed the experience points.

Check that notification in the morning?
Yup.

Sleeping in stable stalls was becoming a normal occurrence for me and I was sure the only inconvenience I got was waking up to Donkey messing with my hair.

I shooed it away and stretched, laying limply on the hay, and peeking through my hands at how bright it was outside.

It wasn't even midday yet.

I groaned and wanted to roll over and go back to sleep.

Except the annoying notification bell went off again.

Right beside my ear.

"I thought we'd agreed for you to stop doing that!" I covered my ears with another groan.

*Rise and shine.*

Not you too, bloody morning people...

*Stop being a night-owl and you won't feel like crap when the sun comes up.*

I'll stop being a night-owl when all the interesting stuff stops happening at night.

*Are you going to check that?*

Check what?

*That.*

I look to the side to see the same notification that popped up yesterday.

"*System upgrade pending!*"

What does it mean 'upgrade pending'?

*"Does the Player wish to upgrade the System?"*

[YES] [NO]

Why is it asking? The last time it upgraded it didn't even tell me anything.

*Maybe it's trying to be polite?*

I click [YES] and watch as the blue screen changes.

"*The System requests that the Player choose which upgrade to install*"

*[Double EXP] or [Mob Drop]*

I stare at the words.

"What?" I ask.
"No idea."

'Help, upgrades?'

«The System seeks to provide the Player an enjoyable experience and enriched environment. In light of recent events, the System offers the Player a choice:
  [Double EXP] will double all experience when fighting mobs;
  [Mob Drop] will guarantee that every mob will drop an item for the Player to collect.»

*Double experience... You'll level up twice as fast!*

But mob drop...

I frown.

'Help, mob drop,' I ask.

«Mob Drops are items that can only be obtained through mobs. These items can be used for crafting, consumable or sold in the Player Store for Coins. Mob drops have different rarity and qualities. The most common items are cheap and easily obtainable, whilst rare mob drops can have special perks the Player can make use of.»

*Oh?*

Crafting? Consumable?!

*Or sold at the Store.*

Sold...

An idea.

*What are you thinking?*

I open the Store quickly and check out the section [Materials], it had bugged me why the Store would see different types of wood, brick, metal and other natural resources.

Why waste precious coins on something you can just get from a real-world store or craftsman?

Now I knew.

It wasn't that it be easier to get from the Store, but it'd be faster.

In my mind's eye I saw a camp of tents lit by red lanterns.

The sight shifted to a small village made of huts and paved streets.

A better world.

I made my decision. I clicked [Mob Drop].

"The System will installed the chosen upgrade"

"The Upgrade should be fully installed in 24 hours!"
So you're going to go after the spirits and beasts for drops?

I am.

And then what are you going to do with them?

What I can make use of, I'll keep, what I can't...

Profit.

I had a better world to build.

I ended up not going night-hunting that night, still waiting on the System to tell me that the 'upgrade' was installed, and instead walked around having a lazy day around the town I was currently in.

It was fun, taking a breather.

When I wasn't making myself an obvious outlier among the population, aka being the only child ever to be a cultivator before double digits, it was hard to tell me apart from all the other children running back and forth chasing after a ball.

I didn't know the name of the game, it was just a ball game, like soccer. Except there weren't any goals. Or field. Or rules.

You just kicked the ball when it came your way and ran after it.

Children were simple creatures.

When everyone else got tired of running around they went to sit down by a garden, just talking and telling tales, or bragging about what they had done or planned on doing.

I was an outsider here, I didn't know any of them, nor did I have any plans on getting to know them personally. But they still brought me into the conversations.

I told them of things I had seen, a fairy tale or two, before I regaled them with legends such as the Loch Ness monster, 'which was never found~' I told them with a deep voice.

I had fun.

Then the sun went down and everyone else went home, their parents, mostly their mothers, coming to pick them up. Exasperated that the children hadn't noticed how late it was getting.

It made my throat clog up. Hard to swallow and hard to take a deep breath.

The deep gaping hole in my chest wasn't raw anymore but it still bled.

It hurt.

Grief isn't a process that happens overnight.

I know.

I wonder how everyone else is doing, back home. How long as it been? Just the same amount of time as in here? More? Less?
Do you really want an answer to those questions?

I thought about it, and decided that no. I didn't really want to know those answers.

I walked back to the stable I'd left Donkey in. The innkeeper said something about needing musicians.

Might as well level up my Flute Skill.

*You sing better than you play that thing.*

I'll need it for when I have Chenqing.

*You and your desire for pet corpses...*

I will have my Fierce Corpse.

*Most people wouldn't have the ambition of getting a deceased corpse following them around as one would love a puppy.*

I am not most people, I thought we'd already figured that out.

*Oh, I'm getting rather forgetful in my old age, dear.*

Sarcasm doesn't suit you.

---

"Beast Core [common] sent to the Inventory!"

The words appeared after I'd poked the glowing light coming from out of the beast I'd felled.

*How many does that make?*

Ugh...

*You lost count?*

I never stopped to count them...

*Why am I not surprised?*

Because you know me, duh.

I rolled my eyes and moved on, cautiously climbing over a fallen tree. The weather was getting cold enough at night that some frost was starting to ice over rocks and tree trunks.

It made for slippery ground and too many opportunities to fall over and split my head open.

*Honestly surprised you haven't managed to do that yet.*

You're confident in me fills me with joy.

*Don't get used to it.*

"Wouldn't dream of it..." I mutter.

I adjusted my grip on the new bow I had crafted. The Crafting Skill was something I had found
ingenious, and wondered about just how many things I could possibly craft.

Then I remembered the [Recipes] section of the Store.

There were just so many things there... Best of all?

The damn fountain pen.

I grinned widely at the tone voice.

I told you I'd get one.

Out of all the things you saw in there, talismans, dishes, even damn tools! The thing that caught your attention was a damn pen?!

A pen that will finally allow me to write something I can read later on.

But you'll be the only one to have one.

All the more success to my genius. Think I can bribe Lan QiRen with one?

He'll shout at you for breaking tradition and inventing something that allows his 'dear, disciplined, and morally adjusted' disciples to write clearly without practicing important skills as calligraphy using the brush pen.

I'll still have to use it for talismans, I just thought of writing a journal or something to keep track of how different things are and where I've been.

Isn't that dangerous?

It'll be kept in the Inventory and if it makes you feel better, I'll even write it in english.

Can you even still write in english?

I don't see why I shouldn't... I still remember all the languages the tutors forced me to learn and the various impromptu study lessons my dear nieces and nephews had with me.

Something to try out later.

Ditto.

How many more creatures are you taking down today?

I hum, and look up at the moon, calculating how long I've been here.

One more hour, then we'll leave.

I want to reach the last border village before officially entering Gusu territory.

Didn't this village refer to itself as Gusu land?

They did?

...I think so?

Huh. Well, no matter. I really want to reach that village and be done with the Jins.
You're not getting rid of them that easily.

Unfortunately.

They can't all be that bad.

I'll believe it when I see it.

Think positive!

Pot. Kettle.

Funny. Oh, look, rabbit.

I shoot the arrow.

Poor thing. Your Lan Zhan will cry.

Knock on wood. I don't even want to think about that mess for the next decade.

I grab the rabbit and attach it to my belt. Dinner was decided.

ChangZe also placed his rabbits like this.

I flinched.

I thought we were over this.

...

I took a deep breath.

One more hour. Then we were leaving.

Chapter End Notes

Of course WWX would get his desired fountain pen XD

Lan QiRen will be jealous.

I honestly can't think of anything to add to this chapter, nothing that isn't a spoiler at least, so I'll leave you all with a nice, big hug and a thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

Where no matter where he goes, WWX always get involved in something bigger than himself.
Where he knows nothing, and still schools the 'educated citizens'.
And where there is a snake problem.

Why is it always you caught in situations like these?

Chapter Notes

There's a snake in my boot!
Lol, sorry I just had to.
~You've got a friend in me~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"No one who achieves success does so without the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude." - Alfred North Whitehead

Chapter 25: Back in the Limelight

How did this happen?

"And now to thank once more to our guest!" A tall bearded man raised his glass, and twenty other men and women followed.

"To Wei WuXian!" They cheered.

I sat in my seat, keeping my posture as straight as I could, and desperately trying not to show my bewilderment at the scene in front of me.

Why is it always you caught in situations like these?

At least they're not trying to kill me?

No, they're just throwing a feast in your honor and making everyone else in town know that you helped them through this arduous task.

I didn't know they'd do this when I offered to help them!
I don't think anyone would think they'd do this...

What the hell do I do now?

*Smile and wave. Just smile and wave.*

"A few words from our guest!" The bearded man pointed at me.

I internally screamed.

---

*Twelve hours previously*

*I warned you that this would happen.*

Shut up.

*I told you 'watch out for those clouds, it looks like it might rain'.*

Stop rubbing it in.

*And what happened? It started raining!*

Alright! Alright! You were right, I should've listened! Happy now?


I turned to face Donkey, who was, indeed, staring at me with a disgruntled expression. Water dripped off his mane and tail. The cold weather didn't help his miserable posture.

"I'm sorry," I wince.

Donkey brays. *Loudly.*

"The rain should stop soon, we'll find some place to warm up, okay?" I pat his wet fur.

The rain shouldn't have reached his skin, but he couldn't possibly be comfortable out in this weather.

Unfortunately it still wasn't cold enough to snow, so we had to contend with rain.

*Cold, wet rain.*

I'm pretty sure that if it was solid, it'd be called hail and I'd have found shelter immediately once it started falling instead of trying to reach the town.

*You say that now, but you're still the person who thought they could make it to the town before the downpour.*

I wasn't expecting a downpour, it's not the season of downpours. A light rain shower? Maybe. Not this!

I stared out at the expanse of land in front of me, rice-fields and some smaller fields for vegetables and what not. The rain fell out of the sky in long thick droplets that splashed mud everywhere.

The trees around us were evergreen, just our luck as we found shelter underneath a thick canopy of branches and leaves.
I pulled my cloak closer to my body.

It was cold.

The sky looked a darkened grey, a contrast to the bright blue it had been before.

With nothing better to do than to wait out the rain I pulled out my flute from the Inventory and started going through scales and notes, trying to find a nice melody to play.

It was easier now to catch a tune and replicate it, but I struggled with playing known songs as the sounds were very different. They didn't fit as it were.

The bamboo flute would play them nicely, the Xun? Not so much.

*Obviously, it's a traditional chinese instrument and there you are trying to play Mary Poppins or what not.*

Screw you, I'll get the tune eventually.

*The world will cry when you do.*

Ah! They'll bow at my feet!

*In despair.*

Would you stop that?!

*Never.*

"Flute Skill leveled up!"

"Who's there?" A voice warily calls out.

I stop playing.

"Who's asking?" I ask them instead.

There's pause.

"It's gotta be a spirit... There's no way a kid is all the way out here," A different voice says.

"Then why isn't the talisman lighting up?" Another voice questions.

"Because it's not a spirit," I answer.

"Where are you?" The first voice asks.

"Under a tree," I answer, grabbing Donkey's lead just in case.

"I see a donkey over there!" The third voice said.

I leaned by the tree and saw three people, two men and woman, wearing similar clothes and Qiankun bags at their waists.

"And I see humans," I unenthusiastically wave at them," See? Not a spirit."

They walk over to me, carrying paper umbrellas and their own capes.
"What are you doing here?" The tallest man then looks around," Where are your parents?"

"I'm by myself," I answer," Got caught by the downpour before I managed to reach the nearest town.

The man looks down at me and frowns," Why are you alone? Don't you know how dangerous that is?"

"No less dangerous than staying someplace to starve on the streets," I scoff," Don't worry about me, I know how to take care of myself."

He presses his lips into a thin line, not pleased with my answer," There are beasts in this area. The Bai Clan is responsible for overseeing this area, we cannot allow harm to come to the people of this town."

I lift two fingers," Firstly, I'm not from your town, so don't count me there; secondly, I'm a rogue cultivator of sorts, I don't fear any beast or spirit coming my way." I tell them, turning back to see the darkened sky.

"A rogue cultivator? You're what five years old?" The shorter man snorts.

"Almost five," I nod.

He makes a disbelieving noise before the woman gasps.

"You're CangSe Sanren's son!" She says.

I internally groan, but comply by pulling her pendant out of my robes. The strange metal glints even under the weak sunlight, from behind all those clouds, a marvel to look at.

The men stare before their eyes widen.

"The YunmengJiang Sect is searching for you," The taller man tells me.

"I know," I frown," Something about knowing my parents..." I answer.

"Did they?" The woman asks.

"I think so?" I shrug," Never met any YunmengJiang Sect disciple or leader so I wouldn't know." A small white lie, I did know ChangZe considered Jiang FengMian a brother, and CangSe appreciated his friendship, but I never met him face-to-face.

"Rumor has it that the Sect Leader wishes to foster you at their Sect," The man tells me.

I turn to look back at them," Although flattered, I don't want to belong to a Sect," I tell them.

"Why? The YunmengJiang is one of the Great Five Sects!" The shorter man is shocked.

"Because if I go there I might as well be locked inside of it until I'm of," I did finger quotes," 'Appropriate age for night-hunting'."

They didn't deny it.

"The GusuLan Sect also promised to keep an eye out for you, in case you appeared within their borders," The woman adds.
"You're going to have to start running soon.

"Why is it so important that they find me? Maybe I should write a letter and tell them to stop looking for me," I grouch, crossing my arms over my chest.

"You're a child," The woman smiles.

"My parents taught me what I needed to know." My eyes grow colder, "They knew I was a child yet they still taught me, those people are not them, they have no right to say what I can't and can't do." I hiss.

Her smile dims, "They're just worried about you being all alone. It's going to be winter soon, what will you do then?"

"I already know what I'm going to do," I tell her, "Getting out of bed in the morning is dangerous, yet people still do it. I know what I'm doing. I won't stop," I say.

"And how do you plan on doing that?" The tall man asks, "Night-hunts aren't games."

I give him a steely look, the scar on my face visible, "I know that. I am not playing around."

His face turns grim, "There's a beast going around these lands, no one has been able to catch it. You can't be out after dark," He warns me.

"What kind of beast?" I ask him, "Why haven't the Lan come help you?"

"We haven't asked for their help," The shorter man grumbled, "The Bai Clan can handle this!"

I give him an unimpressed look, "You might, but will the people?" I point at the fields.

"Huh?" He frowns.

"Rice farmers, regular farmers, maybe a hunter or two," I gesture, "There's only the Bai Clan here to protect all those people. You might be able to fight it off, but can you say the same for these people?"

I see the taller man give me a speculative look.

"Defeat it and protect the people, it's our job!" He tells me.

"Your job is to ensure the people are safe," I correct him, "Cultivators serve the people, never forget that. It's not glory or fame you should seek, but power to protect the people. Be better, in order to protect those people. Bow your head, if it helps protect the people," I lecture him.

He reddens.

"While you've been trying to find this beast, how many have already died?" I ask the woman.

Her lips thin, "Fifteen," She answers.

I sigh, "So you've already lost fifteen people you were supposed to protect," I offhandedly mention, "How many more until you actually catch and defeat it?"

"What are you trying to say?!" The shorter man outbursts, "What does a kid like you know?"

I gave him a sharp smirk, "A kid like me knows you should've already called for help, and you
know it, but were too proud to. Maybe you thought they wouldn't listen? A kid like me knows you don't know what you're up against, and you fear that whatever it is, after consuming fifteen people, is already too strong to fight against.

The shorter man pales.

"Aah~ Yes," I laugh," A 'kid like me' truly knows nothing!"

"Will you help us then?" The tall man asks.

I stop laughing and look at him.

"As a rogue cultivator will you help the Bai Clan in fighting against this beast?" He asks again.

I give it some thought.

Why not? Show them I can take care of myself. That I can honestly stand my own ground.

Win win situation.

"As the son of CangSe Sanren, and as a follower of the Great Baoshan Sanren's teachings, I will help the Bai Clan in defeating this threat," I give him a polite bow.

They blink, surprised, before nodding," Come with us, we'll bring you to our Clan Residence, and we'll talk to our Clan Leader."

I follow them.

Their leader turned out to be a tall bearded man, with his long hair tied with an elaborate wooden hairpiece, that was surprisingly friendly.

He smiles easily.

He does.

I watch him as he greets everyone he passes by with a few polite words as he walks towards us.

"ShouShan," The leader greets the tall man with a smile.

"Father," The tall man greets him.

...Wait.

What?!

I quickly stare at the tall man, and notice the woman smiling slightly in response.

They knew...

Of course they knew.

"Who's this?" The leader turns to me, and I have to raise my head high to look him in the eye.

"I am Wei Ying," I tell him, I wasn't sure if kids were supposed to know their own courtesy names before they were 'to be come adults' so I didn't bother adding that," I offered to help dealing with the beast endangering your land."
I then bowed to him.

"Etiquette Skill leveled up!"

I was pretty sure I wasn't doing something right, because ChangZe and CangSe, more so CangSe, didn't really care for propriety outside of actually talking to a noble person face-to-face.

*And apologizing for insulting them to their face.*

That too.

"Welcome," To give him credit, the man only blinked before going with my response," I am Bai XianLiang, the Head of the Bai Clan, let us discuss this inside."

He led us inside, a younger clan member coming to lead Donkey to the stables.

Once inside, we sat at the common hall, a large room with carefully decorated paper dividers, and the leader and his son talked in hushed tones.

I knew they were talking about me, wished I knew how to read lips, and let them continue doing it.

*Maybe you can learn?*

I focused on their lips and waited for the notification that a new Skill had been acquired.

None came.

*It was worth a try.*

True.

"So, Wei Ying," The leader finally turns his attention back on me," My son tells me you agreed to help us with this beast, despite knowing it has already taken fifteen lives."

I nod," I was traveling to the nearest town anyway," I told him," If they had asked for my help I would've inevitably come here to inform you."

He laughed.

"Youth these days," He sighs," You're all trying to grow up too fast. I won't keep you from helping, but I do request that you do not take needless risks when accompanying my son and my clan members."

"Of course," I give him another bow.

"We know very little of the beast," XianLiang told me," It's fast, it only attacks at night, it leaves no witnesses."

"How long has the Beast been active in the land," I ask him," Have there been any other victims beside humans?"

His eyes widen slightly, if I wasn't looking straight in his eyes I wouldn't have noticed," Months ago, there were several incidents of cattle and other animals going missing."

"So, can we believe that the beast has in fact been residing in this land for a while now, and has only recently grown strong enough to consume humans?" I offer.
I see the gears in their heads start to turn, a slow dawning realization, and the leader then nods.

"Indeed, it's a possibility," He tells me," How did you come by that with only that little information?" He asks me.

"One last question," I ask," The people who were killed, did they all have the same height?"

The woman frowns, same as the shorter man, but ShouShan and XianLiang's eyes spark.

"Investigation Skill leveled up!"

"Player leveled up!"

"How...?" XianLiang blinked.

I smiled at him, and told him:

"Clan Leader Bai," I said," It seems to me you have a snake problem."

Chapter End Notes

I found this new website that has a mandarin name generator, and I'm in love. XIanLiang means "Worthy Brightness" while ShouShan means "Longevity; mountain."

Also, yes this peeps will be important. This chapter continues on in the next (and the start of chapter 27 too, sort of).

And, if you're wondering what he was trying to play, my playlist at that time was 'Chim Chim Cher-ee' although 'Let's go Fly a Kite' played not too long after, followed by Hamatora's OP which scared the carp out of me.
Chapter Summary

Where we deal with a snake problem, where's there's an honest conversation, and heads go a-exploding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Respect begins with this attitude: I acknowledge that you are a creature of extreme worth." - Gary Chapman

Chapter 26: Wei WuXian

"A snake problem?" The shorter man echoed.

"That's the beast?" The Clan Leader presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose.

"A Measuring Snake," I specify for his benefit," A normal snake cultivates and forms a core, eventually they turn into a beast that attacks and consumes anything smaller than itself, and grows the more things it eats."

"How did you realize that's what the beast was?" ShouShan asks me.

"Easy, on the way here there were no small forest critters," I answer," I've been hunting game for a while now, and I noticed that the closer I got to your land that only birds seem to roam around. There ain't any rabbits or foxes or even wolves, despite the fact that your mountain and forest should provide excellent habitat for at least one of those."

"So something had to have been targeting them," The woman nods," And when you added the humans who've now started to be killed..."

"The only explanation was a beast that had finally grown strong enough to attack them," I add," If you hadn't had any problems with animals I'd have been wrong."

"Amazing..." The Bai Clan Leader says," How quickly you saw through our information and realized what the problem was.

I'm sure having an Investigation Skill and high Intelligence Stat doesn't hurt the matter.

Shush.

"Sometimes, a fresh pair of eyes can help you find clues that were being overlooked," I reply back.

He laughs," You are correct, the Bai Clan thanks you for your assistance," He tells me," Now that we know what we are up against, we can prepare to track it down tonight."
"Father, allow me to lead the hunt," ShouShan asks.

"Granted," XianLiang smiles," And let us have some refreshments brought to our guest to rest until the time to leave comes."

"Right away, Father," Shoushan bows.

The sheer level of politeness between family members is making me itch.

*Don't think about it.*

It reminds me...

*Don't. We are not back there. They are not here. It is not the same.*

No... It's not.

Things are different here.

"Thank you," ShouShan tells me, as we sat down to eat a small meal.

"There's no need to thank me," I tell him," I'm glad I could help you."

"No, I need to thank you," He looks me in the eye," I brought you here to perhaps change your mind on remaining traveling by yourself. I asked my Father to see you for himself and test you, in the end, you easily saw through what has been plaguing us."

"It was a lucky guess," I wave him off, embarrassed," Sometimes, we overthink things too much. When bad things happen we automatically expect the worst, most unusual of things, and overlook the easier solutions."

"I cannot deny that," He smiles faintly," But it still is a mark of shame for us to have such a young cultivator easily solve what had stumped us for weeks."

I can't argue with that.

"I accept your gratitude, and thank you for allowing me into your Clan Residence," I thank him in turn.

His smile grows wider.

"You're not used to being thanked, are you?" He asks.

I hum," With such politeness? No, not really, though I haven't really interacted with a cultivator clan before," I blink, realizing that.

He seems surprised," You haven't?"

"No," I shook my head," I've been almost constantly traveling from town to town, I stay one maybe two days in each and then move on. If I stay for too long someone might recognize me and send word to the nearest Sect about where I am," I frown.

He laughs," We won't tell GusuLan you are here, but you should probably try inform the Great Sects that you are not in any immediate threat, they believe you to have been kidnapped by nefarious forces," He tells me.
I wrinkle my nose,” Who would want to kidnap me?" I ask," No one even knew about me until I started following my parents on Night-Hunts, and even then I was only 'that kid'."

"I do not know an answer to that," He replies," Only that your parents died and you were nowhere to be found."

I look away from him.

"They didn't come back, that night," I tell him," They didn't come back and I knew they never would. I feared the innkeeper would take their belongings, maybe steal them or sell them," I had suspected he had done so to the original Wei WuXian," So I left while everyone was still asleep. I don't know why. I just had to leave."

He doesn't say anything in reply, but tips his head in respect.

That's enough.

I adjusted the quiver on my back once more, and counted my arrows, I'd made a show of pretending that Donkey's pack had my equipment in it (and not that I carried everything with me inside a hammer space no one else could access) and bought more arrows.

I then made a few more talismans to carry with me, with the woman from before Bai Hong coming in and assisting me with some of my weaker characters. It made her feel more at ease with me when I looked and acted like a simple child and not the kid who'd straight-faced unraveled the mystery beast killing civilians.

I didn't let her know that I knew that I unnerved her, and remained quiet and polite when she treated me like a young child.

The shorter man, Bai Zheng, on the other hand, had begun to treat me as an upstart who thought they knew more than their elders.

Which was true, I did know better and you could call me an upstart, but I was just as old as their elders.

*Now if you'd only look the part.*

You know what? The wrinkles, sore hips and wobbly walk aren't things I miss.

*I'd forgotten the duck walk.*

Noooooo... Why did I have to mention that!

*Ahahahaha! The Duck Walk!*

Urghhhhh...

I looked around at the cultivators going out with us to track down the Measuring Snake, the Bai Clan wasn't very big, altogether I counted maybe forty or so people, but there were, of course, women, children and elders that weren't cultivators, so that left a scant twenty-three cultivators, a third of which would stay behind to guard the Clan Residence.

I closed my eyes and meditated for a bit, diving into my inner self to seek that little orb of light, it hadn't really changed through the days even after unlocking Talents, so I wondered if it would stay this teeny tiny forever.
Not that I cared if it was small, it fit perfectly in my palms in all its swirly mass of energy and dripped through my fingers like warm honey and onto the void below me.

I thought about if everyone's center was a void, and that the actual goal of cultivation was to maintain that void intact, not letting their energy become unbalanced or driven to a single alignment.

Although... You couldn't really expect people to be 'balanced' all the time.

*That's why the System specified 'any given situation'.*

You're right.

I want to know more.

Learn more.

I want to truly understand what energy is.

I open my eyes when I feel a disturbance in the air, ShouShan was calling for people to gather. We'd be leaving soon.

My hands caress the dagger at my side.

One day, there would be a sword here.

*Suibian.*

I never knew you could long for something you've never even held before.

---

The thing with Measuring Snakes, was that, by themselves, they weren't really that big of a deal. In fact the Jin Sect had many of them in their hunting grounds, they were *that* common over there, but if you didn't know how they fought or what to watch out for with them...

Well... Stuff like this happened.

"What...?" Bai Zheng stared at his sword as it failed to pierce the armored scales.

Didn't he hear ShouShan speak about what they had to do when they found it?!

*I don't think he did.*

"Zheng!" Some other young man shouted and went to help him, breaking formation.

*Not good.*

What are they doing?!

The Measuring Snake turned its yellow glowing eyes on him and stood up, it was three inches taller than the man, and so the Measuring Snake opened its maw to eat him but was stopped by two other men, older and stronger, who quickly hit the top of its head to distract it.

"Get back in formation!" One of the men yelled, and then had to dodge as the snake attempted to retaliate.

This was bad.
Everyone was doing whatever it was they weren't supposed to. And I couldn't get a clean shot the snake to shoot it.

Not that my arrows would do much, they'd just bounce off it's armored scales.

A weakness... C'mon brain, focus, find a weakness.

*It's body was covered in those scales... Unless you got close to it and used a cultivator sword strong enough and sharp enough to cut through them, then nothing was going to slow it down.*

Slow it down...

You've got to slow it down.

"The eyes!" I yell," Target its eyes! Blind it!" I shouted.

I notched an arrow and aimed, focusing on the glowing orbs, I followed after the snake's movements, striving for an opening where I could release the arrow and not hit any of the men.

*Hawk's Precision* [Talent Activated]

'Now,' something told me.

I let the arrow go.

The snake let out a distorted hiss, and scrambled back, head shaking side to side as the small wooden arrow stuck out of its eye.

One down.

*Second one won't be easy, it's angry now.*

It was.

In a sharp motion, the Measuring Snake dove at a man and coiled around him, squeezing him, another man went to help put couldn't as the snake coiled tighter around the struggling guy or tried to bite at whoever approached.

ShouShan called for the men to retreat," Can you fire another arrow?" He asked me.

I notched another arrow and aimed, but the snake had good instincts and hid it's face behind its coils.

"I can't," I told him.

"XiuLi is going to die!" Zheng yelled at me.

I bite my tongue.

'Who was the one who broke formation?'

'Who was the one that had to have Xiu Liu rescue them?'

'Who was it that couldn't follow simple orders?!'

Don't. Let it go. Think.
Think. Think. Think.

What did I have? What could I use? What opening can I make?

My hand brushes against my dagger.

I look up at the Measuring Snake again.

The man was dead or dying, already hanging limply, no matter if the snake ate him or not, no doctor could help wounds that severe.

Not in this day and age.

*Goodbye modern medicine.*

"I have a plan," I tell ShouShan.

"Oh, you have a plan?" Zheng sneered.


Zheng's mouth closed with a click. His eyes betrayed his anger.

"Its scales cannot be breached," I told the clan leader's son," But it has a soft spot."

"A soft spot?" He questions.

"Its mouth," I tell him.

He blinks.

"I can quickly patch something up to injure it from the inside," I gesture with my hands," But that snake has to open its mouth."

"Someone will have to get near enough for it to try and eat them?" A different cultivator frowns.

I nod, grim.

"That thing has already killed sixteen of our people," ShouShan spoke," I will go down there."

"What?!" Zheng was stunned, as was everyone else," You can't!

"I am the one in charge of this night hunt," ShouShan tells them," And so, I will go."

I stay silent, quickly opening my Player Menu and diving right into the Talent Page, I'd leveled up and had another TP to spend, and I knew exactly what to get.

**Breaking Blow (1)** *"When performed successfully an object lands on a selected target within range and explodes."*

"Does the Player wish to spend 1 TP to unlock this Talent?"

[YES] [NO]

I accept and quickly, pull the dagger out of my belt.

"What are you doing?" ShouShan asks me.
"Something I pray will work," I answer him honestly.

I close my eyes and focus, deep, deep down inside of me, I cup my hands around that small ball of energy and *squeeze* it, letting its liquid flow faster.

I open my eyes and some of the people closest to me speak back, startled, I know my eyes are glowing.

I can feel the world around me.

The trees, the leaves, the rocks, the wind... I can feel it all.

*Focus.*

I grab a hold of the dagger and take a step forward to the snake.

"ShouShan," I say," When I yell 'down', you throw yourself to the ground."

Zheng opens his mouth to argue but someone wisely covers it.

ShouShan looks me in the eye fearlessly.

He stares into them for a moment before nodding.

He runs at the snake.

*BREAKING BLOW* [Activated]

I hold onto the dagger and I reach out for its latent energy, asleep and cold, just waiting for a single tap of my finger to ignite.

*SOARING SLICE* [Activated]

I prepare to throw the dagger.

Time seems to slow down.

The many lights.

The many sounds.

The colors...

*Focus.*

Breathe.

*Focus.*

ShouShan runs at the snake, it sees him, and springs up.

It's taller. It coils to strike.

ONE.

ShouShan gets ready.
Two.

It opens its mouth, white fangs gleaming under the moonlight.

Three.

"DOWN!" I shout.

And throw the dagger with all my strength.

Please... Please... Please hit...

ShouShan immediately goes boneless on the ground and the dagger flies true, striking the back of the snake's throat.

There's a single second of silence, confusion, the eye of the snake blinks, as if the pain of the dagger hitting it was only felt then.

And suddenly.

Boom.

A large spike of energy is felt on all of us, our hair standing on end, and the snake rears back, hurt.

Its body falls to the ground.

It's head separated from its body.

The neck where the dagger struck a blackened mess.

"Player leveled up!"

"Throwing Skill leveled up!"

"Knife-handling Skill leveled up!"

"Spiritual Skill leveled up!"

"Meditation Skill leveled up!"

"Player leveled up!"

The sudden notifications nearly cause me to flinch out of my skin.

ShouShan gets up off the ground and stares at the snake, before looking up at me, his facial expression awed.

I look back at him, numb and grateful he was alright in equal measure, and then my eyes roll back in my head and everything goes dark.

When I come to, ShouShan is carrying me on his back. All the Bai Clan members are sneaking astonished glances at me every so often, and dragging the headless snake with them.

XianLiang greets us at the door, but I fall back asleep before I can hear what they say between themselves.
The next day, the Clan Leader insists on treating me like an honored guest and sends clan members to get me properly outfitted for a feast, which he also insists on hosting for me, in gratitude for me defeating the Measuring Snake.

I don't remember how the conversation started, but looking back and trying to piece what little I remember of that day with the massive headache I had, I believe he asked if he could give me my courtesy name, and I told him I already had one.

When asked what it was, I answered as easily as breathing, "My name is Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian."

I didn't think twice before saying them.

In my heart, that was who I was.

Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian.

I am Wei WuXian.

Chapter End Notes

I can't think of anything to add here, honestly... I hope you guys enjoyed reading it! Hopefully, chapter 28 will be finished soon, so I can post the next chapter tomorrow (no more surprise midnight updates) And if thing's work out the way I'm hoping they will, chapter 29 will be either a series of snippets of Spring in Qinghe or the start of a massive timeskip. One or the other, we'll see.
Chapter Summary

Where the Bai Clan wants to keep the precious Wei Ying.
Where one's worldview is changed.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Today is a not-so-happy chapter!
If you have any problems with blood or assault, I'd recommend not reading the last scene. Starting the moment WWX finishes his Quest and is going back to the Inn. Nothing too graphic, but... yeah, better make sure than be sorry later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." - Japanese Proverb

Chapter 27: So different

After the feast, Bai XianLiang and his son, ShouShan, insisted that I remain the rest of the winter with them. But I refused, in the end I wanted to finish up doing the Quests in Gusu as fast as I could so that in the Spring I could travel north to Qinghe.

Even so, I did end up staying a few weeks with the Bai Clan, sleeping off my exhaustion of having blasted through the Measuring Snake, and having my dagger replaced.

ShouShan insisted I allow them to do this, as my old one had, well... exploded.

I let them do it, ShouShan had this gleam in his eyes that told me I wasn't getting out of this.

Zheng had been... subdued, for lack of a better word, whenever I walked by him and greeted him. Oh, he greeted me back but he always made a quick retreat afterwards.

Which was still better than having twenty odd people bow to me in respect and greet me with a polite 'Wei-gongzi'.

It was weird. Having everyone look at me like I was some sort of blessed creature.

Well, you did explode a snake's head off.

Between using Talents that I could just shrug off and claim to be teachings of CangSe, or pulling the sword out of the Inventory and hope that it had enough strength to pierce that things scales, I'd still choose the former.
True, pulling the sword out of nowhere would've made them build an altar in your honor, but you've got to admit that exploding the thing wasn't the most inconspicuous thing you could've done.

I was out of options.

So get more. Don't think situations like these won't happen again.

I sighed, but conceded to the point.

"Wei-gongzi," ShouShan turned around the corner and saw me, he gave me a small head tilt.

"Bai-gongzi," I responded in kind.

He smiled down at me," What? No more, Shoushan? And here I was thinking you and I were great friends."

I twitched.

I forgot I'd called him by his first name, which was 'nomal' for me but indicated familiarity, or disrespect, in this culture.

"It was impolite, my apologies." I bit out.

He laughed," No, no, please I don't mind," He says," It's refreshing."

"Then please called me, WuXian," I sigh," Or Wei Ying, I at this point I just want the bowing and the honorifics to stop."

He laughs harder," How about A-Ying?" He jokes.

I give him a deadpan look," Sure, go for it, no one would look twice on you calling me that in the streets, but call me 'Young Master Wei' and everyone will want to know who the hell I am."

"A-Ying it is then," He smirks," I have something for you."

"Oh?" I'm interested.

"Here," He hands me something wrapped in cloth," The blacksmith finished it this morning."

The new dagger?

I carefully unwrap the object from the cloth, pointedly not paying attention to the amused look on ShouShan's face or the odd clan member peeking out of windows, or hallway corners to see my reaction.

Really, did this people have nothing better to do?

Apparently not.

I pull back the final layer of cloth and get my first glimpse of the blade.

Its sheath is made of smooth pale wood, and had an intricate snake painted onto it, wrapped around the sheath with its maw open wide.

The snake only had one eye.

The grip was made of dark leather and had a smooth pommel of pale metal with a red tassel
attached to it. A bead made of green jade at the end.

I grab the dagger and pull the blade out of its sheath.

It glints under the sunlight.

The blade is beautiful.

I notice characters carved onto the blade.

"Xiaodan," I read aloud," Little Dawn."

"Father thought that Xiaotong might fit best," ShouShan told me," But I figured you'd like this name better."

Xiaotong translated to 'Red Sky Child'.

"It's beautiful," I told him and I experimented swinging the dagger.

It cut through the air with a minuscule whistle.

_Perfect._

ShouShan smiled," Father also had someone make replacements for your tack gear."

"What?!" I yelped, almost dropping the dagger.

"And that was after I talked out of getting you a horse," He grinned," Although I don't think I can stop him from trying to convince you to stay once again."

I grumble at him," I _need_ to leave, to travel, I already made plans" I tell him," Once I've been to every place in Gusu I'm headed north."

"Won't you at least stay for the winter?" He tries.

"No, that will only delay me come spring," I shook my head," I'm thankful for all that you've done for me but I don't like owing people."

"You're not owing anything to us," ShouShan tells me.

I give him a look;" Then why are you helping me? You _already_ threw me a feast and a new dagger, and now apparently some new tack gear," I sigh," That _is_ owing something."

"You helped us," ShouShan answered," Even when I brought you here under false pretenses you still helped us, that night... what you did..." His eyes grow heavy.

"Please forget it," I sheathe the dagger," It's best if no-..."

"The Bai Clan _won't_ forget," ShouShan interrupts me," And if you ever need us, the Bai Clan is willing to help you."

"Advancement Unlocked!"

_Urk._

I feel myself turn red in embarrassment.
This is a good thing!

"Thank you," I bow my head to him," You're too kind."

His eyes gleam with amusement," Can I ask one little thing of you?" He asks.

"What is it?" I blink.

"Write us a few letters, even if it's only to tell us you're alive and kicking," He answers," Bai Xi, my betrothed, has taken a shine to you and is pestering me about how safe you'll be back on the road."

I sigh," I'll write," I promise," If I ever stop by this area again I'll even come say hello in person."

"It's a promise!" He ruffles my hair.

"Argh!" I splutter," Hey!"

I stayed one more week with them before finally leaving. I was itching to get back on the road, but saying goodbye to those people was hard.

They were good people. I wouldn't mind writing to them, like CangSe and ChangZe used to write to FengMian, and even perhaps coming back here in the future.

I offered prayers for them to make it through the war.

Donkey was annoyed with my decision to leave. He'd been perfectly content showing off his superiority in the faces of the Bai Clan's horses and was disgruntled at being back in the cold.

Even if he was decked out in grand new gear and warmer equipment. November was close by and as such there'd be no more rains this year, only snowfalls.

I was going turn five at the end of October.

The thought astounded me, how time flew by, it'd be officially two years since I'd entered this world.

I looked up at the sky, clear blue with puffy white clouds, and wondered about what awaited me in the future.

Eventually I would join YunmengJiang, I would come to Gusu and study at the same place they once studied, and when I returned to Lotus Pier war would soon be on the horizon.

War... I never thought I'd live through a war.

I had seen it, on the news, in magazines and books, but never in real life.

I was scared.

But I would see it through.

I was going to survive.

I was going to build a better tomorrow where there wouldn't be a meaningless massacre.

Tomorrow... Tomorrow...
Donkey brayed at me and I looked away from the sky and at the road ahead of us. There's a village up ahead.

"Well, looks like you'll be warm and cozy soon, eh, Donkey?" I smile," Want to walk a bit faster?" I ask it.

Donkey remains at a steady pace, and I sigh.

* A horse would be better.

But Donkey's is all we're going to get.

* Why not both?

Because I'm not traveling with a horse and a donkey, unnecessary and an inconvenience.

* Maybe get a cart, then have the horse and donkey pull it!

Even worse! Don't make foolish suggestions. What the hell would I do with an empty cart?

* Fill it.

I rolled my eyes.

I'mma just ignore you.

It was close to nightfall when I finally finished the last Quest of this town. It wasn't a particularly hard Quest to do, even if I had a sneaky suspicion that their difficulty was slowly increasing, but the sheer amount of material he had to gather and bring back was scary.

I stretched my back and heard my bones crack, I winced. I shouldn't do that.

I rolled my shoulders and neck instead, keeping the blood flowing and keeping myself warm as I walked to the inn I'd gotten a room in. It was already getting too cold to sleep in a stable, so I just rented a room for the night.

I'd play my flute or sing for coins this night, or maybe a free meal.

The wind blew past me and I shivered. It was cold!

I bring my hands up to cup my ears, warming them up.

The cold reminded me to get some winter clothes ready to go in my pack before I left.

As I removed my hands from my ears I hear this muffled grunt.

I pause.

Turning back the street is quickly emptying, stores are closing and only the inns and taverns would remain open as it was the time they busiest. Nothing really seemed wrong with the scene but I couldn't help the gut feeling that something was off.

I slowly walked back, keeping an ear out for the sound I heard.

And then I heard it again, at the mouth of a dark alley.
Are you going in?

I didn't answer it. I shifted from foot to foot, whether or not I should check it out, it was entirely possible that it was a trap set by malicious people or street gangs.

Or someone needs help.

I remembered my previous encounter in a dark alley.

I stepped into the dark, keeping my footsteps light and soft, and slowly approached the end of the alley.

"S-s-stop..." A gasp.

I froze.

There was another grunt followed by a pained sound.

I ran, not carrying if they heard me, and turned the corner of the alley.

There was a woman pinned against the wall, tears streaming down her face, while a man pressed himself close to her. He held a fistful of her hair in his hand and was muffling her mouth with the other.

"Let her go," I ordered him, fury licking at my mind.

The man turns to look down at me. An ugly look in his eyes.

He isn't particularly bad looking, nor is he good looking, just average, with thick eyebrows and a thin nose. He isn't very old, but he isn't what you'd call a young man. He has his hair tied in a simple bun. He's wearing common clothes.

He isn't the kind of man you'd think did this.

He isn't someone you'd suspect of doing this.

He was just... normal.

Average.

"Go 'way, kid," He tells me, he has a deep voice," 'fore I smack 'ya."

I stand straighter, unafraid, I faced down a six foot bear, I trash-talked a demonic unicorn, I wasn't going to bow down to this normal, average man.

"Try it," I smirk," Bet you can't, 'ya only like to hit ladies, ain't that right?"

His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare.

He lets go of the woman's hair, and grabs something at his waist.

Knife.

I keep my posture of confident and cocky kid, but my feet move into position in case I need to spring away.

"R-run..." The woman tries to tell me, but the man presses his hand down harder on her face.
"Shut it, whore," He growls," Oh, what? Is this yo' brat?" He snorts.

He turns back to me and fully unsheathes his knife.

"I'mma teach you some manners, boy," He laughs.

I give him a bemused grin," Manners? Clearly, sir, you're the one lacking manners here."

"Taunting Skill leveled up!"

One day, that tactic is going to fail, and I will laugh.

One day, that tactic is going to fail, and you will help me get out of it.

The man's face reddens and he lets go of the woman, arm reaching out to grab me.

I jump back out of reach, if the man follows me than the woman can run away, and prepare to grab my own dagger when a loud noise rings right beside my ear.

I startle, not expecting the noise, and in the split second of hesitation the man grabs my wrist and pulls me back.

Shit.

He prepares to hit me with the knife but I strike at his wrist and cause him to drop it, before kicking his balls in an attempt at making him let go.

He doesn't, but he goes down, I try to pull his hand off but it only tightens.

Ow.

The woman is still there.

I look over the man's shoulder and see the woman, clutching at her robes which have been ripped, and yell at her:

"Run! Get away from here!"

"No!" The man almost breaks my wrist and goes to grab the knife off the floor.

The woman instead runs at him, trying to get to the knife first.

Bloody idiot!

She bends down but the man clutches the knife first.

He goes to strike her.

But I struck him in the neck first.

Xiaodan's blade smoothly sinks into his neck like butter.

I stare, my hand had moved to the dagger and struck before I even thought of doing it.

The man turns his eyes towards me, I can see my reflection in them, and pushes me away from him.
The blade slides out of his neck and he slumps to the floor soon after, his grip on his knife goes slack.

Blood pours out of him, drips down from my dagger and coats my fingers.

I stare and the man, unblinkingly.

He's dead.

I killed him.

The world kind of distorts itself around me, like grainy footage, and I find myself floundering.

What do I do now?

I killed a man.

Oh, no.

Stop.

My train of thought screeches to a halt.

Take a deep breath. Hold it.

I do so, and muscle memory takes over. Deep breath. Hold it for five. Let it out. And again.

And again. And again.

Don't panic. Stay calm. Think.

I killed him.

He was going to attack you. Attack that woman.

I killed him.

You did.

I flinch.

And now, you're going to clean your knife, sheathe it, talk that woman out of her panic attack, and then you're gonna go back to the inn and sleep.

That easy?

That easy. Breakdown later. Stay focused now.

I take one final deep breath before I bring my shaking hands up to clean the knife.

Shaking hands make for weak grips.

Are you weak?

I think about all that I've gone through already.

I think about the future.
No.

I'm not weak.

_Then stop shaking. Focus._

I wrapped a piece of cloth around the blade and wiped the blood off of it.

_Just like one does after hunting an animal. It's the same._

It isn't.

_Then close your eyes and pretend. Until you can let your guard down and have a good cry about it, pretend._


Nothing is the same as before.

This isn't like my world.

This is different.

So, so different.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 28 will be a happier chapter (and a longer chapter because I couldn't find a nice place to cut it at, and it kind of just kept growing) to make up for this chapter. But this had to happen.

Hunting down creature, spirits and yao, which are visibly not-human anymore, is completely different than killing another human-being. Thing is, WWX will have to get ready for war, where he's going to kill a lot of people, unintentionally or not, directly or not, he's going to have to kill.

He doesn't have to get use to it, he just needs to learn not to freeze at the sight of it and compartmentalize.
Chapter 28: So Alike

I turned five while I was traveling to the main city of Gusu.

Having passed several towns and villages on the way there, I tried to keep my visits as brief as I could. Once the sun went down I was either playing my flute to entertain guests or up in a room, having already gotten a guaranteed stay. I tried not to linger out too much, it was hard not to think about what had happened.

The first few night I woke up from nightmares ready to scream, only for my self-control to kick in and shut my mouth tight.

When I closed my eyes at night, I thought about that man, left dead in an alley.

I felt guilty.

I hadn't meant to kill him.

I only wanted to save that woman.

Was it fair? That I had saved her, but at the cost of his life?

Was it just?

Is this justice?

My thoughts swirled in chaos and I tossed and turned many nights.

In the end, I decided to use that experience as lines in the sand.

If I ever found myself in that position again, what would I do?

Get help. Shout. Throw something at him in order to make him let the woman go.

What I wouldn't do?
Antagonize him. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have done that.

Get close to him. No, that was a mistake also.

His death wasn't alright. It wasn't necessary. It was a mistake.

*My* mistake.

I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Donkey knew something had happened in the last few days that made my mood somber, and he tried to cheer me up in his own way.

I really didn't deserve him, he was too nice.

*When he wants to be.*

A small curls at the corners of my mouth.

*You've been quiet.*

I've been thinking.

*I know.*

I wonder... Did Wei WuXian ever thought back on the people he killed? Did Jiang Cheng? Lan Zhan?

*I do not know.*

Me neither.

*Is it important?*

I hummed, and tossed the question around in my mind, I guess not.

*Where are we headed?*

CaiYi Town.

*Isn't that?*

I grinned. It's still somewhat far from the GusuLan Sect.

*With your luck, you'll still run into someone.*

I hope it's not Lan QiRen.

*I hope it's Lan Zhan!*

You hate me.

*I love you, dear, but your reaction promises to be priceless.*

Urgh.

I'd rather meet his brother.
Oh? Are you pondering on perhaps having both Lan brothers? How greedy of you!

I choke on my own spit and start coughing.

Donkey, stops and looks back at me, worried.

I have him away, trying (and failing) to give him a weak smile.

How dare you!

Oh, my! Why are you so red, my dear?

I open and close my mouth, before shutting it close with a click. I mutinously glare at me reflection in the water.

I will get you back for that one.

The novel hadn't done CaiYi Town justice.

It was so different than what I imagined, the canals and the people casually selling items off of boats, the sound of their voices. Their dialect really sounded soft and all flowery, it was incredibly funny to me.

I led Donkey through the streets, following a nice passerby's advice on an inn with a stable nearby, and couldn't help but look this way and that way as we walked.

November was cold, and already snow had started to fall, not enough to be an inconvenience but just enough to let you know winter would be fast arriving.

There was a Quest here I was eager to try out, it was by a woodworker and the Quest specifically said something about crafting, so I was interested to see if this Quest could help me level up my Crafting Skill.

I wanted to craft a better bow for myself, similar to how ChangZe's had built my first one, because with how frequently I was using it to hunt and fight back spirits I'd certainly need a replacement bow soon.

At least it hasn't fallen apart yet.

No, but some cracks are starting to appear on the wood, around where I grip it.

Well, that's to be expected... How high are your stats right now?

I blink and open my Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 5
  Title: None Level: 23
  Class: Archer Fatigue: 10

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 34 Stealth: 34
  Strength: 35 Charisma: 34
  Agility: 35 Senses: 36
  Stamina: 36 Luck: 35]
Skills:
+Martial
+Social
+Scholar
+Arts
+Mundane

Equipment:
Winter robes (child)
Common boots

Weapon:
Dagger [Xiaodan]
Talisman (16)
Small Bow (25)

Ah. I see your point.

Might want to figure out a way to control the strength of your grip, one of this days you won't be careful enough and you'll squeeze rocks down to dust in front of the wrong person.

Oh, ye of little faith!

I know you, I have enough faith in your peculiar brand of bad luck.

I am keeping the Luck Stat up!

That just means your bad luck will come back double.

Urgh, you're impossible.

Donkey noses down on my ear and I jump startled.

"Donkeyyyyy," I whine," Why, my friend, why must you be so cruel to me!" I slump down dramatically.

Donkey snorts and flicks its tail, the universal sign of 'why do I put up with your drama'.

I clutch at my heart," You wound me! I'm wounded by your words!"

A vendor lady in her boat laughs as she hears me.

I turn to her with a grin," Good day, Sister!"

"Oh, little beau," She laughs," Good morning to you!"

I keep walking, eyeing the sights of the water-based town covered in a thin layer of snow.

After some walking I find the inn and quickly get Donkey situated, getting his tack gear off and giving him an apple to munch on as I brush snowflakes out of his mane.

Once that's done I quickly get back on the streets, entertaining the thought of being back here as a teenager and fighting against the Waterborne Abyss.

And teasing a certain someone.
"Crafting Skill leveled up!"

I sigh, taking a small break from shaving down the wood in the workshop.

Once I got the information of what I'd be doing I made the wise decision of finishing up the other Quests first before coming back to this one.

The owner, a graying man with a bad leg was tasked with building this new boat for a merchant, but his workers decided to bail on him. He decided to try and finish the boat by himself and, sure enough, disaster struck and his leg decided that now was the perfect time to stop working as it should.

He'd been having temporary workers help him with shaving down the wood, sanding it, and putting the pieces together but there was never much attendance as everyone had their own jobs to do.

Or saw no point in helping the old man out.

That too.

I rolled my shoulder before getting back on task. The boat was almost complete, it just needed a few more boards, a final sanding and be painted with the special coat that would make it resistant to water.

Thankfully the Quest would end as soon as I finished shaving and sanding this piece, which was halfway done, so I could go back to the inn have a bath and go to sleep.

"Stopping already?" The man turns to me, from where he's fitting boat pieces together," Are you tired?"

I perk up," No sir!" I say and start shaving the wood down again.

I was getting this job done and I was going to do it perfectly!

"Youth," The man muttered as he went back to work.

"Aah..." I groaned as I stretched out my arms," I'm so tired!"

*Hey, at least you leveled up your skill and stats.*

True.

I pulled the string holding my hair up and let it fall down my back, the urge to cut it was strong but after being lectured, *at length*, by one of the Bai Clan's elderly ladies about how that was simply *not done* and how disrespectful it was to my parents, I'd have to put up with it.

I was all sweaty from working and the cold did me no favors, but my head was so itchy.
I wanted to get back to the inn and have a long soak.

The moon was up already, and there weren't many people walking the streets, having already gone home. The only sounds came from taverns and other still open shops, men laughed and talked among themselves or ate at the tables.

Snow fell steadily from above, and I took in a deep breath of the cold air.

The night sky was decked in stars, so bright, and I walked back to the inn content, sure that all that was in store for me was my bath and a bed.

I was wrong.

*When are you ever not?*

Goddammit.

About three feet from me was a crouched figure dressed all in white, long dark hair falling down his back, playing with a rattle drum in silence.

Even from behind I instantly recognized the robes and who was probably the person crouched down.

Lan WangJi.

*You're actually meeting him...*


*...Too late.*

Loud echoing laughter filled my mind and I fought back the urge to cover my ears, turn around and take the long way round back to the inn.

But this damn bleeding heart of mine couldn't walk away without making sure the kid was okay.

"Hey... Why are you crouched over there?" I asked him, frowning when he didn't even look up at me.

I sigh, thinking about what to do, and crouch down in front of him.

I pull his head up, and wide golden eyes meet mine.

He's shocked I dared to touch him so casually.

"When someone talks to you, you should look at them," I tell him," Now, what's wrong? Why are you here by yourself?"

He keeps his mouth closed and pushes my hands away from him.

Fine then. Two can play that game.

I grab a lock of his hair and give it a gentle tug.

He looks up at me again, scandalized, before looking down again and away from me.

I grin. And pull another handful of hair.
He slaps my hand away from him, golden eyes narrowed and expression annoyed when he sees my grin.

When he goes to turn away I quickly tap his forehead ribbon.

He jumps back, away from me, getting to his feet.

His facial expression morphs into one of utter disbelief.

I get up from my crouch and stand before him, way too amused by his expressions, and grin widely at him.

"Now, will you tell me what you're doing here, or do I have to keep pulling your hair?" I ask him.

He frowns, his lips pressed into a thin line, and he keeps one hand protecting his forehead ribbon from another potential tap.

He's adorable.

Stop! No more! Not another word!

But... How can you not see how adorable he is!

Arghhhh! Stop! He's not supposed to be cute!

Well... You know what they say, kids don't stay cute forever.

I'm not discussing this now. Nor ever!

The laughter rings out again in my head.

I sigh and nonchalantly go to pull another strand of hair, he takes a step back and finally speaks:

"I lost my brother," He tells me.

In fluent Gusu dialect.

I withheld a guffaw at hearing the soft flowery words coming out of the mouth of the future Hanguang-Jun, wielder of Bichen, and the nightmare of Lan disciples who break rules, was something that I was just not expecting.

Obviously he had stopped speaking in a dialect as he grew older.

I'm not forgetting this moment. Ever.

Save a copy for me, I also wouldn't mind revisiting this memory on a rainy day.

Done.

"Where was the last place you saw your brother," Give me some credit, I didn't indicate I thought his voice amusing at all.

"In front of the inn," He answers.

"What inn," I specify.

He remains silent and looks back down.
Oh, he doesn't know. Kid's completely lost.

"When you were with him, was it light out? Or dark already?" I ask.

"Light." He nods.

"Where was the sun, can you point it out to me?" I ask him.

He looks up at the dark sky and frowns, thinking, before pointing to the one side.

Sunset. Kid's been lost for an hour at least.

"Your brother must be worried sick for you," I hum," Well, did you walk in a straight line, or did you take any turns?"

"Straight," He answers and curls slightly on himself.

Scared?

Ashamed he's made his brother worried.

I let out a long sigh and grab his hand, pulling him with me.

"What?" He sort of jumps and tries to pull his hand away but I have a nice grip on it.

"I'mma teach you a trick!" I smile at him," If you ever notice you're lost or you've lost sight of the person you were with, stop walking. Don't move from that spot, and look around, the further you walk away from where you got lost, the harder it is to find you." I explain to him.

He blinks, haven't expected that, but nods.

"Now, see the moon?" I point at the sky," The moon always follows after the sun, so we're gonna keep the moon opposite to the side where the sun was and find your way back, isn't that interesting?" I laugh.

He nods and slowly lowers the hand he has on his forehead.

Two or so minutes after we started walking he begins to look around, shifty.

"Are you scared?" I asked him, kids couldn't be scared of the dark streets at this age, could they?

He purses his lips into a thin line but nods, before looking back at the ground.

Oh, sh*t.

Lan Zhan is scared of the dark!

Shut it!

Thinking back on all my nieces and nephews, I figured that at this age, a song or something cheerful to get their minds off of things would be best.

A cheerful song. Nothing too long or complicated.

Nursery rhyme?

"Hey, want to hear a song I know?" I ask him but I don't really wait for him to give me an
answer,"I'm a little teapot, short and stout,~" I begin singing.

He quickly raises his head to stare at me, his mouth opens slightly in incredulity.

Oh, you poor, poor child. What have they done to you that you haven't ever heard a nursery rhyme.

*Different culture. Different upbringing. And I'm pretty sure the Lan elder wouldn't have their precious Jade tainted by childish songs.*

"This is my handle, this is my spout~" I keep singing, gesturing with my remaining arm,"When I get the steam up, hear me shout, tip me over and pour me out~!"

"What song is that?" He questions, quietly and incredulous.

"It's the Teapot song!" I cheer," Do you like it? You can sing it too, if you want."

"I've never heard of it..." He says.

"Well..." I give him an embarrassed look," I kind of just thought of it on the spot, hehe..." He smile at him.

His eyes widen and he looks away.

"Sorry?" I apologize, and look away, after a few seconds of silence I can't help myself from singing it again.

Violet, Hannah's daughter, loved this song when she was a little girl, complete with the cute little dance in her cute ruffled pumpkin pants.

As I sang I swung the kid's arm back and forth, trying to get him to sing with me but he remain staunchly quiet.

"A-Zhan!" Someone suddenly calls out.

The kid looks up, lightning fast, and starts running toward the sound.

"Hey, wait, you're gonna fall!" I warn him, and true to my predictions he trips over one of the stones in the road and goes down.

"A-Zhan!" Whoever it was calling must've seen him because I hear them running this way.

*Thank your lucky stars that doesn't sound like Lan QiRen.*

"You okay?" I help him get up off the floor and brush away the dirt off his clothes.

Unfortunately they're pure white so there isn't much that I can do for them.

*Oh, the horror of white clothing.*

And that's why we're wearing black in the future.

*Not because it looks cool?*

Also because of that, but mostly because stains won't be noticeable.

"A-Zhan! Are you okay, I couldn't find you anywhere!" Whoever it was calling finally reaches us and I look up to see who it is.
You're got to be kidding me.

*Called it!*

Shut it.

*Oh my god, this is your chance! Snatch him!*

Shut. *Up!*

Standing above me, in all his nine year old glory, was the one and only, Lan XiChen.

Chapter End Notes

So, I saw the last chapter of Season 2 of the animated series. And I do try and take elements from all the media MDZS has, so if there's a particular scene you want to see or think it'd be interesting to add (even if it's from the Live-Action adaptation) you're free to give suggestions. Always open for ideas.

And no, people, he's not getting both Lan brothers! He gets one and that's already one possessive Lan too many XD
Keep Smiling

Chapter Summary

The continuation of the previous chapter's encounter. Where smiling is the best means of defense, and the best way to keep people from knowing you're internally freaking out. Where there's a friendship, big brothers are the best, and a quick getaway out of the city.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I overslept. I was planning on getting this chapter out early and I ended up sleeping 'till 2pm. Oops

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Use your smile to change the world; don't let the world change your smile." - Chinese Proverb

Chapter 29: Keep Smiling

Standing above me, in all his nine year old glory, was the one and only, Lan XiChen.

Oh, he's cute.

By some miracle I manage to not turn red up to the roots of my hair. And refrained from showing any outwardly signs that I was shrieking like a banshee at the top of my lungs inside my own head.

The voice went quiet, retreating speedily to some darkened corner of my mind to escape my wrath.

I smile at the older Lan brother," Oh, so you're the missing brother! Nice to meet you!"

The older boy blinks, a spark of recognition in his eyes, before smiling back at me," Yes, it's very nice to meet you, as well. Were you helping A-Zhan?"

I swear I could see flowers blooming behind his head as he smiled.

What the utter hell.

"A-Zhan?" I blink, before turning to the smaller boy with a grin," Eh? So that's your name? Well, guess I'll call you that then!"

He quickly pushes me away from him, and frowns," Don't call me that."
I fake widen my eyes," Eh?! Why not? And here I thought we were going to be great friends, A-Zhan!"

He kind of smother a twitch but fails, I see Lan XiChen hide a smile behind his sleeve.

"We are not friends," He tells me.

I grin at him," We're totally friends! I even shared my song with you!" I tell him.

He turns away from me and I don't miss the chance to pull at his hair again.

He bats my hand away with a scowl, my lips twitch in amusement, grin widening.

"Well, isn't this great, A-Zhan? You've made a friend," Lan XiChen smiles down at the two of us," You may call me Lan Huan, and you are... Wei Ying?" He pretends to guess.

I look up at him brightly and nod," Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian, but you can call me A-Ying!" I answer, but blink afterwards," How do you know my name?"

He sort of crouches down so we're more eye-level with each other," My Uncle talked about you, many people are worried about where you've been," He tells me.

"Aah!" I make a gesture of realization," The GusuLan are keeping an eye out for me too, I forgot that," I sigh," I have to leave soon then..."

Lan XiChen blinks confused," Why? You can come with us, we'll take you to Uncle and he can get you back home." He tells me.

I shook my head," My parents are dead, you know, I don't have a home to go back to," I answer simply, ignoring the look Lan Zhan gives at that information," They say there's a Sect Leader that wants to foster me, but I don't know him, besides I have something I want to do."

Lan XiChen still frowns," It's not safe being by yourself," He tells me.

I smile kindly at him and spread my arms wide," I know, but, really, I have this many people looking out for me, I won't be in trouble! I can look after myself too, I'm not alone!"

"It's not safe," Lan Zhan finally speaks up," Come to Gusu," He adds.

I turn to him with a grin," Eh? So you do like me, A-Zhan!" I laugh," Don't look so angry, now, sorry! But I really am fine! Don't worry!"

Lan Xichen sighs," But you're so young, A-Ying. You're A-Zhan's age, aren't you?" He asks.

I lift up a hand similar to how you'd wave hello," I turned five in October!" I tell them brightly.

Lan Zhan frowns," Too young. You'll get hurt," He then pointedly looks at my scar.

I laugh," No worries, no worries!" I tell him.

He frowns, and Lan XiChen hides another smile behind his sleeve.

"Well... I don't feel comfortable letting you leave by yourself..." He tells me.

_Uh Oh._
An idea sparks in my head.

*Bad idea.*

"Hey! How about I send you some letters?" I suggest," A friend of mine also asked I send him some letters, so he could know I was okay! I could write some to you as well!"

I wasn't going to tell them that friend was ShouShan just in case this got him in trouble, but... Well, he might just set a precedent.

Lan XiChen ponders on this, and Lan Zhan tries not to look at least minimally intrigued, before he nods slowly.

"Once a month, always, or we'll tell Uncle where you were wrote to us!" He warns me.

I give him a hug, enjoying the fact that Lan Zhan actually squeaks when I do so, and quickly let go to smile back at Lan XiChen brightly.

"Thank you, Gege!" I say," You're the best!"

He chuckles and ruffles my head," Well, I'd say to hug A-Zhan too, but I don't think he'll let you."

I turn to Lan Zhan and see him ready to spring away from me.

I could probably still tackle him, though.

I smile at him instead," No worries, one day we'll see each other again and there's no escaping from me then!" I grin.

In ten or eleven years he'll have forgotten this meeting anyway.

He scowls fiercely at me before shoving his rattle drum in my direction.

I stare at it.

"Uh?" I blink.

"Thanks," He tells me.

"Thanks?" I continue staring, confused.

"For helping," He mulishly adds.

Ah.

I smile gently at him, and take the offered rattle, it has gentle clouds carefully painted on the drum sides, with intricate designs carved into the wood.

"Thank you, A-Zhan," I say to him," It's a beautiful gift."

He looks away from me," Brother, isn't Uncle waiting for us?"

And you need to learn how to change the subject better than that...

Lan XiChen clearly notices it also and smiles," Yes, we should be going now," He gives me one last conflicted look, as if making sure I didn't want to come with them.
"I have to go back, too, I'm all spent for today! I'll send a letter to you soon!" I promise and go to walk away.

"We'll be waiting," Lan XiChen gives me a tired smile.

Poor kid really was worried about me, how sweet of him.

Such a good child.

You're totally snagging both of them I see.

I barely manage to keep from tripping over my own feet.

Stop saying that!

It's the truth, wait a few years and you'll change your opinion of 'never happening' to 'my dream come true'.


Nah, I'll just add a comma and we can continue this at a later date.

You're so annoying. Obnoxious. Full of yourself!

And you're infuriating. Clueless. And unbelievably good at denying your feelings.

There are no feelings to be felt!

For now.

It's not happening!

Moving on, this is getting nowhere, are we skipping town tonight?

...Ah, because of Lan QiRen? Yup.

I'd trust Lan XiChen but their righteousness will inevitably mean they'll tell their uncle they saw me, before dawn tomorrow the whole town will be packed full of people searching for me.

So, where are we going?

I open my map and start going through possible locations, as a last resort I could just suck it up and go hide at the Bai Clan as they wanted me to, but I decide to go stop at a nearby cave temple.

It'd been a while since I was last in one, and inside of it the weather shouldn't be too bad.

I had blankets, actual blankets, if required and as long as I left early in the morning, no one had to know I'd been there.

There goes your warm bath though.

I moaned pitifully.

I was looking forward to it too!

A week later found me staring out at a valley covered in snow, sitting on top of Donkey.
The sun was rising behind the mountains and the light made the ice and snow sparkle. I smiled at the beautiful scenery it made, my breaths coming out in small clouds of air, puffy and white, and I itched to sketch the scene before me.

Why don't you?

That made me pause.

Why didn't I?

When I was learning how to write talismans, despite the weird grip I had to have on the brush pen, it reminded me of painting more than it did writing.

Why didn't I ever try and paint before?

The thought just never came up. The itch to pain what I saw had come up once or twice but I never gave in to the urge.

Why?

You're wasting time. Soon the sun will be all over the mountain and you won't capture it anymore.

I can clearly recall what the sight looked like!

And I did, my memory was just as good as it had been before, maybe stronger now that I had a better eye for details.

"Advancement Unlocked!"

Another?

The System is the gift that keeps on giving!

I laughed and opened my Inventory, searching for drawing materials when a random thought appeared in my head.

Does the Store have actual paints?

I quickly check it out, but can't find them under any of the [Materials] or [Gifts] sections. Nor under [Recipes] and I start to lose hope.

Try [Misc].

I do, and after digging through chopsticks, bowls, blankets, and other random objects of daily life I finally managed to find what I was looking for.

There were complete sets of paint, brushes, and even different types of paints and other drawing materials.

They were unreasonably cheap.

Well, it's not like they're important to the Story.

I scoff, the artist in my revolting at the thought of art utensils being deemed 'unimportant'. After purchasing a fair amount of them, I get off Donkey and find a safe spot to sit down.
I bring out a sketch book and some oil pastels. And start painting, at some point Donkey approaches to look over my shoulder at what I was doing. It snorts quietly, and keeps watching me work in silence.

Despite being out of practice my body just goes into overdrive, losing itself in the act of painting, so much so that I do not notice the notifications popping over my head about 'discovering' the Painting Skill, and leveling it up. Several times.

After about two hours, my fingers are numbing from the cold but I hold up the finished painting and smile.

I still got it.

The head rush one gets when they've finished a painting. Or a music score. Or a sculpture. When you stand back and let out a sigh, that all that hard work paid off. That it's finished, and it's here and it's perfect.

I still got it.

*Maybe you could keep painting your travels.*

Yes... That's a great idea. I could paint all that I've seen as I wondered about the world, the people I met...

*ShouShan would like to see them.*

And others too.

I thought of Lan XiChen opening a bulky letter to find random drawings of mountains, deer and other critters.

*You should send Lan Zhan some bunnies.*

I failed to smother a snicker.

Yes.

I sent the painting back to the Inventory along with the art supplies, sharing an amused look with the disgruntled Donkey who still couldn't figure out how I was doing that, or getting perfectly ripe apples out of season, before putting my gloves back on and getting up on the donkey again.

I'd send a letter to them all soon.

---

Lan Huan had thought about the small boy he and his brother had met the previous month quite frequently as time went by. The day after they met, Uncle had told him they hadn't been able to find him anywhere in town, having obviously left before dawn.

He felt bad for letting the boy go and not drag him with him to where they were staying but his uncle had told him it wasn't his fault. Obviously the boy thought himself invincible and didn't understand that what he was doing was wrong.

Still, he felt guilty. A-Zhan had taken to looking around when they traveled, having some hope of running into him again, possibly. It did cheer him up thinking how the other boy had befriended his brother.
Most kids thought A-Zhan to be cold and distant, but this boy hadn't had any trouble gently teasing his brother and pulling him along as they walked, as his brother had confided in him, even teaching him a song. Or so he had said, because A-Zhan was adamant that he knew no such thing.

Uncle had given him a look and offhandedly mentioned that lying was against the rules and that he should copy a verse of Righteousness for it, but did not press him about it. Neither did Lan Huan, if his brother wanted to keep this apparently mystery song a secret between him and that boy, well... He wouldn't intrude on their friendship.

It was a nice thing to see.

"Young Master Lan!" A disciple came to him carrying a small package," A letter came for you, from one... Wei Ying?" He questioned.

Oh.

Lan Huan blinked, surprised.

The boy had actually written to him.

How thoughtful.

Lan Huan smiled at the flustered disciple and accepted the package with a gentle word of gratitude, retreating to the his brother's room, because his brother would want to know what his friend had been up to, surely.

He found A-Zhan practicing his guqin in the Jinshi, completely focused on his task. Lan Huan waited for his brother to still his strings before entering the room.

"A-Zhan," He said," We've received a letter."

His brother looked up at him, brows knit together," A letter?"

"From A-Ying," He smiled," Do you want to read it together?"

His brother's eyes widened slightly and he carefully put away his guqin, obviously done with practice for now.

Lan Huan pulled a seat beside his brothers and waited until A-Zhan sat back down beside him before opening the package. It seemed rather large to be a simple letter, but perhaps the boy had written several and sent them all together.

Once he opened it, he found his answer.

There was a single letter, carefully written with slightly wobbly characters that had A-Zhan muttering about calligraphy practice, and dozens of drawings. Of what Lan Huan recognized as Gusu mountains, nearby villages and even merchants. Women in boats selling their products, and fishermen boats far off in the distance.

Then there were animals, deer, birds, even a white fox or two. La Huan caught sight of two or three benevolent Yao and Spirits and knew that, with the detail they had on him, Wei Ying had to have spent a good hour working on each of them.

Furthermore, these weren't made with any material Lan Huan was familiar with.

And the sheer level of detail!
"Oh," Lan Zhan picked up a drawing of a bunny rabbit poking its head out of its burrow, there were characters written carefully on the side 'To A-Zhan, it's pretty cute, isn't it?'

Lan Huan smiled," Isn't it lovely, A-Zhan, your friend made something for you."

A-Zhan nodded, clutching the drawing closer to him.

Lan Huan was glad his brother had such a good friend.

...Now if only he'd actually stop wondering around by himself and be safe somewhere with adults to look after him.

Chapter End Notes

The Advancement he unlocked was "Precise Memory", and it's exactly what it says on the tin. He has really good memory. Not to the point of Meng Yao levels of precise memory, but a large step up from WWX's bad memory, nigh bordering on regular memory loss.

Lan Huan so happy his brother's made a friend. :3

Now, next chapter is a time skip, and then Chapter 32 is another big time skip, Arc II is basically at its mid-way point (finally) and I'll see if I can speed things up and get to Arc III quickly.

Thank you for all your comment!
Chapter Summary

Where the flowers are blooming and life is great.
Do you know what's even greater?
Sharp and shiny blades. And, oh look, we have an endless supply of them right here!

Chapter Notes

Yes, another chapter, you guys are awesome so today's my treat for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+A Game for the Fool+

"The beautiful spring came; and when Nature resumes her loveliness, the human soul is apt to revive also." - Harriet Ann Jacobs

Chapter 30: Spring

The snow and frost were only beginning to melt when I arrived at Qinghe, for the first time since I was alone I entered the city with Donkey and took a deep breath of the delicious foods that could be found here.

God, I missed this.

*Just make sure not to accept any more random toys from girls that eventually lead you to run into Chifeng-Zun.*

Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Nope, we're not doing it again.

Once was enough.

*Even if you got good buns for it.*

Damn, those were some good buns.

I entered the city, having already completed the Quests of the nearby border settlements, and found a place to rest for the day. A life of traveling, playing the flute, singing and telling songs, even selling some art to an interesting buyer when I could part with it, made my life much richer.

*And that's without taking into account just how much money you have to spend in the Store.*

I politely do not grin wickedly, lest I scare any passersby, and only make a show of patting my shoulder.
Night-hunting had turned into a very profitable business, to say the least.

*And you even tried the meat!*

My good humor sours.

I had eaten the Bo meat.

After much food preparation, condiments added and cooked extremely well, I had ended up eating it.

It tasted like a good steak.

When I'd admitted to that, you could feel the sheer amount of glee coming from the voice, as it crackled and repeatedly said *'I told you so'*

I wasn't impressed.

Anyway, after making sure Donkey was settled in, I went up to the room I rented up and had a nice nap.

While nothing in this world came close to the fluffy mattress I'd had back in my old life (which my dear student surely had taken possession of, the little brat had always loved that mattress) I'd grown used to the thin straw mattresses placed atop rigid wooden frames.

*Having about three blankets on top of it and forming what I'll politely refer to as a 'nest', doesn't hurt matters either.*

A man after my own heart.

I put my pack, which I honestly carried baggage in, unimportant baggage that I wouldn't mind having stolen if it happened, and threw myself on the bed, kicking my boots off and taking the dagger off of my belt and placing it underneath me.

Someone coming in wouldn't see it, but I could draw it out in a single motion and attack them before they knew what hit them.

I fell into a light slumber soon afterwards.

When I opened my eyes it was evening and the lights outside were just starting to light up.

I rolled over onto my back and stretched, content and feeling slightly lazy, a change from my initial days of constant vigilance and distrust.

I let myself lay there for a few moments before sighing and getting up.

I had stuff to do.

Not overly important stuff like Quests, though I should get back to those, but writing letters and sorting out my inventory.

Writing to Lan XiChen, Bai ShouShan, and Yan MingXia on a near regular basis was relaxing. They couldn't write back to me, due to my constant and irregular meanderings, but I liked to think of what their responses would be like.
Yan MingXia, in particular, would probably want to strangle me with how reckless some of my stunts were. She was a widow living in the northeastern part of Lanling, almost bordering Qinghe, and she'd put up with me freeloading at her house in return for talismans and getting rid of a few pesky yao roaming around her house. The sect responsible for taking care of such things was 'busy' with their own affairs and night-hunts against strong prey that they spared little time to ease the grievances of the common people.

When I suggested I make some talismans and have her sell them, she'd asked me if I was an idiot.

I wasn't sure if I should've taken offense or not at her words so I just shrugged and explained that, if I tried selling my talismans by myself, no one would buy them, because I was a kid, and kids don't know how to make proper talismans 'obviously'. But if Yan MingXia sold them, people would buy them, because she was fast approaching the age of 'elder'.

I'd gotten a cup thrown at my head and a cold stay outside in the snow for my 'cheek' to cut down firewood, before being allowed back inside.

And having to sit through a lecture on how you should never call a woman old.

Women could call other women old, even joke about it between themselves, men? Not so much.

The unfairness of it all!

So, after that was done, we'd discussed how such a business could happen. Every other month I'd send a fixed number of talismans for her to sell, and she was to say they were done my a travelling rogue cultivator she knew, never breathing a word of just who that rogue cultivator was, and on the months I didn't send her any talismans I'd send drawings or trinkets I got instead.

She'd make some money to improve her living conditions, and I got another pen-pal and practice my skills.

Bai ShouShan got letters detailing my travels and all the prey I got, how I got them, and tips on how they could catch them. Sometimes I scribbled ideas of traps or other cultivation tools that would be interesting to have.

I never breathed a word of demonic cultivation, but I did write to him talking about what energy was made of and how we could potentially isolate sections of it.

I liked writing those letters, and imagined he'd be reading them going 'what is going on in that kid's mind?'.

Writing to Lan XiChen, or Lan Huan, or Gege, as I'd refer to him several times in the letters.

Shameless, your Lan Zhan probably says.

I ignored it.

Those were fun letters too, although very edited out, and only briefly touching upon the matters of night-hunting and catching various creatures. I mostly sent them pictures, with one always dedicated to the tiny Lan Zhan. They were funny anecdotes, bunny rabbits, a particularly beautiful tree, sometimes a spirit or beast I observed at a distance, if they were hostile, or up close if they were benevolent.

I liked to think he enjoyed those the most.
More than once I'd sent him pictures of the night sky, depicting constellations or other astronomical events I remembered from my previous life, like an Aurora Borealis.

He'd probably be confused about what it was, but that was the fun part of it.

Sometimes I'd write him little stories or rhymes, or small melodies.

Those were the letters I wrote all the time. But they hadn't been the only letters I had sent.

Months ago I had written to YunmengJiang, and told them I was fine and if they could, pretty please, stop looking for me I'd be grateful. That I didn't really know why they wanted to foster me, when I was pretty sure I'd never even met them, but I wasn't interested in stopping my traveling.

They hadn't stopped looking.

I'd also written to the other Great Sects telling them the same, that I was fine and very much healthy. While the searches hadn't stopped I felt like they weren't as intense as they were before.

It was the morose action of 'well, if I catch him, I catch him, but I'm not going out of my way to do so'.

Except YunmengJiang. YunmengJiang was becoming an inconvenience. While the Sect Leader couldn't go gallivanting across the countryside looking for me, he's enlisted a fair share of disciples who were more than willing to help him on this crusade.

I was honestly surprised at how eager they were in finding me.

Like I was a prize to be won.

_I don't doubt Jiang FengMian wouldn't reward the fool who manages to drag you back._

I sighed, and get CangSe's desk out of the Inventory and set everything up so that I can start writing my letters.

Once they were all written and bundled up in their own respective packets I'd send off when I was about to leave the city, I brought the items I had in my Inventory out, and there were a lot of things mind you, and started sorting them out.

Mob drops that I could sell would immediately be sold on the spot, everything that belonged to my parents was put aside and sent back, while trinkets and gifts I'd gotten from people over my travels were placed separately in their own bag, like Lan Zhan's rattle drum.

Then I'd sort out my art supplies, see which ones I had to replace, get rid of or restock, and then organize them before sending them back, followed by the provisions and travel gear I had with me.

Clothes and other miscellaneous objects, such as interesting rocks, shells and things I had bought in stores, were the last ones to be checked.

I always had to check if the clothes still fit me, or else they'd be sold for a portion of their value, and where once I only had a single pair of robes, I now had three, plus pair of winter robes, a waterproof cape and various winter articles such as gloves and scarfs.
I even got a small cloak from a nice store vendor after helping her carry her luggage into her new husband's house. I liked that cloak.

The most interesting thing I'd gotten into the habit of checking out were hair ornaments. I'd had many, many lectures about keeping hair clean and correctly brushed, and lessons on different hair styles from sympathetic ladies that I'd somehow found myself getting ribbons and small hairpins.

I also found out countless different types of buns and ponytail styles which I hadn't thought possible.

After all that was done, I went ahead and asked if I could have a bath drawn, I honestly found it awkward to have to ask someone to fill you a bathtub, which was really just a large wooden tub carried upstairs to the room you were in, with hot water.

Personally I wouldn't mind the technological advancement of having sewage systems and plumbing.

Once the bath was drawn and I was left to my quiet contemplation whilst soaking in the warm water I opened my Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 5
  Title: None Level: 30
  Class: Archer Fatigue: 0

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 45 Stealth: 45
  Strength: 45 Charisma: 44
  Agility: 44 Senses: 46
  Stamina: 46 Luck: 45

  Skills:
  +Martial
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
  +Mundane

  Equipment:
  Sturdy Robes
  Hunter Boots

  Weapon:
  Dagger [Xiaodan]
  Talisman (25)
  Small Bow (30) ]

I'd come a long way from where I'd started, and I was still half-way to where I was supposed to be.

As I washed my hair I wondered if I should get more weapons. Xiaodan and my bow were enough for now, but I shouldn't just rely on them, or the talismans. I needed more options in case something went south. And now that winter was over and the warmer seasons would bring monsoons and all the beings the rain brought with it...

Yeah, I should consider getting more weapons.
But what?

I dumped water over my head and spluttered, pushing my heavy wet hair back.

My arms could reliably lift and swing a sword but it was unwieldy, the size of the sword didn't fit in with my body proportions. I either had to get a small sword, which was an idea, I came to realize, or I had to think outside the box.

Think. What kind of weapons were there?

I open the store and start going through the weapons available.

I swear that sword just winked at me.

*That doesn't make any sense.*

It's so shiny.

*Don't even think about it.*

But...!

*Move on.*

Urgh... You're no fun.

I kept scrolling through, the different types of blades there were, and there were a lot, before coming by knives.

...I could get another blade like Xiaodan, keep it tied to my arm in case of an emergency.

*Hmm, that's an idea... But focus on the short sword.*

I scrolled down again until we came across short swords.

Or well, what an adult would describe as a short sword, because they were the perfect size for a child to pretend they were long swords.

Which one to get?

I went through their details, keeping an eye on my money out of habit, and finally picked one that stated it was very effective against spiritual beings.

"*Does the Player wish to name their weapon?*"

[YES] [NO]

I blinked, not expecting that message, and decided to go ahead and name it.

The holographic image of the sword enlarged and floated above me, slowly revolving.

"*Choose a name*"

I stared, and looked up at the blade.

It was a very pale blade, with a dark handle made of dyed leather, and a pommel with a carved flower.
I recognized that flower as a jasmine.

"Liling." I name it.

"Player wishes to name the weapon 'Liling'?"

[YES] [NO]

I press the [YES] button and the notification comes that the weapon was sent to my Inventory. I pull it out and feel it materialize in my hand, despite having grown an inch since I started traveling, the blade could very easily be slightly longer than my leg when standing upright.

I sent it back to the Inventory, eager now to test it out, and focused back on the store.

I went back to the knives and got the one that had caught my eye previously, it was a fine blade with the detail that it focused the Fire Alignment easily.

It coincidentally had a red handle and a pommel with a red stone that glowed faintly.

I named it "Xiaotong" like XianLiang had almost named Xiaodan.

*I start to sense a naming theme to your knives.*

I ignored it, and checked the blade out. It was curved, not like Xiaodan which was straight, and had a faintly jagged edge.

As I saw my reflection in the blade, clear grey eyes reflecting the glint of metal in their pupils, like tiny stars, I couldn't help but grin.

I was happy.

And excited.

And thankful.

So, so thankful.

Aah~, I thought, How wonderful it is to be alive.

This is great.

Chapter End Notes

So, first things first, it's Spring right now, so at least 4 months have gone by since the little Lans last saw him.

Yan MingXia will also become a recurring character, I'll try to remember telling you guys which ones will be important later one, because sometimes I name characters and they aren't really worth pointing out.

That said, WWX has made more 'friends', they just won't be mentioned much.

Info about MingXia, she's fifty-two, a widow, and she lives in a quaint little village raising chickens. Mess with her and he'll whoop your ass with a wooden ladle.
Seriously, she's a fierce granny. (Don't tell her I called her that)

And the new weapons! So, Liling means White Jasmine, and Xiaotong, as mentioned before, means Red Sky Child.
AGF!WWX totally has a name theme going on with his daggers (he'll get one or two more in the far off future)
No worries, he'll get Suibian from JFM! Liling is just a stopgap measure for the remaining years he's MIA

Also, the "The unfairness of it all!" comment from the Voice was sarcasm. He's mocking AGF!WWX for being an old woman being called out for calling another woman 'old', just pointing it out if I hadn't made it clear in-story. XP

Next chapter happens immediately after this one, and I think you guys will like it too.
Search the Pockets

Chapter Summary

Where there's a Quest, a Treasure, and a new Companion!

Chapter Notes

What? Three updates in a single day? I must be crazy!
...Or I'm starting Chapter 34 and the other chapters are occupying space in the little writing corner.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Thief is not the one who steals, but the one that is caught." - George Bernard Shaw

Chapter 31: Search the Pockets (and look for loose change)

"New (Side) Quest Available!"

"View Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I pause, my chopsticks half way into my mouth, and stare at the words.

Well... It's been a while since one these popped up. Usually I have to get to a specific point for the Side Quest to appear, not just randomly pop-up and tell me there's stuff to be done.

What are you waiting for, open it!

Can I finish eating first?

...Fine. But be quick about it.

Hey! Good food must be fully appreciated!

I felt its eye roll.

Hurry up!

I grunt and proceed to continue eating, Qinghe had the best food, hands down, Qinghe had the best food in the world. Everything was nicely seasoned, and cooked, there were so many types of meat!
Aah~ Everything tasted so nice.

Stop sounding like you want to get married to that bowl of rice.

It's a free country!

Pfft.

I hide a smirk into the edge of the bowl and drink the last of the soup I had in it.

Delicious.

Now can you open the Quest and see what it is about?

How much you want to bet it has a stupid name?

I'm not betting on that sucker's bet.

I open the Quest.

"Quest: Loot the Looters!"

«You've discovered the location of a group of looters currently taking advantage of the common citizens. You decide to take a stand against their actions and make them taste a bit of their own medicine. You may do what you please with the loot.»

"View Quest Objectives?"

[YES] [NO]

I stare at the words, and fight back the urge to burst out laughing. Of course the System would encourage a five year old to rob a robbers hideout!

Accept it!

Of course I'm accepting this, who do you take me for, this is bound to be fun!

"Loot the Looters Quest Objectives:"

- Break into the Looters Hideout (incomplete)
- Loot the contents (incomplete)

"Bonus Objective:"

- Find the Sable (incomplete)

"Accept this Quest?"

[YES] [NO]

I accept it and get all the dishes and utensils properly put away for the lady to take them away.

It was night now, and I considered tackling this Quest in the morning but decided that now was the best time to complete it. I got up from the table and put on a darker pair of robes, to better blend in with the night, and putting my hair up in a tight bun. I'd gotten new boots after my old ones got
holes in them, and I had to say, the Store was awesome.

These were super comfy and made it easier for me to walk without leaving traces behind.

Perfect for hunting.

*And breaking and entering.*

Shush.

After I got my boots on, I attached Xiaodan to my belt, beside my Qiankun bag, and got Xiaotong attached to the arm-guard I bought for my left wrist. Xiaotong was really in the case of an emergency and I needed a second knife fast, so I didn't expect to need it any time soon, if I did I'd change the arm-guard to my right wrist.

And finally, I got Liling situated across my back. I couldn't pull it out in a single motion at my waist, it was still somewhat unwieldy, but if I pulled it off my back and drew it then, it was easier.

I looked myself in the mirror and grinned.

I looked pretty dang awesome.

I placed the empty dishes by the door outside, a servant would come pick these up later, and left. The innkeeper did a double take at the sight of the sword on my back but wisely said nothing.

*I think he was too shocked to say anything.*

Whatever.

I followed the map's instructions and soon enough found myself in front of a seemingly normal general store. Or so the front sign read, it was closed by now, and there wasn't anyone inside it, the lights were all out.

I casually meandered into the alleyway between the store and the building beside it. There wasn't anyone watching me, I expanded my sense outwards and couldn't sense anyone inside the building.

I gave it a full walk around before deciding that the window at the back would probably be the safest entry point. It was in the first floor, so I'd have to climb up, but I could see it that the wooden shutters weren't latched closed so I could open them.

I rolled my shoulders and started pulling myself up on the wall, how nice it'd be to be able to walk on walls.

*Or fly.*

One day.

After some minimal difficulty, I managed to reach the window, constantly keeping an eye and ear out for trouble, and slowly pushed it open to peek inside.

It was an office of sorts. Bookshelves and paperwork on the desk, the usual things you'd see in an office. I climb inside, and take care to make sure the wood doesn't creak underneath me. I peek at the books on the shelves, but none of them really catch my interest, they were just books about commerce, the prices of grain, and boring stuff.

I carefully went through the paperwork but found nothing out of the ordinary. Everything seemed
normal so far, no indication that this place housed looters.

*Or maybe the owner doesn't know about the looters.*

Possible, I guess.

I slowly opened the office's door and peeked out, the place was dead quiet, and I couldn't hear anything like breathing or snoring. There wasn't anyone in the house.

Odd.

Not to look a gift-horse in the mouth I opened the office door and went to the nearest door, opening it slowly, it was a bedroom. Empty, and it didn't look like it'd been used in a while, dust gathering on top of everything. I closed the door after that, and moved on to the next. There were four rooms total upstairs, counting the office and that empty bedroom, so there had to be something up here.

The next door I opened was another empty bedroom, and I started to frown, before opening the last door. This one at least looked like it'd been used recently. I entered the room and looked around. Nothing out of place, everything seemed ordinary, even the painted screen divider in the corner was common in every household's master bedroom.

I give it one last glance over before going downstairs. The store beneath the house was full of items for sale, and there was a little bit of everything to buy. I checked behind the counter for anything suspicious but again, couldn't find anything.

I started to get frustrated.

The store room behind the storefront also didn't indicate anything untoward was happening.

*What the hell?*

I placed a fist underneath my chin and started thinking of anything I might've missed.

*There's nothing here! Is this even the right place?*

I open the map and sure enough, I'm supposedly right where the hideout should be.

*This place is a total dump.*

I couldn't exactly deny it. The place was pretty dusty and unorganized, things just piled back here without much care.

*It seems what this store owner needs is a woman's touch!*

I chuckle, finding that statement funny, and true. A woman would defini-...

*What?*

A woman.

...*What?*

A woman!

*You're not exactly making sense here.*
I leave the store room to go back upstairs.

You just said that this place needed a woman's touch! Obviously this is a store owned by a man, right?

*Right.*

Then why is there a girly screen divider in the bedroom?

*Maybe he's married?*

Then why would this place need a feminine touch?

*Well... Oh.*

Yes, oh!

I entered the master bedroom again and pull the screen divider away from the corner, there's a square floorboard that doesn't quite match the rest of the flooring, I crouch down and pull the floorboard up, revealing a rope ladder going down.

*How did you know?*

I grin smugly.

I'm just that smart.

I carefully start going down the rope, once I reach the bottom there's a door that I simply push over.

"*Quest Objective Complete!*"

I look up at the words and give myself a little pat on the back.

I was getting better at this.

Inside the room there's tons of stuff, from silk cloth to iron chunks, there's also crates full of liquor, and leather and bags upon bags of rice.

What the hell.

*Loot it.*

I start grabbing things and sending it to my Inventory, feeling giddy as I slowly empty the room down to nothing.

Should I take the furniture? For the heck of it?

*Take it. Take it all!*

You sound like an evil mastermind.

*I'm just your voice of reason.*

I laugh and quickly cover my mouth.

Sh*t.
No one heard you.

Don't make me laugh idiot! What if someone had heard me?

You'd kick their butts?

Of course, I would, I just don't want to if I don't have to.

I start getting to the furniture, a desk here, a chair there, bookshelves full of other, most likely stolen, merchandise, and rugs.

Where did he even get this? How do you smuggle this much stuff into a city and then bring it inside of this little hidden basement?

There might be another door, the Quest said 'looters', plural.

True.

I continue emptying out the room, losing track of what I just sent to the Inventory and just grabbing as much stuff as I can as fast as I can. I want to go back to my room and sleep.

You had a nap.

And now I want some deep REM sleep.

You jump awake at the slightest of sounds.

Survival instincts, I still deserve my beauty sleep.

After about half of an hour of clearing everything up, I look around the decrepit looking room.

...I kind of feel bad for the guy. Imagine coming down here to store the latest of your conquest, only to find everything else gone.

Karma.

My lips twitch.

Dude, stop making me laugh.

Is this everything?

I don't think so, the Quest hasn't done the little, Quest completed cheer.

I look around the room for anything I might've missed. I can't find anything.

What are we missing?

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I close my eyes and dive right into my center, the small golden ball of energy seems to spark brightly as I come closer, and eagerly comes to rest at my hands. It feels fuzzier, and heavier, but still small enough to fit in my hands.

I smile down at it, at the golden liquid energy that flows from it.

Outside the world grows into focus, and I find a section of stone wall shining brightly. I walk
closer to it and inspect it, the brightest stone, when pressed, sinks into the wall. There's a weird hollow sound and the wall kind of shifts inwards, opening slightly.

...This is Indiana Jones stuff right here.

The System sure does love messing with us.

I walk inside and find another room full of stuff, except this time, they're objects that are obviously heirlooms or some nobles treasure.

Gold. So much gold.

Jackpot!

Oh, my god.

We're rich!

How do you even?!

Start pocketing it!

I'm having a slow mental breakdown over here!

Breakdown later, get rich now!

I groan and start sending things to the Inventory. If that thing had a limit, it'd sure have reached it by now.

There's no much gold.

How?

Don't question your good luck!

There's good luck and then there's you're about to die so be happy while it lasts!

...Damn, you do you have to ruin my hype.

Sorry to burst your bubble!

Work faster, let's get out of here the moment you grab the last thing, I think I see the secret exit.

I spy the closed door but decide that I'd much rather squeeze out of that tiny window that to try the door.

Why?

Gut feeling.

I grab a few more things before I suddenly freeze.

I heard something.

What?

I look up to the corner of the room, there's definitely something in that corner.
I jump over crates and slowly approach the corner, there's a cage, roughly the size of an ice cooler, made of wire. I crouch closer to it and see... fur?

It's a really dark fur.

And dripping.

Oh.

There's blood pooling at the bottom of the cage.

Poor thing.

I swear I heard something, though.

I pull the cage slightly, and there I hear it. A tiny squeaky growl.

Two beady black eyes glare at my from the mound of black fur.

I blink, and open the cage, reaching for the thing.

Sharp teeth bite me but I ignore it, grabbing it and pulling it out.

It's a ferret.

That's not a ferret.

I stare at the tiny weasel-like black scrap of fur, glaring at me with its beady eyes and sinking its tiny little teeth into my thumb, and I have to once again insist.

This is totally a ferret.

"Quest Bonus Objective Completed!"

I stare at the words and pull the Quest Objectives back.

"Loot the Looters Quest Objectives:"

| o Break into the Looters Hideout (complete) |
| o Loot the contents (incomplete) |

"Bonus Objective:"

| o Find the Sable (complete) |

See? It's not a ferret.

It's a Sable.

...What the hell is a Sable?

A ferret.

"What do I do with you?" I ask it, petting it's small head with a single finger from my other hand, it starts biting that finger.
Well, you can't put it in the Inventory.

I sigh, looking back at the cage. Due to how small this is, I'd say that's the mother.

*Poor sable.*

Ferret.

*It's not a ferret.*

It's totally a ferret.

I get up and have the great idea of grabbing a nearby piece of cloth and wrapping it like a baby.

It's not amused with me, letting out another squeaky growl.

...Damn it, it's adorable.

*Oh, no... No, no, no, no... We already have Donkey!*  

...And now we have Ferret.

*You're not naming it Ferret!*  

Alright, I won't name it Ferret. But I'm keeping it.

...*What?! No!*  

"Totally keeping you!" I coo at it, letting it bite my finger again.

Its teeth aren't doing any damage at all so I let it keep doing it.

I find a pouch full of coins and dump the coins out, placing the bundled ferret inside and attach the pouch to my belt. I'd figure out a better way of carrying it back at the inn.

I finish grabbing everything and look around the empty room.

"*Quest Completed!*"

I nod and start squeezing out the window, well, squeezing is a too harsh word, I could easily climb in and out of the window. Which wasn't much of a window as it was a vent of sorts, leading to the store room upstairs. There was another window here, latched closed, but since I was inside it was pretty easy to get out.

As I reach up to unlatch it I hear people get inside the store, laughing. I crouch back in the darkness and my hand goes to grab Xiaodan.

*Don't make a sound.*

The men, because there were several of them, and they were definitely male, went upstairs, laughing and jeering one another.

I heard them pound their feet up the stairs and once I was sure they'd all made it up I quickly unlatched the window and climbed out, leaving it open. Who cares if they found the window open?

*No fingerprinting in this day and age.*
No one will believe a kid stole everything from their secret hideout.

*Even the furniture.*

Especially since they'd have to explain what exactly is missing.

*And they can't do that with stolen goods.*

Oh, this is the life for me.

I went around the building and used the alleyways to make my way back to the inn, greeting the innkeeper cheerfully and going back upstairs.

*Poor man looked so confused.*

I think we have that effect on people.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, remember when I said (several times) the System is more involved in the world than it seems? Yeah, this is one such event.

Basically, word of God here, something happened in the last chapter than made the System go 'Oh, good boy, here have a reward'. Not gonna tell what, in layman terms, that's what basically happened.

As for why he took all his weapons... Better be safe and sorry. No, we wasn't low-key expecting the chance to try them out, why are you looking at me like that?
Connections

Chapter Summary

Where a whole year has gone by, what have they been up to, and fanboys exist.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Time is the school in which we learn, time is the fire in which we burn." - Delmore Schwartz

Chapter 32: Connections

I burst out of the bushes like a hell hound was nipping at my heels, determined to catch the little sh*t before it reached the camp I'd made earlier that morning.

"Yunru!' I yelled, "You stop right there!"

Yunru, the year old sable ignored me and kept running with the bird I'd shot down in her mouth.

"Yunru!' I yelled again," Goddammit! YUNRU!'

It jumps over a short log and enters the camp and goes down her little burrow she had dug for herself.

I slid to a stop just before my tent and slap my knee.

"Goddammit, you always do this, Yunru!' I grouch at her little burrow.

How fast kids grow to get up to mischief.

I swear that's all your influence.

May I remind you, you're the one who wanted to keep her, I told you not to.

Urgh.

I pull the string of birds I'd caught and sit down by the fire-pit, unlit at the moment, to pluck the feathers off and get the meat ready to cook.

Donkey is munching away at a bail of hay, and ignoring the injustice heaved upon me.

A whole year had gone by, almost like in the blink of an eye, it was Spring again and Yunru, the little sable kit I'd saved from that looter's hideout, was eager to explore the land now that the snow and ice were gone.

A lot had changed in a year, and a lot had stayed the same.
I opened my Player Menu.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 6  
  Title: None Level: 53  
  Class: Archer Fatigue: 6  

Stats: 0 Points Available;  
Intelligence: 66 Stealth: 66  
Strength: 70 Charisma: 68  
Agility: 71 Senses: 72  
Stamina: 73 Luck: 70  

Skills:  
+Martial  
+Social  
+Scholar  
+Arts  
+Mundane  

Equipment:  
Hunter Robes  
Hunter Boots  
Leather arm-guard(left)  
Leather arm-guard(right)  

Weapon:  
Dagger [Xiaodan]  
Dagger [Xiaotong]  
Short Sword [Liling]  
Talisman (25)  
Maple Bow (30) ]

Once I'd left Qinghe I stayed a long time traveling the north, and then I went back down to Lanling and finished what I had to do there before losing myself in night-hunting during the warmer months before secluding myself during the colder months.

I spend a lot of time in individual villages, getting to know the better better, helping around in workshops and learning first-hand how the common people lived.

Why, I'd do such a thing?

I came to a realization half way through last year that this time I had for myself was the perfect time to create connections to the people whose opinions condemned Wei WuXian.

If the people didn't fear the Yiling Patriarch, if they saw him as a comrade, a person who understood their struggles and had walked with them down the dusty rural streets, helped them with the most menial tasks then... Then, they'd remember Wei WuXian that odd child that used to travel and not Wei WuXian, a Devil wearing human skin.

So, I'd taken a break from Quests and night-hunting at large and focused only on the people.

Of course, I'd kept my correspondence with Bai ShouShan, Lan XiChen and Yan MingXia, I had even managed to visit Bai ShouShan the last time I passed through Gusu. And was cheeky enough to send Lan XiChen a sketch of the gates of the GusuLan Sect. It wouldn't endear me with them,
because I was sure at least one person was tearing their hair out looking for me.

Even after I sent another letter saying that 'hey, still alive, I'm okay, you can stop now, seriously' to Yunmeng. Just as the first, it didn't work.

I was half convinced that the first YunmengJiang disciple that saw me would tackle me to the ground and start screaming about having found the Holy Grail.

So, that's what I'd been doing for the last twelve months. Making friends.

I could say I was being successful, although it carried the setback of being constantly harassed by smaller sects and clans to join them and being given gifts in order to grease my palms about accepting their offers.

It was annoying, so every so often I'd grab Donkey and Yunru and just travel straight through the wild. Camping and hunting for survival, with the Store filling in the gaps we couldn't procure in the wild.

As it was, I'd soon reach Qishan. I'd already started doing Quests around its territory, and crossed their borders more than once, but I really wanted to complete the Quests there and leave just as quickly.

Despite every other sect knowing that YunmengJiang had been looking to foster me for a year now, QishanWen had one day released a statement saying that they were also willing to take me in. That had ruffled a few feathers, rumors flying everywhere about how the last Discussion Conference was spent with wintry politeness between QishanWen and YunmengJiang.

I felt bad, initially, about worsening the relationship between the two Sects, and feared that the war would spark sooner, but after the panic and worrying passed I just felt rather pissed.

I wasn't an object to be owned. And if I put my foot down that no, I was not joining either of those Sects, frik them, I'd join Bai ShouShan and endure a lifetime of his smug countenance every time it was brought up.

I sighed, and lit the fire pit, the birds were all plucked and Yunru had already poked her head out of the burrow liking her lips and staring at the other two birds I had with me.

I gave her the stink eye," Don't even think about it, young lady, behave!" I scolded.

She squeaked and went back into her burrow.

Donkey snorted at me before going back to his food.

"Honestly, I feel so underappreciated right now," I grumble," I'm the one getting your food, where's my respect?"

_Yunru will soon start hunting by herself and it's technically the System that gets Donkey his sweet straw._

No one asked you!

"Damn brat!" The man groaned on the ground, clutching his stomach.

"Why you're cursing at me for?" I ask him with a sigh," I warned you not to try and take my stuff, did you listen? No, you did not. What were you expecting?"
Seriously, it's like all common sense escaped people when they saw my weapons and thought I'd make an easy target.

If your 'easy target' has a freaking sword on his back and isn't afraid to warn you about attacking it, then it's clearly not an easy target!

*On the bright side, you managed not to gut him.*

Ardy-har...

There was a previous incident where a bandit tried to rob me and I chased him off, only for him to come back with more people. I ended up fighting them all off but stabbed one of them in the stomach before they'd gotten the message to 'get the hell away from me'.

The guy probably didn't make it, not with how much he was bleeding and the lack of access to medicine.

I sighed, and shook my head, no use thinking too hard on it. It wouldn't make a difference and only served to make me feel miserable.

I sheathed Liling and picked Donkey's lead back up. We were almost at the next Qishan territory village and the sun was going down. I heard there was a night-hunt open for rogue cultivators there so I wanted to get there before it started.

"C'mon, Donkey, get us there early and I'll bring out a pack of apples," I told him.

Donkey started trotting, and Yunru poked her head out of the saddle bag she'd taken to travel in.

"Yes, you can come with me night-hunting," I sighed.

She made a happy little noise and went back into the bag.

*You're a total sucker for her.*

Shush you.

_Hypocrite, you tease Lan Zhan about liking bunny rabbits yet you let that fuzzy cloud get away with murder!_

Technically she hasn't killed any prey yet, her hunting skills need work.

*It's an expression.*

Really? I had no idea.

*Sarcasm? Oh, honey, really?*

Learned from the best.

*And don't you forget it.*

Urgh.

Yunru hid in a small satchel I'd bought from a local store back in Qinghe, after I realized that I was totally keeping the little scrap of black fluffy fur, so she didn't have to deal with people's stares as
we waited for the night-hunt to officially begin.

Being a night-hunt open for rogue cultivators, the prey wouldn't be something to brag about, but each participant got a small stipend of money for how much prey they took down.

Not that I was hurting for money after that looting treasure and the number of Quests/Night-Hunts I'd gone on. But I kind of needed an excuse to *not* need the extra money when no one else knew what I got up to whilst I wasn't night-hunting or helping at various workshops.

Even so... The stares weren't worth it.

I sighed, and leaned back on the tree I was standing in front of, pointedly ignoring the not so subtle whispering going around about who I was, who was looking for me and, my personal favorite, not gonna lie, how absurdly *young* I was.

True, I had shot up slightly in the last year, I could possibly pass for a seven year old and not a six year old, but I was nowhere near the 'expected' age for night-hunting unsupervised.

"Hey..." A young looking man came over to me," You're... Wei WuXian, right?"

I stifle the reply of,' Well, yeah, are there any other small children night-hunting trying to steal my style?', and simply smile up at the guy.

"Yup! And you are?" I ask him, just to be polite.

"Oh! My name is Kang Shu!" He hurriedly gives me a polite little bow.

*Don't tell me you have fanboys.*

...I like him.

*Of course you would.*


He perks up and starts... babbling. For a lack of a better word.

...He's like a chinese version of Peter Parker.

Does that make you Tony Stark?

*Definitely a pioneer of a new Era!*

Whatever floats your boat, I guess.

I grin up at the young man, who's excitedly recounting some of my known encounters with spiritual beasts that the world at large know about, and start chuckling when he gets to the part of being fighting that six foot bear in Lanling all that time ago.

"Do people still remember that?" I can't help but ask," It was so long ago."

Kang Shu gives me a wide-eyed stare," How could anyone forget?! The city still talks about it! There's a sign near the forest and everything!"

I blink, hadn't really passed through the Lanling City properly, too close to the Jin Hive to sleep comfortably, so I hadn't known about that.
"...You're joking," I yelp," Please tell me you're joking."

Kang Shu eagerly shakes his head," No, no, no! There really is a sign there, talking about the beast and the one who took it down! With a wooden stake through the neck!"

"It was a bow," I correct him," I vaguely remember my bow broke so I just stabbed him in the neck with it."

He blinks before his eyes start sparkling," Wow! That makes it even more awesome!"

_God, kill me now._

He's totally a fanboy.

I sigh," So, you know all about me," I stop his babbling right there," Did you come over just to tell me that?"

Kang Shu quickly shakes his head," I wanted to ask you something!"

"Oh?" I tilt my head to the side," What is it?"

"I wanted to ask how you can sneak up on beasts, especially when they're super easy to startle and easily spot you!" He tells me.

"Scent, mostly," I answer him," Get rid of your scent, don't stand against the wind currents, and move with the forest and not through it."

Kang Shu blinks owlishly at me," Huh?"

I sigh and give him a gentler smile," Beasts, all of them, have great survival instincts. They were animals before they became beasts so it's only natural for them to be aware of their surroundings. What many cultivators do when tramping about their territory is letting them know where exactly they are, so the beasts run away or hide, making it harder for the cultivators to find them." I start explaining to him.

"Now, instead of letting them know where you are, you 'hide' in the forest and let them stumble upon you by accident, they'll be caught off guard. They weren't expecting to see you there, so they panic. That's the best moment you have to catch them." I tell him.

He genuinely looks like he's about to start taking notes.

"How do you 'hide' in a forest while you're hunting?" He asks.

"First off, mask your scent. You smell human, you either smell delicious to them, or you smell threatening," I tick off a finger," Secondly, feel the wind. The wind will carry your scent, letting anything downwind know what is there, even if you mask it, the wind will probably give you away. Thirdly, you've got to be smart when walking through the forest." 

"Be smart?" He frowns.

"Don't step on twigs or dry leaves, walk stealthily and keep low to the ground. Don't leave footprints behind," I make suggestions," The bigger and heavier you are, the harder it is not to do that, whereas I don't really have that problem," The perks of being tiny.

"That makes sense," Kang Shu nods," You're really a genius, Wei-gongzi!"
Urk.

*Oh, god, he said it. HA!* 

Why must people address me like that?!

*Your Peter Parker is calling you Young Master Wei!*

Stop laughing!

*NEVER!*

It is not funny!

*It is! Especially since there's no escaping it once you get to YunmengJiang!*

Don't remind me. There's not much time left before I have to travel South to complete the Quests in Yunmeng Territory.

*You'll get spotted immediately.*

I'll do my very best not to be.

*You're very best is crap.*

It is not!

*You have shitty luck.*

It's improving!

*So you like to believe.*

It is!

*Hope springs eternal.*

You're impossible.

I quickly turn my attention back on Kang Shu before it starts rambling again.

"Do you want to join me on this night-hunt? I can show you a few tricks?" I offer him.

I swear he went starry eyed at my words.

How is this my life?

Chapter End Notes

So, Yunru means 'Cloud-Like', as for why WWX named a BLACK ball of fur after clouds, well... Sables are soft, extremely soft, and fluffy, and just look so damn cuddly that he went 'ohmagod, a tiny pitch black cloud'.

Kang Shu might also appear in other chapters. Might.
Also, I'll be posting another chapter straight after this one (double update whohoo!) because I'm officially writing the last chapter of Arc II. Yay!
Chapter Summary

Where one has the worst luck possible, no grudges are held, and someone actually cares~

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Depend on the rabbit's foot if you will, but remember it didn't work for the rabbit." - R. E. Shay

Chapter 33: Luck

Qishan brought back memories.

I probably didn't help matters by being sentimental and getting a room in the same inn where we'd stayed that eventful night. Not the same room, I couldn't exactly specify which room I wanted, but what mattered was the location.

*It shouldn't matter at all.*

Hush.

Yunru was exploring every nook and cranny in the room, as she was prone to do in every inn we stayed at, so I kicked off my boots and laid down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

It always felt weird visiting places I'd been to before with my parents before.

*It feels weird because you make it weird. They're just places.*

They carry memories. I ride down a road with Donkey and I remember that same road from a memory of sitting a top ChangZe's shoulders. Or having my head resting against CangSe and her voice lulling me to sleep.

Those memories mattered. I wanted them to matter. I wanted to remember what they looked like. What they sounded like.

I didn't want to forget the only parents I could reminisce fondly about.

*You won't.*

I always fear I will. One day, I'll wake up and they'll be gone. Their faces, voices, and lessons will just... fade away.

*They won't. I won't let them. Even if you forget, I'll remind you of them.*

I smile sadly at the ceiling.

I wonder what they would think of us now? Would they be proud?
CangSe would be, grumbling about how you're her son alright, getting into this much trouble.
She would. And then say her Shizun would be laughing herself silly if she ever saw us.

ChangZe would admire your skills, and be smugly gloating of how you took to hunting like a duck to water.
True. And he'd inevitably annoy CangSe and then moan about it, calling me to help him man-to-man solidarity or something.

And you'd just smile sweetly at him and go cuddle with CangSe.
Totally.

I laugh, and put my arm over my eyes as they tear up.
It hurts.
I miss them.
I really, really missed them.

It's okay to miss them. To grieve for them. What you must not do-...
Stay still. I know.
I take a deep breath and rub the tears away from my eyes.
I have to keep moving.
I have to get to that mountain.
I promise. I promise. I promise.

This was getting ridiculous.

I've told you countless times already, you have shitty luck.
I keep upping the damn Luck Stat?! Where is all that good luck going towards?!

Maybe this is your good luck...
Then what would my bad luck be?

The possibilities of running into Jin GuangShan, Su She, Wen Chao or Jiang FengMian at an inopportune time come to mind.
...Yeah, things could be worse.

A lot, lot worse.

"Who are you?" The nine year old girl with her hair tied in two buns, both having red flaming hair-clips with dangling tassels.

Her voice sounded slightly snobbish, the cadence and tone of voice she used made it seem like she thought herself better than me, but I was sure it was just a side-effect of her upbringing.
Because this girl was wearing the white, red flame-patterned robes of the Wen Sect.

And I knew her.

Or, better yet, would know her.

"I'm Wei Ying," I smile up at her," Sorry, for bumping into you."

I should've been watching where I was going. Goddammit, that Jin kid should've taught me my lesson about running full speed ahead and not paying attention to any passersby suddenly turning the corner.

I really, really should've expected to run into someone like this.

"You should be more careful," She scolds me.

Her big sister instincts are on point, aren't they.

No wonders.

I smile brightly at her," I will, Sister! I'm really sorry!" I apologize again.

This was Wen Qing.

She huffs at my response, obviously some other clumsy kid would frequently tell her the same, and she did not believe me one bit.

Gee, I wonder who tells her that.

I smother a rueful grin.

I really wanted to meet Wen Ning.

You'd scare the poor kid out of his wits.

I would not.

You totally would.

I would be very careful with my cinnamon roll!

"Young Mistress Wen," A servant woman came over, frowning severely at the dirt that had gotten into Wen Qing's dressed when I barreled into her and knocked her down.

I really had to stop doing that.

"It's fine, A-Ru," Wen Qing tells her," This boy was just leaving."

"That boy...-!" The servant hisses," A-Cao will see to him, Young Mistress."

Wen Qing turns to the servant to say something, eyes flashing with something I missed because...

Well...

Because another servant quickly grabbed me from behind and lifted me up by the back of my robes.

The hell?
"Hey! What'd I do?" I asked flailing in the air.

"A street urchin like you shouldn't speak so casually to its better!" The female servant, A-Ru, hissed," Look at what you've done to the Young Mistress's clothing!"

"I apologized!" I pointed," What else do ya' want? For me to buy her another robe?"

"Silence!" The servant hisses again," Such insolence! A-Cao, dear, two lashes for the robes, three for the back-talking," She tells the male servant.

What?!

Of freaking course you end up like this again.

The hell?!

Don't make things worse! Remember last time!

I bite my tongue.

Wen Qing looks up at me with a frozen expression.

Her eyes can't quite contain the shock and fear in them.

She didn't want this to happen.

Argh...

I sigh.

Goddammit.

I hoped this wouldn't scar her or make her feel too bad. Poor girl...

Wens are different beasts than the Jins. Don't fan the flames just yet.

I know.

Be calm.

I am calm. Five lashes, what's that? I've handled worse.

You have, but in all those you fought back. You can't fight back now.

I grit my teeth as the servant tosses me to the ground and puts his feet on my lower back, keeping me down.

Bow.

I know!

Don't fight back.

I know already!

The first lash cuts across my back and I grunt, silently thankful I left Yunru and Donkey back at the inn.
The second lash comes just as quickly, and I twitch, eager to get to my feet before the third lash comes down.

_Bow!_

I stay on the ground, limbs forcibly frozen in place, and head down.

I couldn't let them see my eyes, shining flame bright with intent.

The third and fourth lash come and go, and I take a quick deep breath, before the fifth, and final, lash cuts across my back.

The servant takes his foot off of my back and there's a whisper in my ear about pulling my daggers out and stabbing him with them.

I silence it.

I stay on the floor and hear them walking away. Once I know they won't see me I get up and brush away the dirt off of my clothing. I can feel blood spilling down from my back, though I am certain the whip did not cut through the fabric, but I ignore it.

When some other kid comes by from across the alley, ugly smirk on his face, to gloat at me, I look him in the eyes and grin back at him.

He goes pale white and turns back around in a single motion.

"_Intimidation Skill leveled up!_"

Don't _poke_ with the sleeping dragon.

Don't _stir up_ the hornets nest.

Don't _mess_ with me.

You won't _win._

I look up at the sky, azure blue and clear, and I take a deep breath.

Temper the anger, the fury, the rage. Temper it down to a fine blade. Hold it tight in your hand, even if it bleeds. But never let it control you.

_Be the beast, don't let the beast consume you._

Be better.

_Stronger._

_Cleverer._

_Kinder._

Be Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian.

The King on the Mountain.

I wonder if Wen Ruohan even knew what I looked like when he made the announcement that the
Wen Sect was also willing to foster 'Wei Ying' or he'd just made the announcement to screw with the other Sects.

Because those servants obviously didn't know who they were whipping, and now that I thought about it, Wen Qing hadn't reacted to my name either. But the minute I joined a night-hunt and Wen disciples spotted me I was instantly bombarded with Wen Sect propaganda and how I just had to join them.

I politely refused and did my best to stay away from them whenever they tried to join me on my hunts, but it was growing very annoying.

I'd already dodged out of three parties of Wen disciples just 'casually' roaming the streets where I'd walked through earlier.

Obviously, someone was snitching on me and I needed to take measures against it.

So... Back to sleeping on stables?

To hell with stables, I was camping outside!

I huffed, slipping underneath a fallen log and quieting my breathing. Two Wen disciples jumped over the log and kept walking, muttering about the 'sneaky little bastard' and how 'they would be the ones to bring him in'.

Uh, hello? My parents were married when they had me, and secondly, boy, you better watch who you talkin' 'bout, I'll put you through the ringer.

On the bright side, your skills are coming in nicely.

I gave them a once over, the Archery Skill and my Throwing Skill were nearly maxed out. Foraging was also coming along nicely, with Knife-Handling close behind. I'd hit a bump on the Spiritual, Meditation, Investigation and Talisman-Making Skills, which let me know I wouldn't be mastering those without a master.

But I'd maxed out Story-Telling, Painting and Swimming Skills, which was a good achievement in my book.

I rolled out from underneath the log, and ignored the notification that my Stealth stat had rose, and ran in the opposite direction the Wen disciples had gone in.

I couldn't wait to get out of Qishan and be done with the obnoxious brown nosers that thought they could fool me with flowery words.

Except after Qishan there's only Yunmeng left.

Urgh.

Out of the pan and into the pot.

Seriously, how is this my life?

I've said it once, I've said it one thousand times, and I'll say it one thousand more.

Please... Stop...
You have the shittiest luck.

I groan into my hands, quietly, from where I'm hiding up a tree.

I'd been spotted by the most inconvenient of opponents.

"I think I saw him heading this way!" A young boy pointed north from where he was standing below me.

I dared not make a sound.

"He's fast!" Another boy panted," I don't think the Young Master is that fast..."

"Well," A third one scratched his neck," We already knew this wasn't going to be easy."

All three groaned.

"And we almost had him too!" The second one moaned," Sect Leader would definitely be happy!"

No shit.

Stop...

The boys moved along and I took a second to pity the unlucky star I had been born under for all the crap heaped on me in a single lifetime.

On the bright side...

On the bright side it wasn't FengMian.

But, holy heck, why did it have to be his disciples!?

I had successfully dodged them for a year and a half, but suddenly they're everywhere and I can't escape their notice.

You are approaching Yunmeng territory, and they are getting smarter in cornering you.

Goddammit, I need to get out of here before they call their Big Boss.

No way can I outrun a Sect Leader.

Not without revealing a bunch of Stats and Talent, you're not!

Stop sounding so smug!

But this just proves I was right all along!

Shut it!

I climb down from the tree and hit the ground running.

I was grabbing Donkey and leaving right now.

Yunru poked her head out of the satchel I had with me, took one look at my face and legitimately sighed before going back inside, she wasn't coming out to play tonight.
"But you saw him?" Jiang FengMian tried not to sound too eager, and at the same time disappointed, in the face of the crestfallen disciples. They'd already gotten an earful from his Lady Wife about being outrun and outsmarted by a six year old.

"Yes, sir," The disciples nodded, "In Qishan southern borders, nearing Yunmeng."

"He's traveling south," Jiang FengMian smiled, "Thank you, for bringing this information to me."

"He seems fine, sir," One of them speaks up, despite the other two trying to silence him, "Healthy."

Jiang FengMian smiled kindly at him, "He did?"

The disciple quickly nodded, "The other cultivators there say he comes and goes without warning, but is polite and quite easy to get along with. They say he's very smart and knows a lot about beasts and spirits!"

Just like CangSe, I see.

Jiang FengMian chuckles softly, "Well, thank you for telling me, you may go now."

The three disciples quickly file out of the meeting hall.

Madam Yu gets up from her seat and goes to leave.

"Are you worried?" He asks her.

Madam Yu pauses before turned back to him with a sneer.

"Why should I worry about a child that clearly doesn't care about its own safety?" She tells him.

Jiang FengMian smiles kindly at her and gets up, "My Lady, your hands..." He gently points out.

Madam Yu looks down at her hands to find them clenched tightly around her arms.
Chapter Summary

Fear and scars of a past best forgotten.
Also, an actual background story!

Chapter Notes

I finally named the Voice, praise me, I did it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+A Game for the Fool+

"Fear is a tyrant and a despot, more terrible than the rack, more potent than the snake." - Edgar Wallace

Chapter 34: Phobia

Thanks to being spotted by Yunmeng disciples, the amount of near-misses with Jiang FengMian had increased from 'a distant possibility' to 'I'm getting grey hairs from this crap'.

After the last near-miss, I'd called it quits and decided to focus only on Quests and stop night-hunting. I had enough money to survive well enough without it and it was the end of summer right now, so I didn't have to worry about getting drowned out in a monsoon wherever I decided to set camp.

Each and every time, I barely managed to skip town before Jiang FengMian arrived the very real threat that this Story Arc could finish early before I completed every last Quest on the map bubbled to the surface of my thoughts.

Hell no.

I was in this to win.

I was going to complete the Quests, and then I'd let myself be caught. Not a moment before.

In any case, I only had to stop by populated towns to complete the four Quests there and post the letters to my pen-pals. Otherwise, being out in the open country wasn't something I was unused to.

Yunru loved it at least.

She loves getting muddy, it's different.

You're just upset you're not as cute as she is.
Excuse me?! Why would I want to look like a rat?!

Yunru isn't a rat.

*She's a Sable.*

She's a ferret.

*She's not a freaking ferret!*

I look down at the grass where Yunru is rolling around in the mud.

She's totally a ferret.

*Why do I bother arguing with you?*

Because it amuses you.

*Obviously, why else would I stick around for so long?*

My good personality?

_Darling, if someone ever tells you they love your personality, you can be sure they just want to jump you._

I laughed.

Walter liked my personality.

_Case in point._

I laughed harder.

You'd think that after three months of me going under, someone would get the hint that obviously looking out for me wasn't the way to go when it came down to 'catching me'.

*He's probably thinking you were kidnapped again and that's why they can't find you.*

Who the hell would want to kidnap me?

_The Wens?_

They've been silent since I left Qishan territory, seriously, with how little news come out of that land you'd think they're all bookworms or lazy bones and not actively building an army to one day 'rule' all the other territories.

_Maybe they're not building it yet?_

...Nah, Wen Ruohan has to have thought of it already.

One doesn't simply wake up one day and go 'Let's conquer the world!'...

...I'm pretty sure someone has done that at least once in the world's history.

Why? Just imagine all the paperwork you'd have to take care of, looking after so many people.
Says the person who'll essentially raise a refugee camp.

The Wen Remnants were like... Twenty people. It's not like I'm going to be looking after one hundred people!

True. But people like Wen Ruohan usually have someone take care of the paperwork for them.

Yeah, Meng Yao, see how well that worked out for him.

Couldn't have happened to a better person.

I snickered as I rolled out my tent for the night.

I'd bought it from the Store, obviously, expecting it to be a 'last-case scenario' thing but I found it surprisingly comfortable to sleep in. And it was easily camouflagable so people wouldn't see it sticking out of the ground and go 'what the hell is that'.

It wasn't made of modern materials, the recipe to make these was actually purchasable in the Store, but the ingenuity of a tent like this wasn't yet discovered. Most looked like those indian tepees you'd see on movies, whilst this one was a small square tent with enough space to lie, spread-eagle, and still have room to maneuver in.

Maybe that's because it's suppose to house more than one short seven year old.

I roll my eyes, and keep setting the tent up.

Donkey was by the small river drinking water and Yunru...

Yunru was off somewhere.

I'd be more worried about her wandering off if she wasn't a wild animal and a speedy little sh*t when it came to getting out of trouble.

Takes after someone I know...

Gee, I wonder who?

After the tent was put up for the night, I string up my detection talismans as a perimeter around it and grab my bow from my pack.

If someone or something crossed over the threshold I would be warned and I'd be able to quickly run back to the tent.

I nearly called out for Yunru that we were going hunting before I remembered she'd already went ahead of me.

I sighed.

Feeling left out that your little girl didn't wait for you?

I rolled my eyes and hoisted my bow up on my shoulders, it wasn't worth the reply.

I had dinner to catch.

You know... If I were a real seven year old, this would be terrifying.
A pack of growling dogs snarled at me, drool dripping down from the corner of their mouths and eyes intent on the meat bun I had in my hands.

*But if you're not a real seven year old?*

This is ridiculous.

I through them the meat bun and pull another out of my inventory.

The dogs dive for the thrown meat bun eagerly before growing confused at the new one I'm holding.

I shrug at them and bite into the bun. Turning around to keep walking.

The dogs start snarling at me again.

I pause my steps.

The dogs are filthy, but they aren't skinny, they don't have a lot of fur, but they surely ain't begging for food.

More than one had a collar, or what passed off for a collar, and I just knew that these dogs were used to getting snacks from street urchins who couldn't protect their meals from them.

Their owners conditioning, I'm sure.

I slowly look over my shoulder and give the dogs a chilling glare.

The temperature around the alleyway drops.

The dogs stop snarling and slowly curl into themselves.

"Intimidation Skill leveled up!"

I thought so.

I look away from them and go on my merry way.

"Checkpoint Finished!"

I barely glance at the words, bringing up the Timeline.

Already, we were at the very last stretch of black string before the Story Arc was over, one last knot waiting to be unraveled.

The knot I'd just undone had dogs turning tail and fleeing from a miniature caricature of the Yiling Patriarch and I smiled as I bit into the bun.

That was funny.

The other knots had all been attacks from other children, bandits or the odd occurrence of having to flee 'friendly' civilians. I'd much prefer the checkpoints to have been the sighs of my travels but I had to understand the fact that canon!WWX hadn't gone gallivanting through the countryside like I had.

*And the events followed canon.*
I sighed through my nose and chewed.

There really wasn't much left to do, I'd pretty much done everything I could and couldn't do.

A sudden strike of light made me look up.

_What?_

The sound of thunder rings out soon afterwards.

_Wow, that's loud._

And then it starts pouring rain.

...Shitty luck, I know, _don't_ even start.

_Glad you acknowledge it._

I send the bun back into the inventory and go search for shelter from the rain. Donkey was already at the stable but I had Yunru with me in the satchel, and I had conveniently left the rainproof cloak in my pack, believing it wouldn't be needed since rainstorms weren't common this time of year.

Serves me right for assuming it wouldn't come bite me in the arse.

I quickly made my way across various Stores that had canopies over their goods, dodging crowds of people seeking similar shelter and made my way back to the inn.

It wasn't very far from where I was but I really didn't want to end up soaking wet from running there.

_Maybe wait it out?_

The thunder grew louder and I paused briefly to count the seconds it took for the sound to catch up to the light.

Damn, this storm was close.

I didn't want to risk it, running out in the open.

Between the thunder and the lightning I hear a weird sound, and turn to see a man sprawled out near the back of a building.

_The hell?_

I carefully step out of the canopy I was under and go check out if the man needs help.

Just my luck if the guy is injured and I need to go look for a medic in stormy weather.

_He doesn't seem injured._

"Hey, mister! You gotta get out of the storm, it ain't safe!" I tell him.

Still the man doesn't reply, only stays sprawled in the ground making weird noise-like grunts.

_The utter hell?_

I shiver at the cold rain soaking my robes and step closer to him, determined to get the guy to
either get up and go take shelter somewhere or see if he really isn't injured.

"Mister! You need to get out of the storm," I tell him, loudly," Are you listening to me? Sir? You need-" I touch his shoulder and the guy suddenly rolls over, a wild, wild look in his eyes and throws himself at me.

What the fu-...!

I jump back and my feet trip over something and I fall backwards. Into. A. Cellar.

I hit my head hard on the ground and see stars. It hurts.

I try to get up but everything goes white with spots and my head sways. I stay down. Through my darkening vision I see the man, still wild eyed and stupid, grab the cellar door and close it.

It snaps shut with a heavy thump.

I blackout.

When I come to, I can still hear the storm outside, as fierce and loud as ever, so I couldn't have been unconscious for long.

It's pitch black in the cellar.

I sit up and take a deep breath, already my heart-rate spiked over that last thought.

I hear Yunru messing with something to my far left, but I can't see her.

I close my eyes and dive into my subconscious with some difficulty, my heart-rate just didn't seem to want to calm itself down, but I managed to do it and channel the ball of energy into sensing my surroundings.

Although blind in the darkness I could at least 'see' minimally where I was and what I had with me.

I get up and go check out what Yunru is doing.

"What have you got there?" I crouch down beside her and tug at what she's chewing on. It's a piece of cloth, I pull it down and see that it covered something made of wood.

There's a very small opening at the top of the cellar wall, a hole honestly speaking, above a chest of drawers.

At least it provides some light in here.

Rain pours from the outside into the cellar, Yunru's fur is already wet, I pick her up and walk over to the cellar door.

"We have to get out of her, Yunru, this isn't the time for games," I tell her.

She looks at me confused and nuzzles my chest.

Of course she can hear my spiking heart-rate.

I give her a weak smile and walk up the stairs of the cellar and push the door open.

Except it doesn't open.
Water droplets fall on my face through the cracks on the wood, but the door itself is shut close.

It won't open.

I push it and shove it and even try to kick it.

But it won't open.

It's locked.

LOCKED

I take a shuddering breath and can feel the static fill my head.

Stay calm.

I can't.

I slam my hands hard on the wood but it won't move.

IT'S LOCKED

"Open!" I hit it, Yunru jumps down from the satchel and starts running in circles around my feet, squeaking.

I hit the door again and again.

I T W O N ' T O P E N

"Let me out!" I scream.

'Let me out, Mummy! Please, let me out!'

Stop this. Stop panicking. Breathe!

'I promise, Mummy! I promise I won't do it again! Let me out!'

Stop! Don't go back there! Stop!

I... I... I can't...

Yes you can! Stop this!

'Mummy!'

IT'S LOCKED

The storm only grows louder outside. No matter how much I scream, my voice is muffled by the rain and thunder.

Breathe! You can do this! Don't go back! Breathe!

I can't... Help... Help me... Ike!

Reality splinters.
I remember my mother having people build a room just for me.

A special place she had told me, where you can go when you need to think.

I liked the sound of that. My very own room.

I asked, if the nursery didn't count. I was the only one still sleeping in the nursery, after all.

Mother told me it wasn't the same. One day, I'd move out of the nursery and into my private room, once I was a big girl, and the nursery would be for any baby brother or sister I'd have by then.

This room, she said, would only ever be mine, even when I was still little.

I'd laughed, I really liked the sound of that. Having this room for myself sounded fun.

It wasn't fun.

I didn't like this room.

I wanted to get out.

"Mummy!" I cried, hitting the white covered door with my hands," Mummy let me out!"

She never did. Not when I cried and called for her.

She always told me she didn't hear me call for her. She always said I was only in there for an hour, to think on what I'd done. She always said it was my fault I got sent into the room.

I never believed her.

I never understood her.

I hated her.

But then she'd open the door, after I'd spend so long crying and wailing and scratching at the walls, and hug me tight. I'd feel safe.

'It's over now', I'd think,' It's over now and Mummy won't lock me in here again.'

But she would. Over and over and over again. She'd always lock me in the white room.

It didn't matter if I cried.

It didn't matter if I screamed.

It didn't matter if I got sick on the floor.

It didn't matter if I got hurt.

It didn't matter if I got so scared that I couldn't stop shivering.

It didn't matter.

I always got locked in the white room.

And no one ever came to save me. Not really.
Not meaning to save me.

It was just a brief reprieve from the torture that the white room presented.

**I always got locked in the white room.**

"Please..." I cried, curled into a ball in a corner of the room," Please, I don't want to be here... I don't want to be alone."

_Don't cry._

The _Voice_ speaks. I look up to see a crouching figure in front of me, colorful and bright, as if someone had tried to fit all the colors of the rainbow into a single person.

_I'm here._

"You are?" I croaked out, throat raw and hurting," You won't leave me?"

The figure smiled.

_Never. We're friends for life, you and I._

'Finally', I though,' Someone has come to save me.'

And I felt _safe._

---

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, yeah, I got emotional writing this. And felt pretty bad for even thinking this up.  
Starting from the top, yeah YunmengJiang disciples don't know when to give up, the 'Do the Impossible' motto is going on overdrive over the escape!artist!WWX ahaha

As I've said before, no cynophobia (fear of dogs) for this WWX. But they do have a severe case of Claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces/being confined) and Astraphobia (fear of Storms/lightning/thunder) as a trigger.

OC had a shitty childhood, if it wasn't obvious before, it's getting worse when the reason why the shitty childhood happened comes to light. As I said, OC had issues.

And finally, Ike. Yay, the Voice has an identity (so people don't confuse it with the System XD)
For those interested, Ike comes from the name Isaac and it means "One who laughs; laughter" Fits him perfectly, doesn't it?
Chapter Summary

Aftershocks and Stupid, reckless decisions.

Chapter Notes

The angst continues...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Some choices we live not only once but a thousand times over, remembering them for the rest of our lives." - Richard Bach

Chapter 35: Not Over Yet

Yunru got me out.

When I fell to the floor screaming, lost to the terror that hid inside my mind, she climbed over the chest of drawers and out of the hole on the wall.

I don't know what she did, can't find it in myself to think back on that day and try to piece together the events that followed after I got sucked back into those memories, but she got me out.

That was months ago.

I kind of shakily got Donkey and quickly got the hell away from the town. Went to hide away in an open field, standing under the rain not caring if I got sick or hit by lightning.

At least, I though, if I am drenched in cold water, I might have an excuse as to why I won't stop shaking.

The first few weeks after that were hard.

No, let me reiterate, they were absolute crap.

I didn't feel like eating. I didn't feel like moving. I didn't feel like living.

I just wanted to curl up somewhere and sleep.

Yunru quickly nip those thoughts in the bud.

Ike was silent.
He usually was, whenever something like this happened. In his own words, he was 'patching up' the leak that led to those memories coming out of the deep and dark hole we'd buried them under.

He'd be back soon, and I'd feel better then.

Friends for life, he and I.

After those days I slowly got back into the rhythm of things. Quests to complete and miles to travel. The sights of Yunmeng were pretty, the land was mostly lakes and watery lands but they were indeed beautiful.

Sometimes I let Donkey be the one to pick out route, as long as we left the main city of Yunmeng as the last stop before moving on to Yiling, I didn't care which town we stopped by.

I just lazily sat on the back of Donkey and watched the scenery as we rode by.

I slowly got back into feeling like myself.

The person I had been before. The scared little girl locked in a white room. The old woman dying in a hospital bed.

They were gone.

They weren't me.

I was Wei Ying, courtesy name WuXian, the son of CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe, the future Yiling Patriarch.

That was who I was.

The man who would conquer a mountain.

I breathed in deeply.

I was alive.

There were three placed to hit before Arc II could officially end. I was at the first one of those places.

Yunping City.

Reasonably close to Yunmeng, this city housed so secrets or conspiracies.

Or at least... Not yet.

There was no GuanYin temple build here yet, where such temple would be, I observed from a distance, was a brothel.

This was were Meng Yao, who would one day be called Jin GuangYao, LianFang-Zun, was being raised by his mother after failing to be taken in by his father the world-renowned Jin GuangShan.

I wasn't sure what I was doing here, having already finished the Quests that had to be done, I should be moving on to Yunmeng city proper. Yet I found myself drawn here.

This was the place where the man who'd orchestrate my future demise was living in.
The man who'd orchestrated the deaths of everyone who stood in his way, who dared to try and bring his crimes to justice, and was, in the end, killed by the one person he'd genuinely cared about.

And for what?

A lifetime of ambition intersected by the continuous humiliation and mutters about being a 'prostitute's son', being robbed of everything worthwhile in life by a sorry-excuse of a human being that shouldn't have the right to breathe.

I pitied him.

But I knew Meng Yao would never want for pity.

He was smart. And cunning. And dangerous.

Pity him, and you'd be blinded by the careful mask he'd place over his features, pity him, and you'd never see the knife he'd use to stab you in the back.

Maybe I was being too harsh on him. I don't know. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel about him.

Anger? Hate? Resentment? Sympathy?

I don't know. Honestly I didn't like thinking about him too much. When my anger and hate needed a target to be unleashed upon, Wen Ruohan, Wen Chao, and Jin GuangShan were much easier targets to point fingers at.

Maybe that was what made Meng Yao such an interesting character. He was the antagonist of the story, or one of the antagonists of the story, but he was someone that you never suspected. He really was the perfect person to become a spy, the perfect person to plot and scheme and not be caught, the perfect person you'd love to have as a friend and hate to have as an enemy.

Yet Meng Yao was someone no one could ever hope to use for their own means without reprisals.

The Nie Commander tried that. He died.

Wen Ruohan used him as a pawn. He died.

Jin GuangShan thought him less than you'd do a dog. He died.

Meng Yao could not be used by others. He lived to please an ideal that would never care for him in the same way.

It was a saddening thought.

The door of the brothel opened and a boy slightly younger than me came out, wearing patched robes. He was small, as small as I'd been when I was four, and he looked like a strong wind could blow him over.

It tugged at my heartstrings.

Well... What's one more thing to add to my list of stupid decisions?

I scampered out of the alley and when I knew no one would see me I opened the Store. In the [Gifts] Section I got a pair of brand new robes, made of yellow cloth, and wrapped them in simple
cloth from my inventory.

I followed after the boy, not surprised that he started walking faster when he noticed me following him.

But I quickly caught up with him.

His dark eyes were wary and bore no recognition of my face. Good.

I smiled at him and crouched so I wouldn't loom over the smaller boy, I showed him the cloth package.

"For you, they were mine, but I grew too big for them," I tell him," You can have them, if you want."

He slowly took the package and unwrapped it, eyes growing wide when he sees the contents.

"I can't take this!" He tells me," It must've cost a fortune!"

It really hadn't.

"They're too small for me," I ruefully smile," I don't have any little brothers or sisters to give it away to, so when I saw you walking down the street I thought you'd need them more than my pack." I laughed," It's okay to have them."

He clutched the package tightly to him, and gave me a shy smile back.

"Thank you," He said.

I smiled at him and got up, as I did his eyes caught on Xiaodan at my waist.

"You have a knife?" He blinks.

I look at him and slowly drew it, not wanting to scare him, and show him the blade," A friend of mine gave it to him, I use it on night-hunts," I told him.

He quickly looks up, amazed," You're a cultivator?!" He squeaks, and then covers his mouth, embarrassed at his outburst.

Or afraid.

I give him a gentle smile and nod," I am," I tell him," Do you want to be a cultivator too?" I ask him.

He nods, shyly, and I hum," Do you want me to give you a few tips?" I ask him.

He looks up again, eyes shining, like his dream as come true.

Maybe it has.

"Here," I take a hold of his hand, gently, and press two fingers to his pulse point,"Can you feel that?" I ask him as I channel my energy into him.

He frowns, having some difficulty, but then slowly nods, a look of wonderment taking over his expression.
"That's my Spiritual Energy," I tell him, "What I'm going to do is focus that energy on one spot in your navel, alright?" I explain it to him slowly.

I wait for him to nod.

"When you meditate, you should keep your breathing relaxed and then focus on that exact spot. When you do, you have to think of a cup, a cup as big or as small as you'd like," I say," And then imagine yourself filling that cup with the world around you."

He frowns," The world around me?" He questions.

"Energy comes from the world," I explain," And once we are gone, we too become energy also, to grow strong you take in the energy the world has to give, and you make it your own."

His eyes shine bright," That makes sense. Why doesn't the book Mother bought me explain it that way?" He asks.

I slowly withdraw my hand and frown," I don't think there are any books that really explain how to cultivate," I tell him," Cultivating takes a long, long time to bear fruit, but if you work hard, I'm sure you can become a great cultivator," I smile at him.

He stiffens up his upper lip, looking as if he's about to cry.

My heart, oh my bloody bleeding heart!

I pat him on the head and smile," Don't cry, what I'm telling you it's true, I do think you have what it takes to become a great cultivator!"

"Really?" He asks, voice so quiet I almost didn't hear him," You mean it?"

My smile turns fond," I mean it, I wouldn't tell a lie about this."

He nods, and looks down again, clutching at the cloth package.

I go to leave when his next words make me freeze.

"Mother is sick," He sobs," She's really, really sick." He sounds so scared.

Oh. Oh, that's right... His mother dies when he's still young, doesn't she?

What would it change? Would it change anything at all? Would it make a difference?

Inevitable.

But it's always worth a try.

"Sick?" I ask," Does she have medicine?" I ask him.

He shakes his head 'no' and cries.

"Alright, then," I tell him," Do you know what her symptoms are? How sick she is?" I ask him.

He looks up at me and nods," Then we'll go to the pharmacy, and I'll by her medicine for you," I smile.

His eyes go wide as saucers," Why?" His voice breaks.
My smile turns sad, "Because my mom and dad died when I was as little as you," I confide in him, "And I wouldn't want another boy to go through that pain. So, let me help you, please?"

His mouth drops open but then he closes it firmly. He nods, tears in his eyes, and thanks me.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Somehow, those words sounded like prayers to me.

I knew that the day would come when this small boy walking next to me, clutching my hand like a lifeline, would turn against me in order to reach his ambitions.

I knew that one day he'd make choices I would not be able to forgive, nor forget, and that I'd have to stand against him.

But, I decided, until that day came, if I could do one thing to help him reach his dreams with just one drop of blood or sweat less, it would be worth it.

Everyone deserves a second chance. Sometimes, some even deserve a third chance. I couldn't judge the sinner before he committed the sin.

Maybe... Maybe I could change more than just my future for the better.

Maybe this boy, carrying a too heavy load on his shoulders, could have his own happy ending.

Hope springs eternal.

Yunmeng, the city I'd live in for years until the war, was lively and loud and full of interesting scents. Spices lay heavily in the air, which was to be expected when it hosted one of the largest markets I'd ever seen in this world. When we'd passed her, years ago, I'd been more interested in potentially meeting Jiang FengMian than to observe the sights around me.

Now, when I knew that this would become my home, I was slowly taking it in.

But I mustn't linger. All it took was one person blowing the horn about me being in Yunmeng and I'd be surrounded and taken to the Sect Leader before I could say 'Nope'.

I think I hadn't sneakily done Quests since I'd entered Qishan or Lanling, it was a weird feeling sneaking around in broad daylight, carefully toeing around approaching groups of YunmengJiang disciples or generally anyone wearing purple.

"Young Mistress Jiang!" A vendor suddenly calls.

I freeze, mind screeching to a halt.

Oh, it couldn't be.

I slowly peak over my shoulder.

It could be.

Dark hair tied in braided buns, soft lilac colored robes and a gentle smile on her face.

That was Jiang YanLi.
Damn my luck is absolute crap!

I inwardly curse my unlucky stars before finding my eyes drawn back to her.

Like Jiang YanLi should be about nine years old, at this point in time, and she already looked like she's grow into a fine young lady.

This would become Wei WuXian's big sister, his adored Shijie, the mother of the little Jin Ling. The woman who died trying to protect the man who accidentally killed her husband.

...

I seriously needed to stop doing that.

I sighed and watched her for a few more moments, see her shopping from a distance and keeping an ear out for her small talk. Buying groceries for cooking lessons, what new mess her brother got into now, and what she wanted to order for the next week.

I stayed there watching her until I couldn't reasonably explain doing so without sounding stupid.

I turned around and walked to where I'd left Donkey, resting under the shade of a tree. Yunru, who had gone exploring soon after I left to go do my Quests, was waiting for me curled up on top of my saddle.

I petted her, feeling her smooth fur under my fingers, so fluffy and soft as her namesake, and then turned to pet Donkey.

"One more stop, guys," I told them," And then we're not traveling for a while," I said.

I couldn't exactly keep my voice from breaking.

Donkey turned to give me a look, and I smiled wobble back at him.

"It's alright, old buddy, it's just something we'll have to grow used to," I answer him.

Yunru squeaks and jumps onto my shoulders, nuzzling my cheek as she had gotten used to doing. A comforting gesture.

"I'm fine, guys, really," I smile at them," It's just... It's been a while since I had a home. And Donkey, you'll have your own stable and endless opportunities to gloat about your travels," I chuckle," One more stop."

One more stop and this journey would be over.

One more stop.

And then the real fun begins.

My eyes teared up as warmth burst in my chest.

I could breathe again, as if a weight had been lifted off my chest, and I smiled.

Welcome back.

I never left.
No, you never did.

*Friends for life, you and I.*

Friends for life.

*So, where are we off to?*

Yiling.

I looked towards the river. Beyond it would lie a quiet little town, nothing very exciting ever happened around those parts, but that quaint little town hold a secret.

A very dark, troubling secret.

The Burial Mounds.

My mountain.

I smiled at the distant horizon.

Our final stop.

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Chapter End Notes

Anyone need tissues? *holding out box of them* Tissues, anyone?

So, personally? I don't really like Meng Yao. I've read really interesting fanfics where people manage to make him a really interesting character to read, but I personally don't like him.

That said, I do believe AGF!WWX would give anyone a chance to redeem themselves before outright jumping over the 'kill them all' camp. Some, like Wen Ruohan, Wen Chao, and that LiangLiang(?) chick are different matters, and Jing GuangShan because there's no redeeming that bastard. But all others deserve a chance to prove they aren't complete assholes.

Also, I think AGF!WWX forgot Meng Yao has excellent memory.

Will this come back to affect his future? Well, who knows? *mysterious smile*

I'll post the last chapter of Arc II in an hour or so, I'm being hounded to get off the computer and get some fresh air. I'll be back later! TY!
The four last Quests in Yiling. Access denied. And a meeting long overdue.

No, it's not a Terminator reference, what are you talking about? Also, sorry for the delay, someone locked me out of the house, and I had to wait to be let back in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I must let go of the life I've planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for me." - Kumar Anupam

Chapter 36: I'll be back

The sun was setting when we reached Yiling. The citizens were starting to light their lanterns and taverns started to get rowdy, I found an inn for the night and went up to the room to look out the window.

I felt a connection to this town, even when I had first passed it by with my parents. I knew, in my heart, that this would be the place where I would live, one day, and change my future. With the darkening sky and the buildings I could only vaguely make out the mountain shrouded in resentful clouds off in the distance.

The Burial Mounds.

My mountain.

I reached my hand out of the window, seeing the vague outline of the mountain between my fingers, and smiled.

One day, it would be mine.

Yunru squeaked and curled around my shoulders, nuzzling my cheek.

"Over there, Yunru," I told her," That's where we'll go, one day."

She looked out the window to where I was pointed, and her fur kind of stood on end.

I chuckled.
"It's scary now, but don't worry..." I told her, scratching her head," We'll make it a better place."

A safe place.

A safe haven.

A harbor.

A home.

One day.

One day.

I promise you, I will build my mountain better and kinder than any other mountain in this world.

I will make you proud.

Watch over me, guide me, stay with me.

I promise, I will do it.

I will. I will. I will.

Time was ticking, I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to hurry to finish the Quests available. Only four little bubbles remained on the map, and I thought on how empty it made the map seem, compared to the hundreds of bubbles there had been before.

I just prayed to a lucky star to keep me from being found until I completed the Quests.

But I couldn't bring myself to hurry. I wanted to take my time, each step in Yiling made the world seem so much brighter, the air lighter and cooler, life more... complete.

In my heart, I knew I was already a part of this town. And the people in it were already a part of me.

I loved it.

I loved Yiling.

My mountain.

Yes, my mountain.

A thought buzzed in the back of my mind.

Could I?

You probably can't.

No harm in trying.

I walk up to the path that leads to the Burial Mounds, it's a somewhat steep climb, easily explaining canon!Wei WuXian using Wen Ning to pull the cart full of groceries up the hill, but I've climbed mountains covered in snow and ice. This was nothing.
And it’s not like you need to pull a cart full of stuff up the hill, just send the cart to the inventory and pull it out once you’re up there.

I grin.

Loophole abuse.

As long as it’s not living, everything goes.

What a terrible example you are, Ike, I love it.

After some walking I come across a boundary line.

I touch the invisible barrier preventing me to cross over the threshold.

"Player has not yet Unlocked this Area"

I sighed, put out.

It was to be expected, the System did warn you it wouldn't let you anywhere near Demonic Cultivation.

I know, but...

I pouted at the barrier and poked it.

I really wanted to check it out.

Let’s go back, we got stuff to do.

I sighed again and nodded.

Right, back to work.

Yunru is probably wondering where you are just about now.

I did invite her to come.

Yeah, I doubt the little fur ball will ever willingly climb up this mountain.

I could feel the pressure the mountain gave off, even quarantined by the Wen Sect's seals, so I understood her reluctance.

But...

This was going to be my mountain.

I knew it would.

And I longed for it.

It's here. It's really, really here. It's right here.

Not yet.

Yes... Not yet.
One day.

I laughed as I helped a woman peel potatoes in the kitchen, she was telling me of how her son had tried to be 'creative' in the kitchen and had almost burnt his own eyebrows off.

It was a pretty funny story.

"And you, little boy?" The matron grinned at me," What stories do you have?"

My eyes sparkled.

"When I was in Qinghe I met a man, a really tall and fat man, with a stomach the size of a war drum! Anyway, he was trying to pick up this crate off a wagon, right, and this little lady comes over and starts telling him how that crate is full of fragile things, and he has to be careful with it, right?" I tell her," So the guy finally gets tired of listening to her and grabs the crate roughly out of the cart and yells:'I know what I am doing, woman!'. Guess what happened next?" I smirk.

The matron chuckles," I don't know, little boy, why don't you tell me?"

"The crate's bottom spills open, and all the pottery and fragile ornaments fall out of the box and crash to the ground!" I laugh," The little lady started shrieking while the big man just stared at the now empty crate like it had offended him!"

The matron laughs loudly, the two girls washing dishes in a tank join in on the laughter, and I could hear the woman tending the counter of the restaurant giggle as she eavesdropped on what we were saying.

I liked Quests like these, where I could talk to the people and get a sense of their personality.

These would be my people, one day.

My mountain, Yiling.

"Hey, Sister," I smiled at the lady," Do you want to hear another story?" I ask her, eyes bright.

She nods and listens to me intently.

I tell her story after story, from all corners of the world I had traveled, all the stars I had been under, and the highest peak I had traveled to.

Whether they believed them to be a child's imagination or reality didn't matter to me.

The smiled, and laughed, and listened.

And that was enough.

I felt welcomed.

One day.

"Mister," I huffed," This isn't a 'small' job, ya' know?" I looked at the barely begun project of a new fishing boat.

The young man gave me a rueful look.
"Sorry?" He chuckles.

I sigh, and pull the sleeves of my robes back," It's fine, but do you at least know how to craft the boat or were you just saying that to get more helpers?" I ask him.

He reddens," I do know how to build it! I just..."

"Haven't had the time?" I suggest with an airy tone.

He takes the excuse," Yes! Right! Haven't had the time!"

"I'll help you," I tell him, preparing to cut down wood for sanding and fittings," I already said I would, but, mister, you owe me a boat ride once this boat is finished!"

The young man laughs," Okay! One boat ride, free of charge!"

He starts working on putting the larger boards of wood in place to start piecing the boat together.

I had to remember to send that old man a thank you note and a gift basket for teaching me how to do this.

*I'll remind you later.*

Thanks, buddy.

You know... I kind of figured there would be something like this happening soon enough.

*Because it's been a while since the last one?*

Yup.

Fetch Quests weren't my ideal of fun, but they did wonders for my Stamina and Agility Stats.

*Keeps you from getting fat.*

I let out a scandalized gasp.

Ike! How could you! I'm always in perfect shape!

*Hmm, I don't know, I vaguely recall a time where you were getting kind of chubby.*

I thought back on the last few years.

You better not be using my fifties against me.

*Oh, right! That time!*

Urgh.

I roll my eyes, with an 'I'm so done with you' expression on my face.

*Why do I even bother?*

The last Quest in Yiling comes faster than I expected it to, having completed the previous one barely two minutes ago. A man selling vegetables wanted help organizing his products, lots of
carrying heavy crates involved, and I quickly accepted.

Carrying heavy objects was nothing when I could probably kick boulders apart if I strengthened my body and used Talents.

"Where did you say you were from?" The man squinted at me, once I'd started organizing the crates as he's told me to, impressed.

I smiled cheekily at him," I didn't tell you, I don't really belong anywhere, I've been in every single town there is!" I answer him.

"Uh," He clicks his tongue," Might want to think about sticking around then, always looking for helpers," He says.

I smile kindly at him and nod," Yiling is very beautiful," I tell him.

He barks out a laugh," Yiling isn't much compared to the other great cities you've probably seen!"

"No," I tell him, quieting his laughter, I look up at him with shining eyes," I think Yiling is the most beautiful."

He coughs and looks away," Well, then... Stick around brat, lots of things to see, I guess."

I chuckle and turn back to what I was doing.

"I will, one day," I tell him," I'll stay in Yiling one day."

The man nods and goes out to the store front.

One day. One day. One day.

Donkey was with me, as well as Yunru, and I was leading him through the streets of Yiling, and happened to pass by a store selling sliced melon.

My mouth watered, these would probably be the last melons of the season, and I just got the urge to eat one.

I left Donkey at the door and walked inside, Yunru peeking from over my shoulder.

"Sister!" I greeted the woman at the counter," One-...!"

Donkey brays loudly outside, and I kind of cough, embarrassed, when the woman laughs.

"Two," I emphasize the word," Sliced melons please!" I order and pull out a money pouch from inside my sleeve, directly out of the Inventory.

"Coming right up!" She smiles as she takes my money.

I titter a bit as I wait and prop my head on my fist, staring outside with a content expression on my face, before the woman comes back with the sliced melons. I take them with a smile and cheerful 'thank you, Sister', before walking outside.

"Etiquette Skill leveled up!"

Yeah, yeah, yeah...
Ooh, little Wei Ying isn't a little savage after all!

Bite your tongue!

I chuckle under my breath and hand Donkey his share of the melon, letting Yunru steal a piece from mine, and slowly eat my share.

"Wei... Ying?" A stunned voice asks.

I turn around.

And promptly choke on my melon slice.

Jiang FengMian stands not four feet away from me, clad in his purple YunmengJiang Sect robes, with a group of gaping disciples around him, staring at me like they can't believe their eyes.

"Checkpoint Finished!"

"Story Arc Completed!"

"Story Arc Advancements Unlocked!"

...I think I remember this happening in the novel.

Yeah, me too.

Except not like this!

I cough, dislodging the piece of melon and give the man a wary look.

"Yes?" I ask him," Who are you?"

He takes a step towards me and I back away, in the keeping up with my role, I did not know this man, and his eyes transfixed on me would probably look really, really creepy to any other child who didn't know this guy and his backstory.

He stops, and a series of emotions flit across his eyes, before he slowly crouches in front of me and smiles.

...He has a nice smile.

Shut up.

...I can see sparkles.

You do not.

"Wei Ying," He says my like like a prayer," You don't remember me?"

I frown at him," No? Have I met you before?"

His smile turns sad," I guess you were too young to remember," He says," I knew your parents."

I struggle not to roll my eyes, but the emotion is still very much evident in my deadpan tone of voice," Everyone apparently knew my parents, it's why everyone goes 'Oh, I knew them, we were good friends! Why don't you stay with us?' And most of those were lies."
Jiang FengMian expression twists again.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," He tells me, "But I really did know your parents, your father Wei ChangZe was raised in my Sect, he was my right-hand man."

I can't help but remember ChangZe's stories of growing up with Jiang FengMian, all the pranks they played together and how close they were.

"I knew your mother too," His expression turns rueful, "We met in Gusu, studying there."

I nod slowly, "They told me that they met in Gusu too," I tell him.

He smiles, "They did," He nods, "They wrote to me, years ago."

I tilt my head, "They did?"

"Yes," He chuckles, "Telling me I had a nephew that was calling me 'Shibo', and that I just had to meet him now that he was older."

Oh.

The memory hits me with the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and I drop my melon slice.

Tears just start spilling out of my eyes.

That day at the end of summer, nearing fall, surrounded by flowers and warmth.

It felt like it had happened so long ago.

No one else knew about that day. I had never spoken of my time with my parents to others.

Hoarding the bits and pieces I had left of them with the intensity of a dragon and his gold treasure.

I startle at feeling calloused hands touch my cheeks and look up to see Jiang FengMian smiling sadly at me.

"I re-rem-reme-remember that," I choke out, "I forgot."

I didn't, not really, it's just that sometimes it was hard to look back on those times and remember that that warmth was gone. The scent of flowers and of family couldn't be replicated.

They were gone.

And I was left behind.

You're not alone.

Donkey knocks his head against mine and Yunru starts nuzzling my other cheek.

I laugh, and push Donkey away, "I'm fine! I'm fine! Stop!"

Jiang FengMian sighs, indulgently, "These are your friends you talked about?" He asks me.

I give him a cheeky grin, still teary eyed, "I don't know, I might have more."

He huffs, and mutters something along the lines of 'Just like CangSe', before standing up and reaching a hand out to me, "Come with me, Wei Ying, YunmengJiang will be your home now. Like it was your father's."
I hesitate, I would have to go with him, but I already felt attached to Yiling.

*One day.*

Yes, I sighed, *One day.*

I took his offered hand.

One day, I'd be back to claim my mountain.

"Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart." - Marcus Aurelius

Chapter End Notes

Arc II is finished!
Yes! Yes! Yes!
...Now to start Arc III...
Okay, so; Wei Ying Arc II Final Stats:
Age: 7 Class: Archer Level: 60
Int: 120 Ste: 120
Str: 120 Cha: 118
Agi: 128 Sen: 129
Sta: 130 Luc: 118

Skills:
[Martial] Acrobatics: 10; Climbing: 12; Brawling: 8; Knife-Handling: 12; Swordplay: 5; Archery: 13; Throwing: 13;
[Scholar] Investigation: 10; Meditation: 10; Foraging: 13; Spiritual: 10; Talisman-Making: 10; Astronomy: 8; Flower Language: 7;
[Social] Etiquette: 5; Taunting: 6; Intimidation: 3; Storytelling: MAX; Games: 2;
[Arts] Flute: 13; Singing: 10; Acting: 3; Dancing: 3; Painting: MAX; Crafting: 7; Composition: 5;
[Mundane] Writing: 13; Language: MAX; Animal-Handling: 10; Swimming: MAX;

I think that's everything, I'll see you guys over on the next Story Arc!
Welcome

Chapter Summary

Arc III is here! Hooray, bring out the fireworks! It's alive!
Or, where one arrives at their new home, meets new people, uses reverse-psychology to prevent an argument.
Oh, and the kids are adorable, that's important too.

Chapter Notes

Hello, hello, hello! And we are back with more AGF!
I hope you've all had a wonderful past few days, and I'd like to apologize for the delay.
I'll try not to make it frequent but due to my current life situation it was inevitable something like this would happen.
Sorry.
Also, a fair warning. I'm treating Arc III as a sort of interlude, it has pretty long chapters already, but once I get the ball rolling it will be mostly time-skips and specific scenes until Arc IV starts. So if you have any interactions with tiny JC and JYL you'd like to see, you'd have to suggest them now.
And, before I forget! Characters are OOC because I suck at writing them, apparently, and this story is viewed by WWX's point of view! Unreliable narrator right there...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"If bitterness wants to get into the act, I offer it a cookie or a gumdrop." - James Broughton

Chapter 37: Welcome

Despite having been here the day before I had not dared to get close to the gates of the YunmengJiang Sect, fearing the sentinels at the entrance would spot me, or worse, give chase.

So this was my actual first time seeing the tall white walls with the purple Sect Symbol drawn on them, the purple lotus flower of the Jiang Clan, similarly tall watchtowers and flowing banners coming down to rest atop the sentinels' posts.

This was where I'd be living in for the next decade or so.

Jiang FengMian walked slowly beside me, keeping a constant eye on me, and I could see about three other disciples doing the same. Seriously, it was like they expected me to just take off running the minute their backs were turned.

Yeah, like you totally wouldn't do that.
Totally.

I smothered a grin and pulled Donkey, who wasn't happy with the surprise boat ride we got, because Jiang FengMian arrived by boat and there was no way he was trusting me on top of that donkey to ride back to Yunmeng, towards the entrance.

"A-She," Jiang FengMian spoke up, "Would you warn Madam Yu that I will be taking Wei Ying to the infirmary wing, and have someone clear a space in the stables for his mount," He instructed one of the disciples following after him.

"Yes, sir!" The disciple bowed and hurried away into the Sect.

"Infirmary?" I frowned, "I'm not injured," I told him, "Nor sick."

Jiang FengMian only smiled and hummed, "Just a precaution then."

I think I might need to remind you of something.

What?

Scars.

What?

Your scars.

Oh... Those scars.

I suddenly remembered the scars I got from the lashes and various other encounters with sharp clawed beasts.

...Think they won't be noticeable?

I can feel his incredulous look.

Unless his physician is blind, you're out of luck. Actually, who am I kidding, you have no luck!

Goddammit.

I internally debated trying to find an excuse to get out of the examination but gave it up as a lost cause. I admitted defeat and just kept walking towards my doom. Once inside the Sect Compound, Jiang FengMian relaxed minimally, keeping that same polite smile that did not hide the worry or skepticism my words and actions had caused him.

Today was going to be a long day.

Afternoon, actually, it's past lunchtime.

I didn't reply to him.

Jiang FengMian quickly ushered me into one of the halls, having handed over Donkey's lead to a waiting disciple, and towards the medical wing of the Sect.

I really felt the need to dig my heels in the ground when we neared the door, neither waiting to be examined by a stranger and not having the full extent of past injuries shown. I was certain that the whip marks alone would make Jiang FengMian interrogate me on who had done them and why,
whilst the various night-hunting injuries, which were normal and expected to have if you are fighting against very dangerous man-eating beings, would ground me for life.

Not that he really had the authority to ground me, I wasn't his child and I was twice his age.

_In spirit, not in body. And he totally has the authority to ground you, he's your pseudo-adopted uncle._

I knew that could come back to bite me.

_Everything always does, you're an accident-prone person._

...That was another dig at my bad luck, wasn't it?

_Yup._

Why are you always so cruel to me? What have I ever done to you?

_Give me headaches for worrying after you and heartbreak._

I think that comes with the territory of loving me, actually, Walter said the same.

..._Why are we taking what Walter said as fact?_

Maybe because he was the first person to actually put up with our craziness?

_Oh, yeah... That._

Yes, that.

"You're surprisingly quiet," Jiang FengMian's voice brings me out of my thoughts," CangSe's letters always talked about you being uncontrollable and too energetic for their peace of mind."

...I think that's just normal toddler behavior, but obviously sugar rushes and modern entertainment aren't as common or readily available here.

I just had the mental image of Lan QiRen reacting to a room of toddlers hyper on sugar and candy during halloween, and trying to contain them inside that small room.

I want to snort so badly, I swear I made dying whale noises in my mind due to the sheer force of will it took not to.

If he ever survived that, he'd advance straight into godhood, no doubt in my mind.

_He'd reach enlightenment through patience and knowing his end was nigh._

Death by sugar rushed toddlers...

_What a fine ending for that fuddy-duddy._

...

...

Ike, please stop making me want to laugh, I feel like I'm going to die here.

_I don't know what you're talking about, I'm not doing anything._
There's a guy coming in that's going to take one look at me and ask what's wrong, what am I supposed to say to him?

'Sorry, sir, I was just imagining an old Goat being bowled over by small children.'

I inwardly wheezed.

IKE! STOP IT!

Crackling laughter rang out deep within my mind, and I restrained the urge to follow suit.

I swear one of these days something would happen, deadly serious, and Ike's humorous comments would make me laugh at the most inopportune times.

...Gusu won't be fun.

The laughter restarted at that thought bubble.

"Wei Ying?" Jiang FengMian frowned," Are you alright?"

I smile at him, a smile always covers what you don't want people to see," I'm fine, I just really don't think I need a doctor."

A last ditch attempt.

It's meaningless.

Jiang FengMian takes the bait, his smile clearly tells me this isn't up for debate, he opens the door meaningfully.

I sigh through my nose and enter.

The room is bright and airy. There's a row of cots along the wall furthest from the door, and several large cabinets that contained hundreds of medicinal herbs and other medical equipment. Three nurses stand to one side, getting a table ready for examination, most likely.

A doctor comes walking towards us, greeting the Sect Leader with a smile and polite bow.

He looks down at me, eyes moving up and down, giving me the impression that I'm in for a long, long discussion about what is and is not acceptable for a seven year old to do.

...

This isn't going to be fun, is it?

With your luck? Nah, you're getting a leash and a permanent GPS tracker.

If I could roll my eyes, I was sure they'd orbit around the planet.

Too bad there's no GPS in this world.

Don't jinx the System, it loves to screw you over.

The System loves me!

Yes, to screw you over.
"Well," The doctor suddenly speaks," We'll start with some basic questions, alright little man?"

His tone was so condescending that it physically hurt to listen to it.

*Smile, remember to smile, Wei Ying. Be a cute little boy and smile.*

I will make you tangible and strangle you, mark my words.

*That's not smiling, Wei Ying, that's having murderous intent. Smile!*

I smile at the doctor and nodded.

I will strangle you slowly, Ike, and I will enjoy doing so.

Knowing this was coming, and having already guessed at a lot of the arguments being thrown around, did not prepare me to face the faces and expressions of the adults overseeing the examination.

First, it started with the daggers. Xiaodan was easily visible at my waist, kind of hard not to, but Xiao tong was always tied to my arm guards and invisible unless I pulled my sleeves back or drew it.

So, when I put down one dagger and pull another one out of my sleeve, well... That sends a message.

Then the questions started.

How old was I, how long I'd been traveling alone for, was I alone in my journeys, what did I eat, did I get sick during my journeys, did I see a doctor, did I take care of any injuries, did I have injuries, and tons of other questions.

Answering them wasn't hard but it was totally awkward. How do you explain that you readily get medicine and bandages from a virtual store no one else can access, that no, you never went to a doctor because well... Nothing looked dire enough to trust people with no modern knowledge of medicine?

That and I wasn't an actual small child that'd cry after scrapping their knee.

And then came the kicker.

Removing my robes in front of all those people made me feel very self-conscious. It was weird. Downright weird. And I wasn't happy to be doing it.

*That will change when you get a six pack.*

Not interested in showing off my future muscled body.

*We'll see.*

So, the robes come off and the damn nurses behind me gasp, the doctor stops writing on his damn clipboard and Jiang FengMian gets this total 'kicked dog' look in his eyes.

Goddammit.

Eight crisscrossing long thin scars pepper my middle and lower back, a small bump on my left
shoulder from a stab wound I got by a bandit, and a smattering of even smaller scars of critters over the years on my forearms and legs.

My chest and stomach had the bear's claw mark scars and a thin scar on one side of my abdomen from a would-be thief.

All in all, after almost 3 full years on the run, gallivanting across the nation and getting into so many questionable practices, I thought I'd done a pretty good job at keeping my self alive.

Apparently your best isn't agreeable with them.

I sigh and cross my arms over my chest, frowning at the adults and their pitiful eyes.

Goddammit, why are they making me feel bad?!

Body's natural response when everyone is looking at them like that.

Screw this body's natural response! I was totally right in doing this and I made it out alive! I won!

I know, I was there with you, they weren't.

The 'they won't understand you' went unspoken but very much heard.

"W-w-well..." The doctor coughs," Interesting injuries... How old are they, do you remember?" He asks me.

...Do I answer him honestly?

At least one of these people can spot liars.

I look down at the scars, trying to remember exactly when I got them," These were from a bear," I poke at my chest," Almost three years ago." I blink, wow, these ones were old.

"And the whip marks?" Jiang FengMian asks, definitely interested in them," Do you remember getting them?"

Hard to forget.

"I got three before the bear incident," I nod," And then five... A year ago?" I shrug," They're not recent."

He frowns severely at me," Do you remember who gave them to you? Why?"

I scratch at my cheek, right over the scar on my face, drawing his eyes and attention to it, once more, and quickly remove my hand when it makes him sadder.

Goddammit.

"I don't know," I answer.

A nurse gives me a look.

Told you.

"I really don't know," I repeat.

Oh, the 'head-shaker' method. I don't think you can pull that one off, it's kind of that person's
personal style, ya' know?

He's not the Head-Shaker yet, so it's no one's style to steal.

"Wei Ying..." Jiang FengMian sighs and crouches slightly so he's eye level with me," We want to help you, but you've got to tell us the truth."

I frown at him," I do not need help."

Bad answer, kid.

Jiang FengMian rocks back, saddened, and opens his mouth to say something when the door behind him opens with a bang.

"Father, you're back!" A cute little, puffy cheeked, Jiang Cheng enters the room running.

...  

...  

He's so cute!

I can't find it in myself to refute that.

I want to hug him!

He'll bite you.

Yunru did that at first too, and she loves me now!

Yunru would eat the last piece of meat on this planet if it meant you couldn't have it.

She would not!

She totally would.

"A-Cheng..." Jiang FengMian smiles, amused," What have I told you about knocking?"

The little kid halts to a stop and thinks, you can see the gears in his mind turning, and flushes," To knock first before entering," He looks down at his feet.

"And what else?" Jiang FengMian asks him.

"Not to slam the door open or shut," Jiang Cheng mumbles.

"And...?" Jiang FengMian's smile widens.

I see this is a normal occurrence.

He's so adorable!

Just don't tell him that.

Jiang Cheng sighs, his little shoulders slumping down," And that you have to be quiet in the medical wing."

"So what do you say?" Jiang FengMian questions him.
Jiang Cheng looks up, red faced and successfully scolded, to the doctor and apologizes," I'm sorry, Doctor Wu, it won't happen again."

Lies. Lies. Lies.

*I totally spot a lie.*

He's a kid, give him a break.

*Give him a break? Oh, you're totally handing him a cookie after every time he does something like this.*

Well, I'll have to befriend him somehow, look how cute he is!

*How have we come so far in our travels, lived so many years together, yet I still cannot comprehend your desire to stuff children full of sugared goods.*

It's an easy motivator for them to make grabby hands at me.

*I'm sure their parents thanked you.*

Cynthia's look of 'are you kidding me' when I hand her little boy a cookie not fifteen seconds after he already conned one out of his grandparents pops up in my mind.

Oh, yes, the parents *loved* me.

*Clearly we remember events differently.*

"Father," A soft voice filters in through the doorway," Welcome back," Jiang YanLi stands there and smiles in greeting.

Flowers and rainbows bloom behind her.

*Holy Mother of God.*

Truer words have not been spoken.

"A-Li," Jiang FengMian smiles back," You can enter, I have someone here I want you two to meet."

...Can I at least be fully clothed for this?

*Shh, don't ruin the moment.*

"Who's he?" Jiang Cheng stares at me with narrowed eyes.

I grin back at him.

You and I will be great friends, kiddo.

*I should probably start planning your funeral.*

Why are you so pessimistic? Kids love me!

*Kids also have one defining quality at this age.*

What?
"This is Wei Ying," Jiang FengMian places his hand on my head," He's going to be staying with us from now on."

Something lights up behind Jiang Cheng's eyes, his dark orbs going to and fro Jiang FengMian's hand to my head and back, and then his eyes turn to look fully into mine. "Oh? The boy you'd been looking for all this time?" Jiang YanLi asks, coming to stand beside Jiang Cheng," You found him?"

I'm right here, you know?

"Yes," Jiang FengMian smiles," He'll be part of our family now." Excuse me, you literally bumped into me on the streets not even two hours ago!

Jiang YanLi smiles kindly at me," Hello, I'm Jiang YanLi. It's nice to meet you."

I grin back at her widely," Nice to meet you too!"

I like her.

* * *

I don't think there's anyone out there that does not like her.

Jin ZiXuan.

And then he became a stupidly in love fool that didn't even know how to confess properly.

"A-Cheng," YanLi softly nudges her brother," Isn't it nice, you'll have a friend your age here with you!"

A-Cheng isn't happy.

A-Cheng is feeling slightly angry and slightly furious.

His mind is flip-flopping between those two reactions.

And his eyes. Oh, his eyes are firmly telling me one thing. 'I don't want you here.'

Oh, right. I was forgetting Jiang Cheng's initial problem with me being in Lotus Pier.

That isn't a look we've seen on someone's face in a while.

I smile at him and try not to react at the disdain in his expression.

His eyes burn with jealousy.

Well... This promises to be fun.

And the best part is, you haven't even met the mother yet.

Kill me now.

No, I think I'll enjoy the show, the popcorn is almost ready too!

How come you get popcorn and I get to be stared at?
Life isn't fair, my darling, but don't worry. Your Lan Zhan will do enough staring to last a lifetime.

Bad thoughts! Bad thoughts!

Ike! I told you, it is not happening!

Oh? Is it 'your Lan Huan' then?

Not. Happening!

Both? My, my, dearest, you sure do know how to have a good time!

How I managed to not turn red as a tomato in front of everyone is beyond me, and I'll thank my fleeting good fortune for it, but I sure would remember my mental shrieking fit hours later when the migraine still hadn't died down.

So, of course, it is then that I meet Madam Yu for the first time.

She's tall, almost as tall as Jiang FengMian, but I don't really know how much her hairstyle contributes to it. The golden hair clips and headpiece glint under the burning lamps and her violet eyes burrow deep into mine.

Clearly, she's not impressed with what she sees.

"So..." Her voice rings out in the awkwardly silent room," This is the much discussed Wei Ying."

I immediately feel like my integrity is being attacked. Lady, what did I ever do to you?

*Her husband was kind of smitten with your mother.*

'Was'?

I consider Jiang FengMian's stubborn expression on his face and him slowly ruminating on whether to intervene now or watch this play out.

What I'd give for the height and long limps to shake some sense into him.

"I guess?" I reply to her not-question," I don't really know why everyone finds me so interesting."

Her eyebrow ticks up deliberately, and I see that Jiang Cheng is astonished, seeing me reply to his mother like that, Jiang YanLi simply gives me a look of anxiety. Clearly anyone that spoke to their mother like this didn't make it very far.

...There's always a first time for everything.

"Why have you come here?" She asks me.

I see Jiang FengMian take a step forward and quickly start talking, no way was I letting him making this situation worse than it already is.

"I didn't? Not really? J... Sect Leader Jiang found me on the streets and brought me here, I can just go back out and leave," I shrug," I was doing fine on my own."

"You are a child," She stresses out the word," What are you going to do out in the world?"

I blink at her, and start ticking down my fingers," Well, I was hunting, night-hunting, traveling,
painting, I also played instruments and sang, people love that, oh, and stories too! They even get you free meals and a room if they're really good!” I smile at her genially.

Her face kind of shifts from 'ignorant child' to 'reckless, idiotic, and ignorant child' and I just stand there waiting for the fireworks to start.

"You are a child! The streets are no place for a child!” She hisses.

I blink again at her, slowly," But you clearly don't want me here, so why do I have to stay?"

My question leaves her in silence.

"What did you say?" She asks in an odd tone of voice.

"You clearly don't want me here, so why do I have to stay?" I dutifully repeat back my words," When you're out there, you quickly learn to spot dislike, you don't like me, for whatever reason, and so, why do I have to stay here, where I am not liked, and not just go back out onto the streets?"

"Wei Ying,” Jiang FengMian quickly intervenes," You father-..."

"My father is dead," I tell him, shifting from foot to foot and looking away," My mother is too. This was my father's home, he said so and I remember that, but it isn't mine."

"It can be," Jiang FengMian tells me," If you let us-..."

"I do not need help," I sigh," I was perfectly fine on my own, I even wrote here and said so! I already know how to night-hunt, what do I have to learn in here anyway?"

That's the final straw for Madam Yu's stunned silence.

"So you believe yourself to be all-knowing? Too good to study in YunmengJiang?" She stands straighter and her eyes narrow into slits," You think you know everything just because you wandered about doing Heaven's knows what?"

You ingenious bastard...

I nod," I'm pretty sure I do."

Pride, I remember, was something of a flaw Madam Yu and Jiang Cheng shared. They took pride in YunmengJiang being one of the Five (soon to be Four) Great Sects, and any slight against that pride better have some strong backing.

To insinuate that I did not find them to be worth my time, meant that they either would kick me out for disrespecting them, which, while tossing canon right out the window, wasn't something I would mind; or, they'd have to show me otherwise.

And to do that...

She has to let you stay, no, not let you stay...

I almost threaten to break out into a maniacal grin.

She has to force me to stay.

And Jiang FengMian gets his wish without being the one putting his foot down.
"You insolent child! You think becoming a cultivator is easy?" She hisses, "We'll see how you'll handle the lessons taught here in this sect!" She then turns around and leaves, taking the identical maids with her.

Jiang FengMian doesn't say a word, stunned, but when he realizes what happened he starts smiling in good humor.

His good cheer won't last long after Madam Yu realizes she's been played.

I think that will only make her like me more.

I don't think Madam Yu will like an upstart twerp messing around her beloved Lotus Pier, dragging her precious children into whatever madness you cook up, and generally existing within two yards of her.

Some people really don't know how to appreciate my greatness. Don't worry, they'll learn.

"A-Cheng, Wei Ying will be staying in your room, for now, until he's better acquainted with our home," Jiang FengMian tells the slightly younger boy.

Jiang Cheng turns to glare at me.

There's one such person right there.

I smother another grin.

Oh, my dear, dear, Jiang Cheng... You and I will get along so well in the future.

I pity the kid.

Hush, I won't bite him.

No, you'll only let your Lan Zhan do that to you.

IKE! We've had this conversation too many times already! It. Is. Not. Happening!

Chapter End Notes

OK, so final scene here; you and I both knew Madam Yu wouldn't send the kid back out the door, it wasn't happening. But does she want to let anyone else in on that little tidbit of information? No, she doesn't.

So, yeah... AGF!WWX 'conned' her into forcing him to stay. Kid is pretty smart, but this is the Violet Spider, she is perfectly aware of what he's doing (and there will be consequences of doing this) //don't look at me like that, it's nothing too bad... maybe...//

Can we just take a moment to imagine the Pleased!FengMian expression on the guy's face as he walks about his home the rest of the day, making everyone wonder what the hell happened to him that makes him so happy?
Chapter Summary

First night Checkpoint; First morning troubles.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." - Victor Frankl

Chapter 38: First Night, First Day

So... This is fun.

Sure, whatever you say, dear.

I stared at the closed door of Jiang Cheng's room, my arms carrying my new sect robes I'd have to wear from now on, my pack slung over one shoulder, and tapped my foot while listening to Jiang Cheng's rant of how I wasn't allowed inside.

Honestly, I understood where he was coming from, I totally wouldn't want anyone intruding on my personal space, especially having just met them. But going on and on about how they were his parents, his room, his toys, his everything; for almost twenty minutes was getting on my nerves.

It's not like I actually wanted to share a room with him, I'd much rather have my own room and be able to move around without an escort, but Jiang FengMian apparently wasn't taking any risks.

Sounds fair, considering he has been running all over the place for the last three years looking for you.

It was his choice to keep searching for me despite my letter telling him, politely, to stop.

We both knew that he wouldn't just give up like that.

I sighed through my nose.

"A-A-And! You can't stay here! You can't! So go away!" Jiang Cheng yelled through the closed door.

Yeah, I had enough of this.

"Okay," I agree with him," I'm leaving my stuff here at the door, I'll be back for it in the morning, bye!" I drop the sect clothes they had handed to me and turn right around on my heel and head for the stables.
Honestly, Donkey was a better company at this point.

Yunru poked her head out of her satchel and seeing that there was no one here jumped out.

"Don't go far, if you get spotted don't come running to me," I tell her, watching her scamper off.

I wonder if Jiang Cheng has his dogs yet.

If he doesn't he will soon, especially once it comes out that I have Yunru. He'll want a pet too.

Despite the fact that I acquired Yunru by chance and it wasn't his father who got her for me.

The stables were deserted and Donkey was pretty easy to spot, I quickly entered the stable and dropped my pack by the hay, making a nest for myself.

"So, how's the good life Donkey, made any enemies yet?" I ask him.

Donkey turns to stare at the chestnut mare across the aisle from him and brays.

The mare give him one look before looking away with a snort.

Donkey stomps his feet.

I chuckle. "Yeah, Donkey, show her who's the best!"

*You're a terrible role model.*

I'm a great role model, society just doesn't agree with me.

*Sure.*

I totally am!

*Uh uh.*

I laugh and drop down onto the hay.

How long do you think it'll take before someone's out looking for me?

*Give it thirty minutes.*

The kid will panic when he sees that I actually up and left.

*I'm sure that will endear you to him.*

Hey, he sent me away!

*He's a six year old, he probably still believes in the moon rabbit.*

I snort, thinking of a little Jiang Cheng staring at the moon wide-eyed.

A thought bubbles in my head.

Do you think Lan Zhan believes in the moon rabbit?

...
He totally does, right?

He's probably never heard of the moon rabbit.

Clearly something that needs to be rectified immediately.

So eager to write to you...

We are not discussing this. He's seven years old!

He won't stay seven forever!

No, by then I'll be reaching my eighties.

You poor old grandma.

You're just as old as me, you know!

I am ageless.

I roll my eyes and open my Player Menu, right after Jiang FengMian found me there were a lot of
notifications and I barely got a good look at them.

There were a few advancements that I had unlocked due to completing every single Quest
available, and one that I kind of blinked at. "Blessed Lineage", apparently by having the backing of
a powerful clan or sect, and possessing a traceable reputable lineage, some enemies wouldn't kill
me as their first option even if I posed a threat to their ambitions or plans.

Which was good.

It depends on how fast they go from plan A to plan B when encountering you.

I grimaced, well I could at least expect a warning before they attempt to murder me?

Always Miss Positivity with you.

Well, we already have Mister Pessimism standing right beside me.

What a pair the two of us.

What a pair.

I smile softly before going back to the Menu, checking every tab to make sure I wasn't missing
anything. There wasn't really anything that stood out to me, so I just closed it and went to sleep.

I woke up to someone opening the stall's door.

The immediate response to 'Unknown close to my prone body' was to pull out Xiaodan from it's
sheath and jump awake, hand going over my shoulder to toss it.

Thankfully I manage to keep my grip on the blade and not let it fly towards the target.

A startled Jiang YanLi carrying a teary eyed Jiang Cheng on her back stare at me from the stall
door.

Donkey snorts and hits me with its tail.
I slowly sheathed my dagger again and yawn," What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be asleep?"

*You should tone down the 'motherly' vibes, you're sounding condescending.*

Oops.

Jiang Cheng sniffs, loudly," You were gone, I couldn't find you anywhere!" He sobs.

Big, ugly sobs.

*Honestly, kids confuse me sometimes.*

Kids are inherently confusing, they don't know what they want except that they want it, but then they can't give you an explanation of what they want and why it's so important.

*And you wanted a whole brood of them.*

I had a whole brood of them, they just weren't *my* brood.

"You wanted me gone," I point out to him," I thought you'd be happy if I went away, why are you crying now?" I sigh and rub at my eyes.

I hated being woken up, I liked my sleep uninterrupted.

He sniffs loudly again," But... But... You weren't supposed to go..."

I give him a look," You wanted me to sleep on the floor outside your room? Or keep asking to be let in?" I ask him," Because I can think of better things to do than that, like sleeping, which is what you should be doing." I pointed at them two.

Jiang YanLi gave me a smile," Jiang Cheng got scared that he couldn't find you, he thought you might've fallen off a pier."

*Wouldn't that be hilarious.*

"It's too cold for a swim," I deadpan," And why would I go near the piers? The stables aren't very far from the residential wing of your house."


"Uh?" I blink, lost.

"Our house," He says, mumbling half the words into his sister's shoulder," Father said you lived with us now."

*Kids... I tell you, they're so confusing.*

I sigh," And finding me couldn't wait until morning?" I yawn again.

Jiang YanLi open the door wider," You're both tired, c'mon, let's get you both to bed, and we can talk more tomorrow," She smiles.

She clearly got Jiang FengMian's 'this isn't up for discussion' smile.

I sigh once more and get up, grabbing my pack and petting Donkey goodbye.
I dutifully follow after the older girl as she leads us back to our room, picking out straw from my hair and yawning at various times.

I really wanted to sleep.

There were two beds, thankfully, because I'd totally kick Jiang Cheng off of the mattress and hog the blanket if I had to share, and after seeing which bed was Jiang Cheng's I kind of just flop down and pull the blanket over me.

"Your boots, A-Ying," YanLi chuckles and pulls my boots off," Goodnight you two."

"Night," I tell her and roll over against the wall.

"Goodnight, JieJie," Jiang Cheng says.

"Checkpoint Finished!"

Go away and let me sleep.

YanLi leaves and I hear the door close, after about a minute or two of silence, just when I'm about to nod off, I hear Jiang Cheng speak:

"They're my parents though, you can't have them," He tells me.

I huff," Mine are dead, I don't need replacements," I tell him," Your father and your mother are all yours."

"Aren't you sad?" He asks quietly, almost shyly.

I ponder for a moment," Sure, I didn't want them to die," I tell him," But they're dead. What use if to cry about it? I still remember them, that's enough."

It's not. It won't ever be enough. But a child wouldn't understand.

Most people wouldn't understand either.

I close my eyes and pull the blanket up, curling my legs up to my chest like a little ball, I'd stretch out in my sleep eventually. ShouShan had once said I slept like a starfish, what he was doing in my guest room as I slept I'd rather not find out.

He was totally fawning over how cute you looked so he could describe you to sculptures for when they carve up a statue in your honor.

If they ever carve up a statue in my honor it better not be when I look like a doll size version of the future Yiling Patriarch.

Ah, but tall statues cost more, a shorter statue from when you were a little tiny baby would be cheaper.

I am not going to sleep with that thought in my head, change the subject if you want to chatter.

Like how Lan Zhan would totally get a statue of little you?

You know what, forget it, shut up. I'm going to sleep now, so shush.

So prickly.
I was beginning to realize that sharing a room with a young child would not only require more patience on my part, I'd also have to get rid of some ingrained instincts.

Like pulling Xiaodan or Xiaotong on the first person that came within a foot of me whilst I was asleep.

"He pulled a knife on me!" Jiang Cheng was crying into YanLi, who was giving me a look, while Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu stared down at the three blades I had set down in front of them when asked for the weapons I carried with me.

You still have that sword in your Inventory, too.

I am not handing over all of my weapons. And I'm getting another dagger after this, keep it in the Inventory.

"Where did you get these?" Madam Yu asked as she picked up the blades and inspected them.

"Xiaodan was a gift," I point at the dagger with the drawn snake sheath," Xiaotong and Liling I bought in Qinghe," I point to the other two.

Well, I only technically bought them in Qinghe, they didn't come from Qinghe.

Semantics, they don't need to know that.

"Why does he get to have a sword?" Jiang Cheng's attention is immediately drawn to Liling.

"Because I have been night-hunting for almost three years," I tell him," And bandits are annoying," I grumble out the last part under my breath.

Madam Yu's eyes focus on me and I stand straighter.

"You know how to use these?" She asks.

"I know how to use the daggers pretty well," It was true, I was almost maxed out with that skill," But I haven't got much practice with Liling."

She scrutinizes me.

"Have you ever spared before?" She asks.

I hesitate," I have brawled?" I tilt my head slightly," Never trained against anyone, usually just use them when I have to fight against something," I answer.

"What else?" She crosses her arms primly.

"Bow and arrow," I answer," And talismans."

"You know how to make talismans already?" Jiang FengMian finally looks away from the blades to stare at me, surprised.
Honestly, it was annoying. I had been on my own for almost three years, I had been night-hunting, traveling and constantly getting into dangerous situations, how did that think I kept myself safe? That everyone around me just protected me? Carried me on their back?

What the hell?!

"Yes," I stress out the word," I've been learning since I was four."

Madam Yu looked from me to Jiang Cheng and something ugly flashed in her eyes.

Oh, she better not do what I think she's going to do.

"Jiang Cheng," She calls out, and the boy peeks out from his sister's robes," Did he hit you with the knife?"

"No," The boy mulishly tells her.

Hey, have a little trust here...

You did almost throw a knife at them yesterday too.

I growled in the back of my mind.

"Then stop crying," She tells him," You're the heir of Lotus Pier, you cannot be weak!"

Oh, hell no.

"My Lady,-..." Jiang FengMian goes to speak but I interrupt him.

"He's not weak, he's six years old!" I hiss at her," How can you compare him like that? He's your son!"

Madam Yu's violet eyes flash with lightning, the same lightning that sparks out of the purple ring she's fiddling with,"What did you say?"

"I said," I hiss," That he's your son! That he's not weak! That you can't compare him to other people because he's not other people! He. Is. Your. Son!" I yell at her.

Tone down the disrespect.

Screw you! I was not letting her bring this kid down for being startled by someone pulling a knife on him.

A lightning arch slams on the ground right beside me, coming from the ring on her finger, and Jiang FengMian goes to take a step forward but stops and stares at me.

I didn't flinch.

I had stared down things that could chew me up and spit me back out.

I had been on my own and I had made it.

I was not scared of a woman with jealousy problems.

I looked Madam Yu straight in the eye and felt my fire spark behind my eyes.

"Such disrespect!" She scolds me.
"You've done nothing to deserve my respect," I tell her.

You're going to get into so much trouble for doing this.

Worth it. Nip this trouble in the bud.

Her eyes narrow before she sniffs with disdain, "Obviously, you had no mother to teach you manners."

All the sound around me screeches to a halt.

For a second I can see everything clearly, Jiang FengMian's shocked expression, Jiang YanLi's surprised look and Jiang Cheng's worried glance at me, both the maids behind Madam Yu remain expressionless but their eyes tremble, they hadn't expected her to say that.

That.

Those words.

That second goes by in the blink of an eye and suddenly the world is all blurred together.

Past and present converge into a chaotic mess of what once was and what is now.

I see a stern faced woman sneering down at me, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me to the hated white room, raking me across my fingers for mistakes during my lessons, ordering me to repeat the same greetings and polite chitchat hundreds of times until all I knew to say were those exact words.

I had had someone teach me manners, all right. But I did not have a mother.

And then I see another woman, one with happy silver eyes and dark hair, smiling down at me and picking me up to sit in her lap, who'd cuddle with me and always make me feel safe and warm.

I had had a mother. But what she taught me more than just manners.

Anger pooled in my chest, striking a match that lit my insides on fire, fury licking at my senses.

How dare she!

How dare she?!

I snarl, an animalistic growl coming from deep within my throat, and my eyes lock into hers.


She sniffs again, "I know enough," A woman like that-...."

I don't even thing, between one blink and the next I'm charging forward, dodging under her hand and rolling into a somersault, my feet touch the floor and I launch myself up like a spring, and I throw back a fist to hit her.

She grabs it and hits me with a single hand, making everything go dark.

The last thing I hear is Jiang FengMian calling my name.

What did you honestly expect to happen?
Shut up.

No, no, let's talk, my dear, what did you think she was going to do? Let you just walk away after you attacked her?

Seriously, just stop talking.

I will not stop talking until you tell me exactly what went on in that brain of your that thought it was alright to attack her!

I sighed through my nose and shifted slightly on the ground, trying to take some pressure off my hurting knees.

I was kneeling in the front courtyard, under the hot sun to make it harder for me to endure it, and every so often a disciple would come check up on me to see how I was doing and if I had moved from my spot.

I didn't think.

Clearly! We went over this already! You cannot let your anger rule you!

She badmouthed—...!

I don't care if she calls you an ugly old whore, you cannot act on impulse! You must stay calm and in control!

Argh! You're siding with her?!

I am siding with our continued existence! One day, you will badmouth the wrong person and you'll pay for it!

I will not!

Will not?! You're in this situation exactly because you did so!

I grit my teeth and clenched my hands into fists, my nails creating crescent shapes on my palms, growling in the back of my mind.

It will not happen again.

You and I both know you are not keeping that promise so don't bother trying it.

My eyes looked off into the distance.

I am sorry.

Silence greeted me, the conversation had evidently been put on hold, and I felt worse than ever.

I hadn't meant to lose control like that... It's just...

I couldn't let that remark slide. I had to do something. I was only thankful I hadn't thought of using any Talents, those would've made things so much worse than they already were.

A squeak to my right made me look to see Yunru peeking from under a bush.

I smile softly at her and gesture her to come out, she rushes to my side and climbs over to rest on
my shoulders, nuzzling my cheek.

"And where have you been? Having fun?" I ask her, scratching her chin," At least one of us, or two I guess if you count Donkey, is happy here."

I looked back to the distance and breathed through my nose.

I'd messed up.

Again.

I needed to stop doing that.

I knew that.

But whenever someone talked about them I just got so angry.

They didn't know them. Didn't know me. What right did they have to talk behind their backs? About how they chose to raise me?

Yunru fussed with me for a bit before her fur stood on end and she dived into the collar of my robes.

I barely refrained from yelping, or collapsing in a fit of giggles are her tiny little paws tickled me, and stoically remained kneeling under the sun.

I heard hesitant footsteps behind me before whoever it was decided to come over.

I looked over my shoulder and was pleasantly surprised to see Jiang Cheng carrying something in his hands.

He was looking side to side, as if to make sure there was no one else here.

...

I get the feeling he wasn't supposed to be here.

*Probably not.*

Being prohibited from approaching the 'wild child' the Sect Leader brought the day before was perhaps the mildest and most certain warning Madam Yu's children got about me.

Which, fair enough, I had tried to punch her.

Jiang Cheng finally rushed the final meters to stand by me and looked down at me with a frown.

I had a bump on the back of my head, from hitting the floor, and a bit of a bruise on my temple but other than that, I just looked rumpled.

And sweaty because holy hell the sun was hot.

"Let's make a deal," Jiang Cheng said.

I gave him a look," What deal?"

"You teach me what you know, and I'll watch out for you from now on," He proposes.
"Watch out for me?" I ask him, confused.

"I'll keep you out of trouble," He tells me," Father said that you don't know anything about sects or how you're supposed to act here, so I'll teach you," He nods at his own words.

Of course, Jiang FengMian would say that, and of course it would be to his six year-old son who wanted nothing more than to make him proud.

On the bright side, it felt somewhat gratifying that it wasn't just my birth family that had problems.

It didn't make this situation any less daunting.

"So..." I muse," I teach you all that I know about being a cultivator, and you'll teach me how to play nice with other people?"

Jiang Cheng frowns, thinking through my words,"I... I guess?"

Dear Lord in Heaven, this kid was too adorable for his own good.

"Alright," I shrug," You've got yourself a deal, but don't expect me to go easy on you just because you're younger than me."

Immediately Jiang Cheng gets an annoyed look on his face," You're barely any older than me!"

"A year older is still a year older," I simper," So I guess that makes me your... shixiong?" I guess at the word, feeling it foreign on my tongue.

Jiang Cheng grows mulish but nods," And I'm your shidi, but just you wait, I'mma be so strong I'll beat you in no time!"

Yeah, kid, that's never gonna happen.

"We'll see," I grin at him in a predatory way," Personally, I don't think you're that great with how high you screamed when you saw my Xiaodan."

Jiang Cheng flushed red and hisses at me," I didn't scream!"

"Sure, whatever you say," I shrug with an airy tone," Whatever you say, MeiMei."

His high pitched shriek of indignation was well worth the punch he threw at me.

Which I dodged, of course, except dodging meant he over-balanced and fell on top of me, causing me to tip backwards and hit the bump on my head on the floor again.

Immediately I switched positions and sat on top of him, laughing as he tried to get me off.

Which was when Jiang YanLi found us.

Oh, the look of exasperation on her face.

Chapter End Notes

"Obviously, you had no mother to teach you manners." *Shots fired*
OOC moment here, and need I remind you that AGF!WWX is not all knowing (despite planning for future events with scary accuracy, according to outsiders with no knowledge of his Gamer!Status) and therefore, he makes faulty assumptions.

Madam Yu knew exactly was she was doing when saying those words, hint: It was a ***t.

Also, AGF!WWX has serious temper problems, especially when the right buttons are pushed.

The Advantages unlocked at the end of Arc II were:

Blessed Lineage (Void) - "Characters with 'High Status' understand that they might suffer a loss of prestige if they harm you, and thus do not choose to kill you as their first option, even if you are a political obstacle they would otherwise eliminate without hesitation."

- As Ike pointed out, great advantage to have, depending on how quickly they scrap Option A, and move on to Option B-

Zao-Shen's Blessing (Earth) - "Laborers recognize you as a kindred spirit, and those with 'Low Status' are innately trusting of you unless you give them reason not to be."

/For completing every Quest/

Famously Reliable (Earth) - "Other people have heard of you for your remarkable adherence to your oaths and responsibilities, even over and above most people/cultivators, and they believe it by default unless given evidence to the contrary." /For completing every Quest/

Seasoned (Void) - "(really long explanation/detailed info)" /For participating regularly on night-hunts/

- Basically it just means he knows what he's doing, he's easily recognized among other cultivators, and knows how to get around in basically any town-

He also developed the Passion [Travel], which makes him feel at home practically anywhere.
Chapter 39: Classroom

I was called back to the main room, where my... disagreement with Madam Yu happened, after three or so hours of kneeling. I felt my legs were like jelly but after massaging them for a while and drinking some water, I saw my fatigue drop considerably. I wouldn't be pulling any stunts after the last one but I could decently dodge in case anyone started anything.

Madam Yu looked down at me from her nose when I entered and quickly got to the point," Your actions this morning were disgraceful and disreputable, do you deny this?"

I bit my tongue and gave her a proper bow," I do not, my actions have no excuse."

"Ma'am," She adds," Or Madam Yu, you must always finish your addresses to someone of higher importance with their title," She lectures.

"Apologies, Ma'am," I answer in response.

God, this was going to get old so quickly.

*Suck it up, it's only a decade.*

Oh, *pshh*, sure, it's only a decade!

*At least your Hanguang-Jun doesn't mind you call him Lan Zhan, or would it be ZeWu-Jun, and Lan Huan?*

That is getting old too, Ike.

"Your weapons will be kept in storage until you are deemed responsible enough to have them back," She continues," That is *not* up to discussion," She accentuates when she sees me open my mouth to argue.

I bite the inside of my cheek until it draws blood.
It irked me not to have my weapons, more than weapons they were mine, no one elses, and Xiaodan, especially, was a gift!


I growled in my mind and pushed down my annoyance and anger.

My eyes still smoldered with resentment over my current situation, obviously noticeable for anyone who cared to look, but that was beyond my current capacity to smother.

They were my things, goddammit!

*You're in this situation because you couldn't keep your cool, let this serve as a lesson.*

I grumbled at him, trying to stay focused on what Madam Yu was saying.

"Due to your... circumstances," Here she gives Jiang FengMian a bitterly cold look," You will join Jiang Cheng in his lessons and serve as his shixiong, along with your other fellow disciples."

Great, lessons. Woohoo, I'm so thrilled.

"Yes, Ma'am," I reply back, showing I heard her.

"Do not shame this Sect when it has been so graceful as to foster you with its main Clan," She warns me.

Again, your husband was the one constantly hounding after me, I can just go and leave you to your unhappy marriage.

*Hush.*

"Yes, Ma'am," I grit my teeth and bow once more.

Satisfied, or merely done with her distaste for me at the moment, she leaves. I roll my shoulders and frown after her, Jiang Cheng elbows me with a look and I roll my eyes at him.

"I didn't say anything," I grouch.

"She's my mother," He warns.

I sigh," Fine, I'm sorry," I apologize," Satisfied? Or are you also gonna lecture me about manners?"

He clearly wants to lecture me but stops when he sees his father approach us.

"A-Cheng, A-Ying," He smiles," A-Li told me she has something for you in the kitchens, best go eat before the lessons start," He tells us.

Jiang Cheng perks up and grabs me by the arm and starts pulling me out of the room.

"Hey! What is so important about your sisters' cooking, anyway?" I grumble at him.

Jiang Cheng gives me a piercing glare from over his shoulder," A-Jie's cooking is the best! And you will tell her so! Be thankful she even deemed you worthy enough to cook for you!"

*Aah, the canon idolization.*

She is supposedly a good cook.
Enough to make Jin ZiXuan fall in love with her.

I'd be more impressed if I hadn't been twice to Qinghe and ate my weight in delicious food.

She might cook better than Qinghe.

Doubt.

Ready to admit it?

Shut up.

I told you.

Shut up, Ike.

"It's delicious, A-Jie!" Jiang Cheng cheerfully munched away at the buns that Jiang YanLi had prepared for us.

"It's good," I agree and cough when Jiang Cheng elbows me.

"Good?!" His eyes blaze with indignation," A-Jie's cooking is the best!"

"It's good," I hiss at him," I've had Qinghe's regional food, now that's delicious!"

Jiang Cheng makes an audible gasp and hits me again," A-Jie's cooking is definitely better than whatever you ate in Qinghe!"

Jiang YanLi watches us 'bicker' back and forth with a smile, pushing another bun in my direction," Isn't this great, A-Cheng, you have a friend your age now."

Jiang Cheng goes red.

"Are all the other disciples older?" I frown, trying to remember if the novel mentioned anything of the sort.

"Not really, they're just too scared to befriend A-Cheng, because he's the Sect Leader's son," She answers me with a slightly sad smile.

"I don't get that," I shrug," When you're night-hunting you don't really care who's who, just that they know what they're doing and not going to accidentally shoot you with an arrow."

Jiang Cheng turns back to me, a glimmer in his eyes," What is it like? Night-hunting?"

I pause to chew on my bun, and tilt my head in thought," Quiet," I tell him," Unless you have a large group of people or are hunting in a group, everyone usually goes their own direction. So there you are, at night, in the middle of a forest or mountain or cemetery, with the light of the moon or torch to light your way," I continue.

"And everything is quiet, there's the sound of your own heartbeat, the nocturnal critters of the forest, and then you heard them," I close my eyes in remembrance," Beasts, Yao or Spirits. They all make sounds, they all can be found if you just listen, and then you're running after them, the wind rustles all around you, you feel like you're flying."

Jiang Cheng is utterly entranced by my words.
"And then you find them, you choose your weapon, like a bow and nook your arrow, and take aim," I make the pulling the string back motion and fire an invisible arrow," Then the prey goes down and you just wait for everything to go quiet again, and start all over again."

"I want to go night-hunting," He tells me in a dreamy tone.

I start laughing.

He grows annoyed and hits me over the head.

"You went on night-hunts, why can't I?!" He half-yells, half-pouts.

"Because, A) My parents were the first ones to take me, so if you want to go, talk to your parents, and B) you're so not ready to go night-hunting," I tell him.

"Why am I not ready?" He frowns.

I give him a sideways look," Because you flinched at the sight of my dagger, what are you going to do when a Beast jumps out of the undergrowth, maw open wide to devour you, and claws bigger than my dagger? Run away crying?" I ask him.

He flushes red," I'd fight it!" He states.

"With what?" I ask him, indulgently," Do you know how to make working talismans? Do you have a blessed dagger? A cultivators sword? Any other tools?" I ask him," Do you know how to use them?"

Jiang Cheng remains silent, glaring at the table.

I sigh through my nose, and see Jiang YanLi meaningfully looking from me to her disheartened brother.

Of course I'm the one that has to fix this.

>You're the one who made him sad.

Better sad than to encourage his dreams whilst he can't protect himself and give him false confidence to do stupid things.

>Like joining in on rogue night-hunts with no support?

Exactly.

>Like you did, as far as the population knows?

I ignore him.

"I'll teach you as promised," I poke him," Just don't expect to suddenly become the next Enlightened Buddha or something anytime soon."

He looks at me," But you'll teach me?" He asks.

I nod," I thought we'd already got that out of the way, you were the one that thought of the deal, so you're not getting rid of me that easily now," I tell him.

"You can't be any worse than Teacher Fang," He mutters, and Jiang YanLi giggles.
"Who's Teacher Fang?" I ask him.

Jiang Cheng's disparaging look doesn't reassure me.

Teacher Fang was the YunmengJiang's oldest instructor, he was responsible over teaching meditation and the history of the Cultivation World.

In other words, he was one of the most dreadfully boring people in this world.

I sat beside Jiang Cheng and tried to stay awake for his lecture about how the world formed energy.

What he was teaching and what I had been doing for the last years couldn't be any more different if they tried. Here, man produced energy and the Earth absorbed it once we died, so the Earth fed on the energy of past lives. I'd already proven that the Earth had its own energy and that everything produced energy, not just humans.

Although he was correct that the Earth absorbed energy upon our passing, it also cleanses it in order to keep the Earth 'healthy'. When it couldn't do that, the energy turned into Resentful Energy and acted as an infection of sorts, seeking nutrition from other sources of energy, such as humans and Spiritual Energy.

*You still have to learn how to cultivate their way or you'll never hear the end of it.*

I know... It's just so boring.

I hid a yawn by pretending I was fiddling with my new robe sleeves.

Unlike what I was used to, with long loose sleeves that allowed me to hide Xiaotong in my forearm, these were tight around the arms and it kept pulling at them when I grew distracted.

Jiang Cheng was paying avid attention to the lecture out of sheer force of will, but even his eyes were starting to glaze once the lecture went on for more than thirty minutes.

Seriously, the man hadn't stopped going on and on about how energy was 'pure' and 'innately strong'.

The other children around me weren't helping matters either, constantly shuffling in their seats, setting off my senses and instincts, talking in hushed whispers that sounded loud to my ears, and generally being children.

"How much longer does this last?" I inconspicuously asked Jiang Cheng.

"Another hour," He breathed out the answer.

I stared at him, and then stared at the old bastard rambling on about cultivation and how you absorbed Spiritual Energy, before letting out a mournful sigh.

Jiang Cheng shared a commiserating look with me before turning back to the lecture.

I'll die.

*You won't die.*

I'll totally die of boredom.
You're not dying of boredom.

Ike, I'm telling you, I'm dying. I'm not surviving a decade of this.

Be positive, the man might not be alive in a decade.

I looked at the bastard and then thought about my luck in these situations.

Guy will totally be alive in ten years.

Ike seems to have realized the odds of me being lucky and replies in kind:

Yeah, I just realized that, you have the shittiest luck.

I'm going to dieeeeee... 

If you're that bored, find something to do, read a book or something.

... 

What?

Ike, have I told you how much I loved you?

Not recently, no.

I love you. I really, really do, even when I want to strangle you to an inch of your existence.

Gee, thanks. I am so happy.

I ignore his sarcasm and open the Store, starting to riffle through the daggers and knives being sold.

You're getting another one?

I need to have a weapon with me, even if it's in my Inventory just in case of an emergency.

Try not to pull this one out on the kid.

I grumble under my breath and keep looking so one that wasn't overly expensive and practical.

I settled on one knife with a hooked tip, it stabbed easily enough but wasn't advisable for the target to pull it out. Gruesome I know, but, again, if I ever had to materialize a knife out of nowhere I was already in dire straights.

I'd worry about excuses as to where I got this from later, or never, if I ever get caught with it.

"Does the Player wish to name their weapon?"

[YES] [NO]

I pressed [YES] and wrote out "Xiaohui", getting the notification that the purchased weapon was sent to my Inventory.

Next I decided to go check out the [Books] section, and started going through lists of book titles and what their supposed contents. Obviously I could only use it after going back to my (shared)
room and excuse its sudden appearance as having it in my pack.

And it's mysterious origins? Books about important things such as martial arts and swordplay styles aren't sold to the public, more than likely being passed down through generations.

Urk.

I grimace, remembering that.

Damn backwards time periods where printers weren't invented yet.

Maybe your [Recipes] can teach you how to build one.

...

That's actually a possibility, isn't it?

Possibly.

I quickly divert my attention and start going through the [Recipes] section.

Sure enough, I find several ancient versions of modern day appliances, such as the much desired printer, heater, and freezers. I kind of blinked at the last two and clicked on them to see what they required to learn.

Color me surprised when it says that, once mastered, Talisman-making Skill allowed me to fiddle and mess around with individual characters of a seal or array, making my own variations or, as the recipe intended, created something new entirely.

Obviously, we had a new goal set for this Story Arc.

Mastering that Skill, if put all your effort and time into it, won't last long. You're already on advanced levels in pretty much all your skills.

So, we just have to decide on more goals!

Like what?

Crafting for one, I need that for the fountain pen.

Oh, yes, how could I forget about your beloved fountain pen.

And I'll need sewing to modify my robes to add protections.

What else, again this won't take long since you're barred from night-hunting, and I know what you're like when going through hyper-focus.

...You said books were likely passed down from generation to generation, correct?

Yes, probably.

So this place should, in theory, have it's own library, correct?

I know the Cloud Recesses had one.

It does, why?
There's another goal.

*The Library?*

Read every single thing in it!

... *Now that might take a while.*

Clearly, as you've told me several times already, I have time. In fact, I have ten years of time!

"And that concludes today's lesson," The old foggy's voice snaps me out of the ensuing argument with Ike.

I close the store and turn to Jiang Cheng with wide eyes, "I totally blanked out, what did he say?"

Jiang Cheng gives me a look and sighs, "I'll tell you later, c'mon, off to the next lesson."

He gets up and waits for me to follow after him.

"What is the next lesson?" I ask him.

"Calligraphy," He says without looking back.

...

...

I'm going to die.

*Oh, stop that.*

I thought I was done with writing characters!

*I think this is different than that.*

...What?

*I think this is a different Skill.*

...Why?

*Because no matter how much you write or increase your writing Skill, your characters are only barely legible. So...*

So calligraphy might actually be a Skill...

*Hooray, you've found another Skill to max out?*

Go die in a ditch, Ike.

*Hey, and here I thought you loved me!*

I love you, very much, so please go die in a ditch.

*Women, always so temperamental.*

I will start singing "It's a small world after all", don't you think I won't!
Everything inside my mind goes dead quiet.

When the day was finally over I really just wanted a bath and slump over in bed. Forget dinner, forget listening to Jiang explain what I missed of the old foggy's lecture, I just wanted to go to sleep.

Of course, here that's not an option.

"How were lessons?" Jiang YanLi asked us as we walked into the main hall where the main family ate.

To be fair, I had tried to follow the other disciples and go eat with them but Jiang Cheng quickly grabbed me by the arm and dragged me with him, saying that 'I was family' or 'Father wants you there', despite the fact he clearly disliked the idea he had to 'share' his parents time with me.

I give Jiang YanLi a deadpan look," I'd rather be chasing after Liu Yao," I told her.

She blinked and Jiang Cheng turned to me with a frown," What are those?"

It took a few seconds to think where I had seen them and realized that my geography needed some serious work.

"So, they're these yao that hide inside twigs, totally unable to differentiate between actual twigs, except the yao float instead of just falling back onto the ground once you let them go," I explain it to them," So, strategy wise, you basically go around the area tossing every single twig up in the air and striking down those that float."

Jiang Cheng nods," I'd rather be doing that than Teacher Fang's lectures."

"How often do those happen?" I ask him, dreading the answer.

"Every three days," He answers," But once you are ready to cultivate a golden core you're moved to another teacher Teacher Xu," He tells me.

"Teacher Fang is very wise," Jiang YanLi somehow manages to say that with a straight face," You do well to learn from him."

Jiang Cheng and I share a look of utter disbelief.

"He blanked out for an hour," The little brat points at me," Literally didn't hear a single word he said, and you're asking him to actually learn anything?"

"Hey," I grumble," That whole deal of energy is basic knowledge and learning how to meditate."

"That's the most important part of cultivation," He says, exasperated.

"Yeah, well, it's also the most easy to teach," I roll my eyes," And my parents did spend a year constantly teaching me things."

Jiang Cheng looks at me," You already know this?"

I nod and take their left hands, focusing energy into their systems, and watch as their eyes go wide.

"How do you know that?" Jiang YanLi takes her hand back surprised.
"Teach me!" Jiang Cheng enthusiastically stares at his hand, still feeling the last remains of my energy thrumming through it.

"Oh?" I grin wickedly at him," Wouldn't you rather learn from the wise Teacher Fang?" I ask him.

Jiang Cheng's eyes glare at me and he opens his mouth to respond back in kind when both his parents enter the room.

Immediately the two of them bow and I bow a second later, which Madam Yu quickly points out and takes the next minute to grill Jiang Cheng about how I did in today's lessons.

Jiang FengMian clearly struggled not to smile at both my ineptitude to stay focused during Teacher Fang's lecture and my total lack of grace during calligraphy practice.

And fine, yes, I was a bit miffed about my failings being used as a conversation starter.

"So, a Sect does have things to teach you after all," She sneered.

I refrained from rolling my eyes, although I didn't manage to bite my tongue fast enough to avoid drawling out," Yes, well, clearly I'll just recite the lecture to put the Yao and Spirits to sleep and frighten Beasts away with beautiful calligraphy."

Jiang YanLi covered her mouth quickly to hide her smile but Jiang Cheng was unfortunate enough to snort in response and slapped his mouth a second too late.

Goddammit.

You're hopeless.

You're not helping.

Madam Yu glared fiercely at my smart mouth and sat straighter in her seat.

Oh, you're getting it now.

Goddammit.

"And what, pray tell, should the children be taught then?" She asks in a rhetorical way.

I open my mouth to answer and stop, tilting my head in thought.

What CangSe and ChangZe had done with me wouldn't work on most of these kids exactly because they were just that, kids. They wouldn't understand half of the things I did, because I already had a whole lifetime of knowledge, modern knowledge at that, to base their teachings on.

"He can already use Spiritual Energy!" Jiang Cheng tells her," He agreed to teach me!"

My eyes widen," I probably should've specified what it's in my ability to teach you..." I muttered and sighed.

He turns to me with a frown," Why can't I learn?"

"It's not that you can't learn, it's just that... I don't remember when it started?" I gesture with a grimace," My parents taught me basic meditation and then... Well, they were gone so I had to think of something... I don't know what I did right or what I did wrong, I just kind of woke up one day and knew how to do that."
Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu look surprised. Jiang FengMian hurriedly comes over to my and starts checking my system.

"What you did was reckless!" He scolds," What if you had gone into Qi Deviation because of improper cultivation?!"

Jiang Cheng pales and stares at me with horrified eyes.

"I didn't?" I shrug," I don't even remember what I did."

Which was a lie but talking about how I knew Energy worked in this world and how they perceived Energy to work would be too wordy and leave it obvious that I was as 'normal' as an elephant in a tutu.

Yes, best avoid that, also, thank you dear, that is a lovely mental picture.

Jiang FengMian scours all of my system and meridians with my curious energy poking at his every so often, before withdrawing," You're fine, strong meridians and pathways..." He seems to muse something.

"A golden core?" Madam Yu has another peculiar look in her eyes.

"No," Jiang FengMian shakes his head," Advanced Energy absorption but in terms of cultivation he only has a base."

"I what?" I frown.

"It means you can start cultivating to form a golden core," Jiang Cheng answer me, unhappily.

I see the jealousy in his eyes and groan," You are such a platypus!"

Everyone just blinks.

"What's a platypus?" He asks.

I stare at him in confusion before my brain starts processing my words and just where platypus exist.

...

You screwed up.

I didn't?

You totally did.

I just need to find a platypus?

Where are you right now?

YunmengJiang.

In the world, doofus.

China.

Yeah, and guess where Platypus are?
...China?

_Australia, you bloody idiot._

...

...

Oh.

_Yes, oh! What have you done now?!_

...Apparently about to create a mythical creature.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

Xiaohui means "Morning Sunlight", which is definitely what the victims of this knife won't be seeing.

Poor bookworm! WWX he can get all the books in the world, but he can't have them without an excuse to explain their origins.

AGF! WWX reluctance to 'teach' JC anything 'Golden Core' or 'Spiritual Energy' related is because it would bring to light that they use two very distinct techniques to absorb/control/circulate energy, which are explored in a later chapter. While WWX will develop a Golden Core sooner (using his usual Gamer BS), he'll have to fake cultivate using this 'normal' method.

And yes, from now on AGF! JC will be known as "Platypus", and Ike is so done with life at this point.

...No that's not another Iron Man reference, what are you talking about?
Chapter Summary

Where the mythical Platypus becomes a Thing, where kids find scars cool, where there's a promise, and art is serious business, believe it!

Chapter Notes

No, that wasn't a Naruto reference. Why are you all looking at me like that?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The language of friendship is not words but meanings." - Henry David Thoreau

Chapter 40: Nickname

...Apparently about to create a mythical creature.

No, no you are not.

Yes, yes I totally am.

"It's a..." I tilt my head to the side to pretend-ponder on my words, "A strange creature, it was originally a duck but then it got cursed and became a platypus," I tell them.

"Cursed?" Jiang YanLi frowns," Why was it cursed?"

I have this brilliant idea.

It's a terrible idea, just like all of your recent decisions.

"Because the duck kept going on and on about how little it had and how much it wanted to be like others!" I tell her," First he wanted to be an otter, to swim really fast, then he wanted to be a beaver, because of how they build their dams."

Jiang Cheng looks confused," Beaver? Otter?" What are those?"

I sigh," Animals, I can draw a picture of them for you later," I offer," Anyway, the duck tried to be like an otter first, but the other otters were too swift and wily for the duck to be able to imitate them."

"So he tried to be like the beavers," I say," But beavers had strong tails that they used to build their homes, while the duck only had a feathered butt," I grin, causing Jiang Cheng to snort.
Jiang FengMian smiled amused, while Madam Yu looked ready to tear into my lack of courteous speech, thankfully they both remain silent and I proceed with my story.

"So, the duck got angry and went on and on about how it wasn't fair that he was a duck, he wanted to be like the others, wanted to be just as good as them, and ignored all the other ducks telling him he was just perfect in his own way," I smirk. "He complained so much that the Gods inevitably cursed him and turned him into a mix of a duck, an otter, and a beaver," I shrug.

Jiang Cheng looked horrified," And that's a platypus?"

I nod cheerfully," I'll draw one for you so you can see what they're supposed to look like!"

Jiang Cheng doesn't look much enthusiastic about that," Why did you call me that?"

I blink and tilt my head at him," Your eyes," I poke his forehead," You always look at me like I have something you don't, and you forget all about what you do have."

He frowns and pushes my hand away," I don't."

"You do," I sigh with a sad smile," You think it's not fair that I've already gone night-hunting, that I know enough meditation to start building a golden core, that I already have, or had, weapons," I tick off my fingers," But you're ignoring the reason as to why I had all those things."

Jiang FengMian looks saddened for a moment.

Through the corner of my eye I see Madam Yu crossing her arms, looking outwardly sour about the conversation topic, which was fair enough.

"So, in conclusion," I gesture grandly at Jiang Cheng," You are now, Platypus!"

Jiang Cheng lets out a sound of outrage," I am not!"

I laugh," You're totally are! My shidi, the Platypus!" I laugh harder when he tries to hit my but I keep dodging.

Jiang YanLi eventually grabs both of us and tells us to stop messing about, and that it's time to eat.

The rest of the meal passes over quickly, no more barbs or jabs to be said about anyone, except Jiang Cheng muttering at me and my continuous ribbing of him and his new nickname.

After a particular unflattering mutter from Jiang Cheng I hide a smirk in my soup bowl and look away, trying not to show my mirth of his attempts at sounding menacing.

If only all days could be like this.

It's not as cold as I thought it'd be.

Warmth...

How familiar.

Because of how small we were, and how big the bathtubs were, Jiang Cheng and I ended up taking a bath together.

I tried not to let it show how awkward I found the scene to be.
It was made especially hard since the kid kept glancing at my scars and trying to get me to tell him how I got them.

Honestly... I barely remembered half of them. I mean, I knew what had given me the scars but as far as 'how' went, well... Night-hunting. Or an angry servant. Or bandits.

Really, they looked 'impressive' and 'wicked' to a kid but I didn't really care about them.

And then there was the scar on my face.

No one knew how I got it.

I mean it, absolutely no one knew how I got such a scar on my face.

Since I only started appearing on night-hunts after the scar was already on my face, people had bets going on about how I got it and where I got it from.

The running bidding was that it was a training accident.

It was annoying.

No, beyond annoying, it was exasperating. Seriously, people had nothing better to do than to gossip.

So, in the end, I told Jiang Cheng I didn't remember getting it, since I was four years old and stupid back then.

I ignored his 'You're still stupid' muttered response and finished washing my hair and getting out of the tub.

Honestly, bed sounded like a heaven-sent gift.

So, naturally, something had to happen that kept me from going to sleep.

"What's that?!" Jiang Cheng pointed at the fur ball curled up on my bed.

"That's Yunru," I sigh," She must've decided to sleep indoors tonight or just grew bored of exploring."

What great timing, you have, girl...

_Takes after you._

Don't start, please...

"You have a rat?" Jiang Cheng makes a disgusted face.

I give him a deadpan look, walk over to the bed and pick Yunru up, showing him just how big and long she was.

"This is not a rat, kid," I tell him," This is a sable, a ferret."

_She's not a ferret._

She is a ferret if I say she's a ferret.

Yunru yawned and climbed up my arm and jumped back onto the bed.
"And she has the right idea, let's sleep, I'm tired," I put my boots at the end of the bed and lie down, pulling the blanket over me.

"Why do you have her?" Jiang Cheng does the same, climbing in his bed, "Where did you get her?"

"I found her," I sigh, "In Qinghe, about two years ago. She was just a pup then, so I cared for her until she could take care of herself."

"You have a pet," He pouts.

"Yunru is a wild animal," I stress out the word, "She comes and goes as she pleases, if she wants to go hunting and never come back she can, she's almost an adult too, eventually she'll leave to find a mate or something."

*She might stay.*

She'll go, everyone needs a family.

*She just might choose you as her family.*

I let out a deep sigh.

"I want a pet..." Jiang Cheng mutters.

"If you want one then ask your parents," I tell him, "And stop muttering, *Platypus*, it's unbecoming."

Jiang Cheng makes an affronted noise and throws his pillow at me.

I sit up and throw it back at him, "Sleep, kid, and let me sleep!"

"I'm not a kid!" He yells.

"You're totally a kid!" I retort, "You're throwing pillows and everything!"

"If I'm a kid so are you!" He yells.

"Fine, then we're both kids and should go to sleep," I concede, "So, pretty please, go to sleep!"

I lie back down and roll over.

"You're so annoying!" He grumbles, "And weird!"

"And you're not getting rid of me no matter how much you kick and scream," I laugh, "So better get used to it!"

He extinguishes his lamp and grumbles, turning away from me and facing the wall.

Kids, always a delight.

*Only you...*

I chuckle lowly and curl up, Yunru coming to cuddle next to my head, pulling the blanket up.

Tomorrow's another day.
Because I did learn from my mistakes, no matter what Ike said, I brought a bunch of simple drawing materials with me when we left the room in the morning.

According to Jiang Cheng today there would be no Teacher Fang, instead we'd have simple calculus and history lessons in the morning, followed by cultural lessons, which were a mix of various subjects.

Including etiquette.

I had let out a mournful sigh when he told me that and Yunru popped out of her satchel to nuzzle my cheek in a 'there there' gesture.

Madam Yu wasn't impressed with the sable on my shoulder. Even less impressed with the spoiled donkey resting its laurels in the stables, which I found out had been my mother's alone before she married my father, but merely griped about it for half an hour and started arguing with Jiang FengMian about the allowances I was getting unlike other normal disciples.

Jiang FengMian simply smiled and asked Jiang Cheng if he wanted a sable of his own.

Jiang Cheng quickly answered he wanted a spiritual dog.

Madam Yu quickly replied he should get three as I had two pets.

I didn't even bother getting into that mess of an argument, I looked at the starry eyed Jiang Cheng and ribbed him about picking after puppies until they were house-broken.

He wasn't impressed with me.

Jiang YanLi shushed us before we could get into another 'fight' at breakfast, and we quickly at the rest of our meal in silence.

Madam Yu left first, as she always did, and called YanLi to go with her as they had lessons together. Jiang Cheng whispered to me they were 'womanly arts' but couldn't explain further, not exactly sure what that meant either.

Jiang FengMian had smiled at us but hadn't answered our query.

Given that I was more interested in math and history than in boring old men going on long-winded spiels about incomplete knowledge of energy, I paid close attention to what was being taught, and took squiggly notes on paper during the lessons.

Unfortunately those notes ended up being a point of contest against me as I was apparently awful at taking notes and my usual writing was illegible to other people. My argument that they were my notes and not anyone else's so why should they be reading my notes was both ignored and scolded for.

Honestly, I just threw in the towel about it and spared myself the headache of arguing back.

Whatever, I'd have my fountain pen soon enough.

Lunch came and went, with YanLi providing some of the dishes (and Jiang Cheng continued pestering of me to admit they were delicious) as she enjoyed cooking as a past-time, and I found myself a relatively quiet place to sketch and draw for a few hours until it was time to get back into lessons.
Yunru had been with me at lunch, if only to steal food off my plate or be cute for YanLi’s eyes and beg for food from her, but had went away once all the food was gone.

Probably begging for food somewhere else.

_Priorities._

Can't say I blame her.

Donkey was fine, living a carefree life and annoying all the other mounts there, so I wasn't worried about him.

I was using charcoal sticks to draw the view around me, the rippling water of the river in front of me was full of lily pads but I wouldn't see any lotus blossoms this year, the weather already starting to grow cold.

Once that sketch was drawn I moved on to draw an otter, from memory the exact dimensions were slightly skewed, I was sure, but it still close enough to the original that I wasn't too bothered by it.

The beaver was harder. I started sketching one but quickly scraped it. It wasn't as I wanted it to look like.

I closed my eyes and thought back on what beavers were supposed to be like.

I had never seen one in real life, illustrations from books or the occasional movie, but I wanted to get it as realistic as I could.

I focused on memories I had, and when I opened my eyes I started to slowly sketch a very close approximation of one.

Not the best, and I could probably disguise a lot of silly mistakes in proportions with paint and a scenery, but if I ever did that then I'd probably send the picture to Lan Zhan and send the kid on a wild goose chase trying to figure out what it was.

... 

_Please don’t._

Why not?

_Because then everyone will want to know how you know that._

And I tell them it's a myth.

_Told by whom?_

...A stranger.

_Why do I even bother..._

I chuckle and finish the sketch, blowing the loose charcoal dust and placing the finished picture together with my other drawings inside a packet.

_What will you draw next?_

I mused on what to draw before spying two older disciples sparring a bit further away from my
observation roost where I was perched, and decide to give it a try. I could see them clearly and it was interesting to sketch moving targets.

I was just about done when a sudden shout comes from beneath me. I look down and see Jiang YanLi covering her mouth in a gasp, "What are you doing up there?! You're going to fall down!"

I don't think I'm that high up, but the poor girl looks so startled that I quickly pack my things and nimbly climb down from the cozy spot I had found.

"Is lunch hour over?" I ask her, "I'd think Jiang Cheng would've already run around looking for me if it was."

Jiang YanLi quickly checks me over to see that I was unhurt, but tuts at my charcoal covered fingers, "No, it isn't over yet, almost though, what were you doing up there? It's dangerous!"

It's really not.

"Drawing," I answer," I wanted to paint the water and since I was already drawing I decided to sketch the otter and beaver for Jiang Cheng to see. Haven't done the platypus yet, but I wanted to use color for that one."

She takes me by the hand," C'mon, let's try to get your hands clean before the lessons start, Mother will be upset if she sees you like this."

*Upset sounds like an understatement.*

When is it ever not?

"It's just charcoal..." I hum," If I was using oils or other paints then it'd be harder to get it off, but charcoal washes off easily."

"Oils?" Jiang YanLi blinks," How do you paint with oil?"

"Oil pastels?" I ask her," Well... They're colored chalk except they're not really chalk, more like crayons."

Jiang YanLi frowns and I can see that she doesn't understand.

"After I draw the platypus for Jiang Cheng do you want me to paint you using oils?" I offer her," I could make it a portrait!"

Jiang YanLi smiles at my enthusiasm and nods," If A-Ying isn't busy with lessons."

"It's a promise!" I cheer," I'll draw the prettiest portrait of you!"

She chuckles and leads me to the kitchen to wipe my hands clean.

"If A-Ying says so then it must be true," She replies.

You better believe it is!

This world won't know what hit it!

---

I got bored very quickly in the next lesson. It wasn't that it was a bad lesson or that the teacher was just ranting about meaningless topics, it was just that I felt full of energy and all I could do was sit
here and listen to the lecture.

Once more, Jiang Cheng was paying avid attention to the professor, and I blanked out, pulling paper and charcoal out of my pack and sketching just about everything I could think of. In a single page I had a little Yunru with stuffed cheeks, a few viola flowers, Xiaodan and a focused Jiang Cheng with narrowed eyes.

I was just getting started on one final sketch of the YunmengJiang Sect gate when my sense alert me to dodge, I quickly sink to the floor and the paper ball thrown at my head flies right above me and hits the boy in front of me.

The boy turns around with angry eyes at the disciple behind me, who stares, wide-eyed, at the other boy and gulps.

Yeah, you done goofed.

"Students," The teacher calls for our attention," What is so important that it has you distracted?"

The boy behind me has the brilliant idea to try and pin this on me.

"He threw a paper ball!" He quickly points at me.

I give him a deadpan look.

"I didn't," I tell the teacher," I just dodged the ball tossed at my head."

The teacher looks at the boy behind me and then at the boy in front," Who threw the ball?" He asks the boy.

The kid points at the one behind me.

"Gou, in the hallway, as punishment you will stand there until I call you back inside," The teacher orders.

The boy opens his mouth to argue but his friend quickly makes sure he doesn't.

He leaves the classroom but not before glaring at me.

Seriously, kids were weird. Why get angry that I didn't take the blame for him? I don't even know him.

"And you," The teacher turns to me," What is that?" He points at my desk.

Jiang Cheng hisses and I look down at my desk.

There's nothing out of the ordinary, I haven't spilled anything and I have it decently organized. I look at the teacher, confused," What is what?"

The teacher stops for a moment before stepping closer and plucking the paper full of sketches.

He stares at them for a moment before looking down at me," You drew these?"

I nod," Why?"

The teacher doesn't answer straight away, inspecting the drawings," Who taught you?"
Tough question.

I had an art tutor starting from when I was six, who stayed until I just started practicing on my own at around fourteen, I studied arts since I was a child and learnt many things from books or recreating famous paintings.

But that was when I was still Sarah.

No one had taught Wei Ying how to draw, I just remembered how to paint.

"No one," I answered him after a pause," I just... started drawing what I saw while I traveled."

"No one taught you," The teacher looks me in the eye.

I shake my head," No, sir."

"Have you drawn much?" He asks.

I nod," I have a few pictures with me, if Teacher wants to see them?" I offer.

He nods and holds out his hand.

I quickly grab a few unimportant pictures and hand them over.

The teacher stares at them, flipping though the pages, and then looks down at me again.

"It seems a conversation with the Sect Leader about this new development is in order," He says.

Jiang Cheng and I frown, not exactly sure why Jiang FengMian had to be told, while the rest of the class throw me looks.

"If that's what Teacher decides," I nod.

The teacher goes back to his desk, not even handing my drawings back, and resumes the lesson.

Jiang Cheng mouths 'What was that about?' to me and I shrug.

'No clue,' I mouth back.

What was so special about a couple drawings?

Apparently a lot.

"A genius," The teacher rambled while Jiang FengMian views the pictures he had been handed," Never have I seen such a technique, and the material! These were not done with ink!"

I stood, bewildered, as the man continued his spiel about how my art was fascinating.

I mean, I was flattered, but they were just charcoal sketches.

"Thank you, Master Cao," Jiang FengMian said, halting any more ramblings," For bringing this matter to my attention, I assure you I will work something out with Wei Ying."

It was a dismissal as clear as day, and the teacher saw it for what it was and, bowing, said last pleasantries to him and left.
"Can I have those back?" I ask him, "Teacher Cao kept them through class and I thought he'd confiscate them."

Jiang FengMian hands them back easily enough, "You never mentioned you painted."

I frown up at him, "Why would I talk about that?"

"It's a nice passion to have," Jiang FengMian continues, "You have talent."

No, I have decades of practice.

I shrug, "I don't think these are anything much, they're just sketches. Oh! But I have drawn the otter and beaver for you to see, Jiang Cheng!" I turn to the boy, and pull the two pictures out of my pack, "Here," I hand them to him.

Jiang Cheng looks at the pictures and gapes.

"What are these?" He asks, astonished, "I've never seen them!"

"That's an otter," I point at one picture, "That's a beaver," I point at the other, "I haven't painted the platypus yet, but I'll do that one in color."

Jiang FengMian observes the pictures from over Jiang Cheng's head, "These are really well made, the level of detail..."

They didn't look that impressive to me, especially since I knew I had screwed up dimensions and details one could only get from a reliable memory and knowing what the animal looked like in real life.

"Can you teach me?" Jiang Cheng looks at me, eager and bright eyed.

"I can teach you if you really want to learn for the sake of learning and not because you want to copy me," I tell him, "Or else, you'll really turn into a platypus."

He reddens and frowns, "I really want to learn!"

I nod, "Then I'll teach you, shouldn't be harder than trying to stay awake for Teacher Fang's lectures," I smirk and Jiang Cheng responds in kind.

Jiang FengMian places his hands on both our heads, "I am glad you two are getting along."

Jiang Cheng's eyes go wide like saucers and he brightens up immediately, "Yes!"

It was sad to see the kid so desperate for acknowledgement and attention.

Had I been like this before?

I thought back at the lonely child trapped in a pristine manor with only books, paints and a rainbow colored being to keep her company.

Surely, I had, at some point, desperately tried to have my parents attention on me, to disastrous consequences.

Wei Ying had never had that problem, attention and affection were easily given and it was rare for him to feel lonely.
Jiang Cheng would grow up to be an embittered adult, not even a shard of this bright-eyed child remained in his countenance in the future, and I did my best to keep my sadness out of my eyes and expression.

I wanted something better for him.

A better future.

Let him keep smiling like this.

Please. Please. Please.

Let him keep smiling.

I pray.

Chapter End Notes

There we have it, the explanation!
And the reason why JC gets three dogs when he's little.
AGF!WWX being confused by everyone admiring his doodles going 'wtf... It's Yunru eating berries, not the Mona Lisa'

And WWX so worried about JC staying happy in life, really getting chapters ready while listening to MDZS songs is not the brightest decision to make, but damn there's some good songs out there.
I'd recommend Sally Warwick's channel, she has many MDZS songs with english subs, and they're to die for. And cry heavily about.

As for the Platypus story; I don't remember exactly what the story was like but it went along the lines of Duck gets really jealous, doesn't listen to the whole entire lake of animals telling him about only things he can do that the others can't, tries to be like the otter/beaver and gets laughed at.
He starts ranging about his predicament, makes everyone else miserable in the lake, and gets turned into the Platypus by something (I don't remember if it was a shooting start, a wicked witch of the west, or his evil fairy godmother, I honestly can't remember) and he gets miserable.
And cries a lot, and leaves to find his own place in the world.
Or something, again it's been a long time, and I have no idea why that story is still occupying space in my brain.
Chapter Summary

Where there's never enough time, where a brat is asking all sorts of hard question, and where a realization happens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Say it before you run out of time. Say it before it's too late. Say what you're feeling. Waiting is a mistake." - Anonymous

Chapter 41: In Patience

The next day Teacher Fang was back and I managed to get pulled from the class to start forming a golden core with the older disciples, getting stared at by twelve or so pre-teens isn't my idea of fun but it was hard not to show my relief of not having to endure Teacher Fang's lecture.

Poor, poor Jiang Cheng.

Yes, poor, poor Jiang Cheng.

You're not going to brag about being rid of the old man, are you?

No, but it's going to be impossible not to look amused when he comes trudging back to the main hall for supper and gripe about the lecture while all I did all morning was sit in a bamboo seat and 'circulate' energy into a sphere in my chest.

Which, let me tell you, is odd.

Whenever I dived inside of myself I could see an orb of light, energy, warm and bright and liquid. I could just reach out and let the energy flow from the orb and into the rippling void beneath me, allowing me to connect with the world around me, to see so much more than what is there.

They wanted me to instead grab all that liquid energy and make it into a solid shape in the center of my chest.

At first, the task didn't seem to be so hard. All I had to was transfer this energy up to my chest and make a marble out of it. Easy, right?

Wrong.

When are you ever not?

Ugh.
You could cup your hands full of liquid energy and carry it up to your chest easily enough, but the furthest you were away from that little orb of light the thinnest the liquid got and the faster it slip between your cupped hands.

So, by the time you got to the new 'energy deposit' in your chest, all you had to place in there were one or two drops of energy.

I initially thought that it was because it was my first time, your first attempts at doing something are always inevitably worse than your more practiced shots, but... It kept happening.

Over and over and over again.

After the sixth or seventh time it happened I kind of stopped and thought about the process. Either I was doing something wrong, or the process was just inherently slow.

Going through novel information, my bet was that the process was just slow.

The thought irked me.

Not only were people cultivating an incomplete theory, their actual methods of cultivation were so slow... I knew tortoises that could move faster than the rate at which these inexperienced kids would be able to gather enough energy to form their golden cores.

What are you going to do about it?

I need to change it!

You sure about that?

Yes, I am sure! These people need to know-...

And who else?

...Uh?

You tell anyone about a different, more powerful method of cultivation and word will spread. It could very help earnest, good, and friendly people, but it will also allow the exact opposite people to do the same.

What would Wen Ruohan do if he knew of this? You might go 'he's already too old to use this method' and that might be true, but his sons aren't.

The thought of Wen Chao or Wen Xu having the same power scale as I did, when they already caused enough chaos in canon as is, was chilling.

I couldn't let that happen.

But that meant...

It means that your generation will not learn this. Maybe Wen Yuan's generation or their children's generation, but not yours.

I grit my teeth and stared at the ever-flowing ball of light inside of me.

The knowledge to change peoples lives, and it needs to be kept secret because some would use it to their own goals and ambitions.
I thought back on all the recipes the System provided me, all the materials, equipment, and sheer amount of resources I could learn and grow from, survive out of, and just... just realized how powerless I was at times.

What use was power if it could not be used? Or taught?

I was to build a better future, but doing so, aspiring to do so, could very well condemn a generation to a needless war, needless pain and suffering.

*You cannot stop the war from happening.*

I know that.

*You cannot control the actions of others.*

I know that.

It's just that... It's just that I really thought that I could make a difference here.

*You can.*

I can't.

Madam Yu still compares Jiang Cheng to me, still hates me, and to make Jiang Cheng feel better I'd have to compromise on my own growth, and I cannot do that. I cannot stop growing just because this one child is being pitted against an adult inside a child's body.

I have to get stronger.

It's still not enough.

*How do you know that?*

Because if I cannot stop this war then I am powerless to stop hundreds, if not thousands or millions, from dying.

If I cannot stop this war, I can only do damage control.

How much can I prevent?

How many can I possibly save?

How... How...

How weak.

I slammed my fists into the solid void beneath my feet, punching it over and over again, and howling in anger.

It's still not enough.

I need more.

I need to be stronger.

I need more power.

There still isn't enough time.

As if materialized by my thoughts above the glowing orb of light a countdown formed by glowing blue letters forms.

I stare at the ticking down seconds, and at the remaining time.

Not enough time.

But it is the time you have. A wise man knows that time is always running out, what does he do?

He learns from the past, lives in the present and plans for the future.

I take a deep breath, calm my emotions down and lock my eyes on the swirling energy in front of me, and then up at the countdown.

Not enough time.

So what does that mean?

I have no time to waste.

I get up and gather more liquid energy in my hands.

I would get stronger. I would get better. I would do better.

The war would come, of that I was certain, but the people it took, the people that remained...

Fixed events can only be delayed, never avoided.

Outcomes... Well... No one had said anything about fixed outcomes.

Play to win. Hold the cards close. Read the ones that remain on the deck.

Life is but a game.

And I am a terrible loser.

I joined Jiang Cheng for the afternoon lessons and started to show him various trapping knots I used in night-hunting and in regular hunting. Teaching him was... peaceful. He was a good student, despite his frequent jabs that I wasn't that much older than him and therefore shouldn't act like I was his elder, and he learnt fast.

The theory at least, put theory into practice would have to wait.

I thought of teaching him how to use the bow but upon reflecting on it I decided it'd be best to ask permission first. Agreeing to teach him was all well and good until he actually tried something I taught him and ended up hurt because of it.

Plus, I didn't even know whether he was strong enough to pull the string back.

The only reason I had been able to do so was because I cheated.

Or, well, it wasn't exactly cheating... I just had a crutch others didn't.
Although, to be fair, if I had just woke up in a new world with a culture vastly different than my own, in a completely different era, and had nothing to guide me or to at least provide a direction to go towards, I wouldn't have lived for long.

I'd have totally panicked and gotten myself killed over something stupid.

*You just might, with your track record of dubious decisions and actions I wouldn't put it past you to get yourself killed over something minor.*

Like?

*Like someone badmouthing your parents and you punching them in the face.*

Okay, first off I *tried* punching her in the stomach, secondly, I have every right to defend CangSe and ChangZe's memories from every douchebag who thinks they can just talk about them however they please just because they're dead.

*You don't need to automatically resort to violence.*

It's usually the fastest solution.

*It's also the quickest way to offend someone you can't afford to antagonize.*

Jeez, I get it already, I'm sorry. I'll try to not let it happen again.

*You better.*

"Are you even listening?" Jiang Cheng hisses at me.

"Not really, why?" I ask him in a soft voice.

"Why?! You're supposed to be learning!" He hisses again and pinches me.

I bat away his hand," He's talking about the different types of spirits."

"And you already know it?" He gives me an unconvinced look.

"I've encountered most of them," I shrug," But no, I just find it boring. No worries, I won't 'bring shame' or whatever down on your family."

"Our family..." He grumbles.

I sigh," Your family," I tell him," I'm just... a foster disciple, of sorts."

I'm not even sure what I was, to be honest.

Technically I fell under the category of a Rogue Cultivator, since I performed on night-hunts and held no association with any sects or clans, but my age would automatically send me to the 'apprentice' or 'disciple' category, since you were only considered a full-fledged cultivator once you reached, at the very least, fourteen years of age.

Or your sect/clan decided you were ready and inducted you earlier.

Whichever happened first.

As the Bai Clan and I kept our close relationship secret, they could not induct me, therefore I
wasn't yet a cultivator. But, I wasn't a mere disciple either.

_Somewhere in between?_

Sure, let's go with that.

Jiang Cheng gave me a look that promised we'd be having this conversation at another, more opportune, time.

I just hoped he would not tell Jiang FengMian and get the man more involved with my current development in the sect.

Already, I was in advanced classes to form my golden core, with disciples three or four years older than me, and would have a private tutor regarding my painting skills. Madam Yu hadn't been happy about the latter, and I'd been quick to try and get Jiang FengMian to drop the matter, I had no need or want of someone coming in and telling me how to paint, but, again, I had been overruled.

The Madam had been suspiciously quiet about the former, and I had felt something akin to a foreboding feeling about her silence on the matter.

_An augury of future conflicts?_

God, I hope not.

Anyways, my week promised to be packed with things to do. Jiang Cheng stated we had a day and a half to ourselves, without any lessons, but I doubted anyone would let me find peace and quiet to scour through the YunmengJiang Sect in search of interesting books.

Well, any books really, since my goal was to read everything.

_You could just ask._

...Ruin my fun, why don't you.

_It's not supposed to be fun, it's supposed to be time-efficient._

I grumble under my breath but concede to the point.

I'll ask once the lesson is over, might help to keep me focused on lessons, reading about the subject.

_Or prove that you're actually learning something._

That too.

"Why don't you think of us as family?" Jiang Cheng got right to business once we settled down for a meal.

Dinner time meal.

He did this on purpose, I realize as everyone stops eating to look at me, devious _brat._

"You're not my family," I put down my chopsticks," They're your family and this is your home," I state," I'm just... staying here, temporarily."
Jiang Cheng frowns, "Temporarily?"

"For a short time," I clarify, "I made a promise, eventually I'll have to leave to fulfill it."

Better to rip the bandage now and not get caught up in the whole 'you promised to stay by my side' debacle.

"What promise?" Jiang Cheng asks.

I look down at my hands, the promise happened some time ago, but I still remember it clearly," I promised my mother I'd become a great person, like her Shizun, and that I'd have my own mountain."

"A mountain?" Jiang Cheng didn't understand how those two things could be related.

"So you're taking advantage of the Sect and then leave without any gratitude," Madam Yu sneers.

I stare at her with a steely look in my eyes, "I did not ask to stay, I am perfectly fine with leaving, I did not ask for your help, Ma'am."

_Temper. Reign in your temper._

I took a deep breath and slowly breathed out, repeating it two more times before I felt in control enough to stop.

"Ungrateful child," Madam Yu speaks, "To belong to a sect is an unspeakable honor."

"An honor I did not request," I assert, "I have stated, several times, that I was fine with my travels, I did not walk through the gates by my choice alone," I point out.

"Wei Ying," Jiang FengMian intervenes, "A child should not be alone on the streets."

"Words spoken whilst there are other hundreds of orphans of fellow rogue cultivators living off trash and the generosity of strangers," His 'care' irks me," How am I different than them? Because you knew my parents?"

Jiang FengMian's lips press into a thin line, and Madam Yu laughs," How different indeed! In terms of manners and courtesy, you are clearly no better than a common street rat."

I smile genially," As you've said, Ma'am, I had no mother to teach me any manners."

Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi shift in their seats, uncomfortable, and I pull back on my animosity. _Be better._

I close my eyes and turn away, controlling my breathing again, and trying to bring down the sizzling anger just starting to spark inside of me.

"I apologize," I turn back to Madam Yu," That was discourteous of me."

She does not reproach me, but she does snub me for the rest of the meal, which is spent in a tense atmosphere.

Goddammit.

Honestly, every time I promised myself I wouldn't do this, I inevitably made things worse.
I kept myself not to antagonize the woman, there was absolutely no reason, no merit, in antagonizing her. So why did I keep doing it?

I thought about it a lot as I ate, mulling over what it could possibly be about Madam Yu that just raised my hackles.

I couldn't think of a reason, anything that was out of place with what I had expected her to be like, nothing that screamed at me 'dislike, dislike, dislike' whenever I saw her or addressed her.

Truthfully, I just... didn't like her, but I didn't hate her either.

It was confusing.

I shook my head when my thoughts kept spiraling endlessly without a conclusion.

Best to take a break and ruminate about this with a fresh perspective, and awake mind.

I'd figure out the reason sooner or later.

Of course, that did not mean Jiang Cheng didn't restart his questions about my eventual departure and why I had to leave in order to fulfill, in his mind, a weird promise to make.

"You can be a great person here!" He kept repeating.

"And the mountain?" I offer him a tired grin," I'm not leaving anytime soon, Jiang Cheng, not until I'm not 'a child' in your father's eyes."

"But you'll still leave," He says, upset," What about teaching me?"

"I will teach you," I chuckle," But I won't be teaching you forever, you will eventually learn things all on your own."

He frowns, I can vaguely see his troubled expression thanks to the moonlight coming in from the bedroom window," But why do you have to leave?"

"Because I made a promise," I answer him for the nth time.

"Why? Why is that promise important?" He grumbles.

"If I promised you to stay by your side forever, and suddenly went back on my word and left, would you be angry?" I asked him, already knowing he would be angry no matter what he told me now.

He frowns harder and thinks about it," Yeah... If you promised you'd stay and then left that'd make you a liar."

"And I'm not a liar," Not all the time, anyway," I already made that promise, to my parents, so I'll have to keep it," I tell him.

"But you'll go away..." Jiang Cheng pulls his blanket closer to himself.

I turn to face him and prop my head up on my arm," When I leave it doesn't mean we won't ever talk again, you just won't see me all the time," I reasoned," Besides, your sister you eventually leave too, won't she? It's the same, we can still be friends, we can still talk and meet, I could still teach you things. Just not all the time."
He glares at the wall behind me and then looks away," I don't want you to go."

I chuckled," You're the one that two days ago couldn't stand me knocking at your bedroom's door asking to be let in."

He pouts and I believe he's flushing in embarrassment," It's different..." He mumbles.

"How so?" I ask him, amused.

"You're family now," He tells me.

I sigh, tiredly," Not family, platypus, I already had one, I don't want another."

Lies.

Jiang Cheng turns back to face me and his dark eyes show signs of tears," You're lying!"

I blink," How do you know?" I ask him instead of trying to deny it.

"Because you always get sad when I can you family! You miss them!" He answers me.

I chuckle again," Well, of course I miss them, I love them," I tell him," Took me a while to realize it too," I add in a quieter tone.

I regret not treating them better than I had.

I regret not cherishing every moment we had together more.

I regret being falling asleep that night and letting them slip through my fingers without saying goodbye.

"What do you mean?" Jiang Cheng asks softly, having obviously heard my change in voice tone.

I ponder on how to answer his inquiry, rolling back on my back and staring at the white ceiling.

"I... resented them," I finally tell him," They were gone almost every night and I got left behind. I hated it," I continue," No matter how much I begged to go with them, I was always told no, so I had to stay behind on an inn or park until they came back."

"I was... not lonely, but I didn't like the feeling of having to wait for them," I shrug despite knowing he wouldn't really see it," I used to be angry at them, I hated being left behind, and since they kept doing it, I hated them."

"But you went on night-hunts with them!" Jiang Cheng tells me.

"Later, yes, not at first," I laughed," And even then I couldn't go very far from them and had to obey to them at all times," I told him," But it was... fun. And I got to spend so much time with them, I loved it. I wasn't left behind anymore, I felt... really happy."

"And then?" Jiang Cheng wonders.

"And then they died," My expression twists," They were gone and they were never coming back. I was... so sad. I wanted them back. I wanted them to be right there with me again. But they weren't... They never would be."

I sigh tiredly and look back at Jiang Cheng with a sad smile," I've had my family, I don't want to
replace it. So your family is your own, platypus, and I am fine with that."

Jiang Cheng wants to say something more but stays silent.

I nod," Let's go to sleep, okay?"

He reluctantly nods and closes his eyes to sleep.

I roll over and curl up in my blankets.

You can start fresh, you know?

I do not want to.

Liar. Your flaw is that you carry everything inside your soul like a bloody cross. You don't have to do this alone.

I know.

You don't. You are ignoring a thousand helping hands in favor of walking across the hot coals and burning all the bridges lent your way prematurely.

I am keeping the bridges intact, you know I am.

Not every bridge. Why not accept the Jiangs as family? Why keep your self at arms length?

Because Lotus Pier may burn?

Because it is not fair.

Not fair?

I did not call them my family for so long... I was pretending to be their son, yet at the same time, I did not see them as my parents.

How can I welcome these people into my heart as family when I did not do the same with CangSe and ChangZe?

Oh, darling...

I miss them.

I know.

It's like a hole inside my soul, it hurts.

I know, honey.

I can't replace them. I can't! I can't even think about feeling up that hole with more people, when I treated them so bad.

You didn't.

I did.

You didn't.

I did! Ike, I did! I was just like her!
You were not. You weren't, and never will be, like that woman.

I tried to not let any tears fall from my eyes, concerned I'd wake Jiang Cheng up, but I had to cover my head with the blanket just in case.

That woman was a bitter, and unloving, cruel human being. You have never, not once, displayed any of her mannerisms or traits. You spent years of your life working to make others feel better, even if it was just brewing a cup of tea and listening to them, you were there when they needed you.

That woman never was. She took, and took, and took and what she didn't take from you she'd destroy.

You are not her, my darling, you've never been her.

I curled up into a tight ball and tried to focus on his words without getting lost on any trigger memories.

But it was in doing so, in listening to his words, that a picture started taking place in my mind.

I saw a more youthful 'Mother' posing with my Father for a portrait by the fountain, just after they were married.

And then the picture shifted, and when it settled there was a younger Madam Yu with a stern expression standing dispassionately beside a smiling Jiang FengMian.

The thought clicked.

Why I detested Madam Yu even when trying and swearing to myself that I wouldn't rise to the bait of antagonizing her.

She reminded me of Baroness Windsor.

Chapter End Notes

Sad chapter, yes I know, kill me. (It gets worse muahahahahaha *gets shot*)
Okay so, the Baroness title isn't actually a title, like they're not royalty anymore, it's just a weird inherited thing? Of sorts? Idk, I wanted Marquis but that was higher up on the social ladder (or so wiki says) so I went for Baroness.
Poor WWX and his complicated feelings about family.

As a side note, I have no idea how golden cores actually work so... yeah, I'll probably contradict myself a few times and just go "aliens, that's how".
Chapter Summary

Where resemblances do not mean the same person, where there's a lot of books, and where being impatient is harmful to your continued well being.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What good has impatience ever brought? It has only served as the mother of mistakes and the father of irritation." - Steve Maraboli

Chapter 42: Impatience

When the thought appeared it made everything so much clearer.

Of course I wouldn't be able to stand the woman when on a subconscious level I was associating her image with that of that despicable woman.

But they weren't the same.

Madam Yu loved her children dearly, she was angry that Jiang FengMian did not spend much time with them, that he did not gaze at his son as he'd gaze at the son of another woman. The son of the woman he had loved and lost years before. When Lotus Pier burnt the last thing she had done was make sure her son would get out safely, and to make the child she had treated so horribly promise to protect her son.

Order them to reunite with their sister, and to be safe.

Baroness Windsor would never have done that.

Baroness Windsor was a bitter old woman who viewed her only daughter as the biggest shame to have befallen their house, and a personal failing of hers to have birthed such a reject, and who'd done everything in her power, short of ordering my untimely demise, to make sure no one else knew such a mistake existed.

I wouldn't be surprised if more distant relatives had been told the baby girl the Baroness had been expecting had been a stillborn, if only to prevent any questions about how I was doing.

Or to appear on any family portraits or christmas postcards.

When I had left that house I had, for the first time ever, actually walked the streets and interacted with the world without any lines to recite or governesses looking over my shoulder.

It felt freeing.
And terrifying.

Madam Yu was not Baroness Windsor.

She wasn't. And I needed to come to terms with that.

The way they'd look down on me and act so superciliously towards me, held great resemblance with how Baroness Windsor used to look at me.

But there were differences.

There was a reason as to why Madam Yu hated me, the Baroness had no such excuse.

I had done nothing to deserve her hatred, negligence, and abuse.

In parallel, I had done nothing for Madam Yu to dislike me prior to coming to YunmengJiang, although I wouldn't say the same since I arrived.

...I could work with that?

I thought about it, letting words and thoughts mesh together and forming roots and branches in the garden growing out the black void that was my mind, and decided that yes, I could work with her.

Look past her issues and see the person.

*It will take time.*

Yes... Changes always do.

*You might not change anything.*

I know, more than anything I know that I am not omniscient.

*It is not your problem to solve.*

I know, I pull the blanket off my face and rub my eyes, but I'll be solving many other people's problems in the future.

*So you'll use this a practice run?*

You have to walk before you can run.

*How very not Tony Stark of you.*

I snorted and covered my mouth, looking worriedly at Jiang Cheng but he remained asleep.

Don't make me laugh like that!

*I just remembered something.*

What?

*Did you remember to write to your pen-pals?*

...

My eyes widen.
Oh, no.

Nice dreams!

Goddammit, Ike!

Love you, dearest!

Go drown in a puddle, why did you have to remind me of that!

He was already hiding somewhere in my mind so there was no reply. I threw an arm over my face and groaned, quietly, sulking at my horrible luck.

I just knew ShouShan would send back a reply if only to laugh at my misery.

The next day everyone pretended that last night's dinnertime discussion hadn't happened and I went along with it, I didn't want to rock the boat any more than I already had, today was another Teacher Fang day for Jiang Cheng and another session of carrying drops of liquid energy up to my chest, something I wasn't exactly looking forward to due to how boring the repetition got, and how slow the process was, but the afternoon lessons were more interesting.

History and heraldry in this place was interesting.

Despite having magic and otherworldly beings crawling about at night, their technological developments were... sub-par at best, well, on some things. Flying swords did sound pretty damn cool.

But, again, such things were only available to cultivators, and only the ones with the money to afford such items, which made for a very imbalanced society.

I needed to write to Yan MingXia and get her thoughts on this, now that I could get replies back, and ShouShan's too. I'd need to remind Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi not to use their actual names in their replies, I wasn't sure if I wanted our relationship to be public.

With the scrutiny the letters would get when they started coming, it'd be best to play it as if they were just simple GusuLan Sect disciples and not its heirs.

That won't work forever, especially not when you go to Gusu yourself.

If I can keep our relationship from being exposed for seven years I'll be grateful enough not to complain when my inevitable bad luck comes right around the corner and kicks me in the balls.

It's almost like you're hiding a secret affair, my dear.

Goddammit, Ike, it's too early for this.

Madam Yu finished eating and got up, leaving with a few clipped words to Jiang YanLi to remind her of lessons, and a fleeing glance in Jiang Cheng's direction.

Damn uptight types of women.

Temper.

I am perfectly calm.
I sigh through my nose and focus on eating the last bun on my plate and the rest of my soup.

Today was going to be a long day and I wanted it done and over with. I had letters to write, excuses to come up with, check in on Donkey and try to find Yunru to make sure she hadn't gotten herself caught by a miffed disciple.

Also, I wanted to paint that platypus picture for Jiang Cheng, and maybe a few more to send with the letters.

And I also promised to paint YanLi’s portrait when I had the time.

Which reminded me...

"Books," The word comes out of my mouth.

"Uh?" Jiang Cheng gives me a confused look.

"We have those history books to study in class," I think of an excuse fast," I wonder if there are more books like that."

"Of course there are!" Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes," The YunmengJiang has a Sect Library full of books! So wh-..."

He stops when he notices the stars in my eyes.

"Lots of books?" I ask him, playing up my act," A whole room full of books?"

Jiang Cheng reddens slightly but straightens up his spine and turns his nose up in the air, so reminiscent of his mother it was adorable," Yes, a room full of books! The YunmengJiang has one of the best and most extensive libraries in the Great Sects, short only of GusuLan who is an older Sect."

"Ooh," I gasp in wonderment," Can I see the library?"

Jiang Cheng gives me another odd look before quickly looking away," Disciples of the Sect are allowed inside to study, but you cannot remove any books without permission," He explains," I can take you there after lunch," He offers.

I smile brightly at him," Yes, thanks, platypus!"

Jiang Cheng chokes on his own spit and turns, face flaming red, towards me," Stop calling me that!"

My smile turns into a wicked grin and I quickly reach out to pinch his cheek," Nope! You're my adorable shidi, the platypus!"

Jiang FengMian chuckles and YanLi covers her mouth primly with her sleeve.

Jiang Cheng reddens even more and bats my hand away," Stop! Or I'll call you something too!"

"Oh?" My eyes gleam," What brilliant nickname can you come up for me?"

Jiang Cheng closes his lips into a thin line, thinking, before looking away," I will think of something!"
I prop my head up on my hand and smile at him, "Mn, I'll be waiting then."

He grumbles something under his breath and goes back to eating breakfast.

I wanted to keep this as is. This attitude, this energy, this peaceful atmosphere.

I wanted a better tomorrow where this scene didn't have to change.

Please. Please. Please.

I close my eyes and offer a silent prayer to whatever deity is out there.

Let him be happy. Let him grow up loved. Let him be himself.

Please. Please. Please.

I kind of trudged back to the main hall for lunch and just sat down with a sigh, massaging at my chest with a grimace.

"Are you hurt?" Jiang Cheng asks, eyeing me with concern.

"No, just sore, and tired," I groan. "It doesn't hurt but you have to continuously keep your energy circulating for hours, I'm not used to doing that. When I night-hunt I don't waste needless energy, just spark up once or twice, the rest of the time is good old fashioned track-and-capture," I explain to him.

He blinks," But cultivators always use Chi when night-hunting!" He tells me.

I shrug," Well, no one told me that, so why would I suddenly start doing it?" I grumble.

I had Talents for that, and Stats, and Advantages.

You've been spoilt by the System.

I have not!

You totally have.

You're just jealous of my greatness.

I live inside your brain, I share in your greatness.

So what are you complaining about, freeloader?

Oh, is that how it's going to be, dearest?

Love you, Ike!

"A-Cheng, A-Ying," YanLi enters the hall," How were lessons?"

Jiang Cheng grumbles and I groan, causing her to laugh and come sit on the table beside us," You must work hard, this JieJie is happy to see you growing strong."

Jiang Cheng preens up and I open my mouth to needle him when Madam Yu enters the hall, my mouth shuts close with a click.
Better to remain quiet and not accidentally say the wrong thing.

_Good tactic._

"Hello, Mother," YanLi smiles," Is Father joining us?"

"Your Father is busy," Madam Yu answers," Jiang Cheng, how was Master Fang's lesson?" She asks upon sitting down at her table.

Jiang Cheng straightens and goes on to explain what was discussed that morning.

_Sounds dreadfully boring._

I'd have fallen asleep sitting up before the ten minute mark.

_I don't doubt it._

"Wei Ying," Madam Yu turns to me and I repress a flinch,"How was... your lesson?" She asks.

I blink, bewildered and confused, before answering her," Teacher Xu discussed the methods of keeping your Chi circulating for long periods of time, and had us cultivate continuously until the lesson was over. If the disciples stopped for a moment they would be hit with Teacher Xu's ruler, Ma'am."

And hadn't that brought back memories.

Madam Yu nods and turns to YanLi," How were lessons with Mistress Zhu?"

YanLi smiles genially at her, and once again I imagine the flowers and rainbows blossom around her head," They went well, Mother. Mistress Zhu said that I would be able to start the next forms soon."

Next forms? What?

I tried not to look too curious and failed. Not that Jiang Cheng was any better.

YanLi smiled at us but did not disclose any more information.

"I'm taking Wei Ying to the Library after lunch, A-Jie, do you want to come with?" Jiang Cheng asks her.

I twitch.

Kid, you're going to get me _killed_.

"The Library?" Madam Yu turns back to Jiang Cheng," Why are you taking him there?"

The unsaid 'when he's like that' rings loud and clear in my head, and I withheld a sigh.

"He wondered if there were more books on history," Jiang Cheng answered," It's one of the only classes he actually pays attention."

"It is not," I mutter.

I'm ignored.

"History?" Madam Yu gets another one of those odd looks in her eyes," What is so fascinating
about history?" She asks me.

I ponder on how to answer that for a moment.

"I guess... How things were before, what happened and how they happened," I muse aloud," It's interesting, at least to me, especially since I've passed many areas where great battles happened but there's nothing that indicates that they did. It's like the land just... forgot, I guess."

YanLi and Jiang Cheng give me surprised looks, astonished I could say such deep words, and I flush red," What?!" I yelp.

"You sound much older than what you are," YanLi tells me.

I look away, embarrassed.

Madam Yu doesn't say anything else and the meal continues in silence, Jiang Cheng hurries me to finish eating so that we can get a move on, but I grumble that I want to appreciate eating, getting another odd look from Madam Yu, but eventually comply.

The faster I knew where to find the Library, the quicker I started reading everything that there was to read in there.

Those were a lot of books.

And scrolls.

And so much paper.

I blinked at the shelves shock full of historic events, weather phenomena, and lineages upon lineages of people and couldn't help the giddy skip to my steps as I wondered around marveling at the sight.

"They're just books," Jiang Cheng was muttering to the bemused YanLi," What's so special about books?"

"Hush, A-Cheng," YanLi smiled," Look how happy he is."

I was happy. Oh, god, was I happy.

Where do we start?

By topic? By shelf? Start on one end and work towards the other? By rows?

So many options!

You're starting to sound a bit crazy.

Squee!

My inner bookworm had just died and ascended to the Heavens. I was in paradise.

I find myself a little niche in one corner and grab a history book, getting right to it.

"That's what you're doing all for the remaining lunch hour?" Jiang Cheng groans.

"Yup!" I cheerfully reply losing myself in the words I was reading, "You're welcome to join me."
"Heavens no! I'm going to spar with the other disciples!" He tells me with a huff and leaves. Jiang YanLi stays for a few minutes longer before leaving also.

And then there's just me and the books.

And Ike.

I'm kind of offended I was merely an afterthought.

Priorities.

Darling, you wound this poor heart of mine.

Sorry not sorry.

As lovely as always.

You betcha'!

He grumbles under his breath and settles down to read the book with me, occasionally offering some input to the words written and comments about how stupid some people's plans and tactics were.

It was fun.

I missed this.

My mountain would definitely have a place like this.

A place full of knowledge and history, where people could come and go to learn, to remember past events, a place that immortalized names and memories forever.

Ink on paper, how ephemeral yet long lasting.

Don't get poetic now.

I chuckle breaking the silence of the library and turn the page, engrossed in my reading.

Time flies when you're having fun, and just as I was halfway through my third book an annoyed Jiang Cheng comes to yank me out of the library, stating we were almost late for lessons.

I moaned in despair at having to leave the library, and shamelessly clutched at the door frame making a scene that infuriated (and embarrassed) Jiang Cheng, culminating in getting dragged to the classroom.

YanLi couldn't stifle her giggles at dinner and Jiang FengMian's lips curved upwards as Jiang Cheng raged at my mortifying behavior and I moped over my dinner.

Madam Yu hadn't said a word but her eyebrow kind of twitched before she put on a stony facade.

I weighed the odds of her planning my demise before going back to moping.

It had been such an interesting chapter too!

I couldn't wait for tomorrow.
You're getting into so much trouble.

Trouble is my middle name!

It will also be your cause of death in your tombstone.

Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud, Ike!

It's your funeral.

I rolled my eyes and effortlessly climbed out of the window of the bedroom, and walking across the rooftop towards the library, Yunru had joined me on my nightly excursion, having spent her day goofing around the training yard and jumping at distracted people's heads, and poked her head out of her satchel.

The weather was cold and dry right now so expertly traversing from the residential wing of the Sect to the place where the library was at, wasn't that hard.

And more, there were a lot of windows I could use to get inside the building that had no locked doors.

I was a genius.

You are a budding rogue who has, to this point in time, not only looted a whole basement of contraband, and walked away unscathed, but need I remind you about that week in Qishan with the Magistrate's house?

...

...So?

No... No, Ike, you don't need to remind me. Ow, you really hit where it hurts.

Just making sure you didn't think you got these 'skills' by doing nothing.

But you've got to admit, that week in Qishan was pretty spectacular.

...It was... interesting.

Pssh, sure, just interesting. It's not like I completely ruined that bastard's life.

You went fully Robin Wood on that one, I'll admit to that.

Aah~ Good times...

I climbed up a classroom window and slowly eased the door open, keeping an ear out, but everything was dead quiet. I entered the hallway and closed the door softly behind me, moving silently towards the library on nimble footsteps.

When I reached the library door I couldn't help but give myself a pat on the back.

I was awesome.

I made my way back to where the book I had been reading was and positioned myself under a window so I could use the moonlight to read. Wasn't the best method but I couldn't risk using a lamp and have the light be seen by anyone.
Thankfully *Keen Sight* made matters easier.

I lost myself in my reading, sure that I could sneak back into the bedroom before dawn and no one would know I had snuck out during the night.

As my track record for situations like this should indicate, I was wrong.

"What," The sudden voice startles me so bad I drop the book I had just started reading, I look up with a shocked expression to see Madam Yu staring down at me with an unimpressed expression on her face," Are you doing?"

"Reading, Ma'am?" I thoughtlessly answer.

*You have a death wish.*

I do not.

*A total death wish!*

I do not!

Madam Yu's eyes blaze with ire and she opens her mouth to, no doubt, rant at me, but before she can do that Jiang Cheng bursts in the Library.

The window was visible from the door, which made me wonder just how Madam Yu got in here without me noticing, and he stared at me and then looked up at his infuriated mother.

*You have the shittiest luck, and I am loving this!*

Goddammit, Ike.

Madam Yu looks from Jiang Cheng, who gulps and visibly cowers under his mother's unimpressed stare, and then turns her eyes back on me.

*You're getting blamed for this.*

I didn't ask him to come here! I don't even know what he's doing here! How is here? He's supposed to be asleep!

*Like I've told you many times, my darling, you have the world's shittiest luck.*

I let out a mournful sigh, resigning myself to my fate.

"You two," Madam Yu speaks slowly, as if physically restraining herself to not start shouting at the nth hour of the night," Back to your bedroom. We will talk in the morning," She said before glaring at me," Do not attempt to leave the bedroom until the morning, or else."

*That was a death threat if I ever heard one.*

Ike... Please... Stop...

Jiang Cheng nods quickly and grabs me, dragging me back to his room.

"You are so dead," He hisses at me," What was so important it couldn't wait?!"

I don't answer him, only let out another mournful sigh.
Goddammit.

Chapter End Notes

I really like Ike. I really, really, really do like writing Ike's input on conversations. Ike's my spirit animal. Or the changeling on my shoulder. Same thing.

What do you think Jiang Cheng's nickname for WWX will be?

And, poor WWX, he just can't catch a break to read his precious books XD
Morning

Chapter Summary

Where there's a tense morning, where Wei Ying should just not speak, and there's a breakdown.
And some people have the worst timing in history to bother you during said breakdown.

Chapter Notes

Name is a play on words (to the non-english speakers) Morning sounds like Mourning.
...Yeah, because that's not ominous at all, is it? (Muahahahahahah)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"There should have been a better farewell. But in the end, there never is. And we take what meager scraps we can find." - Richard K. Morgan

Chapter 43: Morning

When the sun peeked through the window I was already wide awake and going through scenarios of how my death was going to occur. From a modern perspective, getting out of bed at nth hour of the night to go read some books wasn't the worst thing I could've done.

I hadn't even sounded any alarms off!

Which didn't explain how Madam Yu even found me.

Yunru curled up against my head and made this odd purr sound, the 'there there, stop moping' practically visible in a thought bubble over her head.

I sighed.

Seriously, I had done nothing wrong!

You were out of bed and sneaking around.

I grumbled under my breath and Yunru made the purring sound again.

The world was against me!

Oh, yes, the injustice of preventing you from reading a history book under the moonlight instead of waiting for daytime to do it.
I pouted.

It's not fair... I want to read!

*Well, you won't be reading anything any time soon now, get ready to face the music.*

I groan and roll out of bed, getting my robes on and brushing my hair. Jiang Cheng was still asleep and I needed something to distract myself with, so I ended up deciding to do several hairstyles and undoing them until he woke up.

Anything to buy myself more time.

*Delaying the inevitable.*

I did not offer that a response.

Eventually Jiang Cheng woke up just as I was finishing a braided bun on my head, which was somewhat crooked due to lack of practice, and he blinks.

"You never put your hair in a bun," He yawns.

"I'm bored," I tell him, undoing it," You were still asleep and I'm not leaving this room alone."

The events of last night flood back into his conscious mind and he pales, then reddens," Mother is angry because of you! If you hadn't left the room-....!"

"You did not have to come get me!" I throw my hands up," Your mother would've yelled at me or something but you just had to show up, now we're both in trouble!" I press my hands to the sides of my head.

I just knew there was a migraine incoming.

Jiang Cheng frowns and presses his lips into a thin line, getting out of bed and angrily putting his own robes on.

*Great, now you've upset the kid.*

I sigh," I'm sorry," I apologize," I know you were only trying to help me."

"You were gone..." He mumbles.

"Uh?" I blink confused.

"You were gone! I woke up and your bed was empty!" He yells," I thought you'd left!"

Oh.

*Sh*t.*

"But then I saw that your things were still on the bed, so I thought that maybe you'd went to the stables to be with your donkey," He continues," But you weren't there either!"

Honestly, the thought that he remembered to search the stables made him look so cute, grouchily stomping towards Donkey's stall, opening the door ready to yell at me, and finding the hay stack empty of a lil'me, and Donkey probably giving him an 'excuse me, how rude' look.
"So I thought of calling A-Jie to help me look for you!" He cried," But then I remember how much you liked the library!" He sobbed.

He, honest to god, just started sobbing.

*Oh, sh*t!*

I quickly drop the hairbrush and rush to him, semi-frantic because crying kids were my weakness (‘*cute things are your weakness*’), and if anyone passing by the door suddenly heard him start crying they’d have my head on a stick.

"Hey, hey! Don't cry, shh..." I hugged him and he put his face on my shoulder," I'm sorry! Were you scared? I told you I wouldn't leave you!" I rub his back," When I do leave, I promise to tell you, okay? I'll never leave without saying goodbye!"

"Y-y-y-you p-p-promise?" He sobbed.

"I promise!" I hurriedly told him.

"*Jiang Cheng will remember that!*"

The words popped up before my eyes with a cheery little bell sound.

*Ah! Your shitty luck strikes again!*

Goddammit.

"A-Cheng? A-Ying? Is everything alright?" YanLi's voice sounded from the other side of the door.

I immediately opened my mouth to tell her everything is fine when Jiang Cheng beats me to the punch.

"Jieeee!" He cries.

*Strike two!*

Goddammit!

The door slams open and a worried YanLi rushes inside, eyes immediately locking on me hugging a crying Jiang Cheng.

"Oh! What happened?" She hurries to our side and Jiang Cheng attaches himself to her.

I got to step away from them when both of them grab me and pull me on the hug.

*Feel the love, dear, feel the love~*

Goddammit...

"Mother is going to kill us!" Jiang Cheng wails.

I sigh," She's not going to kill you... Me? Probably, but what else is new," I mutter into YanLi’s robes.

YanLi makes a questioning noise and Jiang Cheng starts telling her what happened last night. Halfway through I peek at her, see her disapproving face, and look back down.
They were younger than me! How did she manage to make me feel like a child caught stealing from the cookie jar?!

_Younger body, less control over your emotions and impulses._

I have exc-...

The last few days in YunmengJiang kind of flutter by the forefront of my mind.

_You were saying?_

Nothing.

_No, go on, what were you going to say?_

"A-Cheng," YanLi pushes us back slightly so she can crouch to be at our eye-level," You don't have to cry, I'm sure Mother is only angry because you were out of bed, she's not going to punish you harshly," She assures him.

_You know..._

What?

_You should take lessons from her._

Lessons on what?

_How to reassure people, how to keep calm, how to be as sweet and gentle as her._

I thought about it. Honestly, there were worse role models out there to base my behavior on, but I don't think I could keep up the genial and sunny personality YanLi has going for her.

I swear the girl was a reincarnation of GuanYin.

"And A-Ying," She turns to me," What you did was dangerous!" She scolds," What if you had gotten hurt?"

"By going to the Library?" I could help but doubt," I wasn't bothering anyone..."

YanLi sighs," Little boys should be in bed at night! There's a curfew and you broke it, Mother will punish you but she's not going to hurt you."

Right, making me kneel under the autumn sun was just a common occurrence.

_Given the time period, it probably is._

I sigh and nod.

"Now, let's get you cleaned up," She tells the sniffling Jiang Cheng," And then let's go down to eat breakfast."

We both nod and I go to tie my hair in the usual ponytail I ended up defaulting to, when Jiang Cheng turns to me with a pout.

"What?" I ask him with suspicious eyes.

"I want to wear that bun you had when I woke up," He pouts.
I blink, slowly, and process his words, "You want me to do your hair?"

He nods and Jiang YanLi, who was sitting on his bed, covers her smile, watched the scene play out with bemused eyes.

I sigh in a defeated way and pluck my hairbrush off of my bed, gesturing him to come to me.

"Stay still," I tell him and start brushing his hair, careful to work upwards to deal with knots, and start humming almost subconsciously.

"What song is that?" Jiang Cheng asks.

"Hm?" I blink, "What song?" I'm confused.

"You were humming," YanLi chuckles.

"I was?" Habits were hard to beat.

"You were," She tells me, and then hums the same melody.

"Aah!" I recognize the tune, "Steady as the beating drum, Singing to the cedar flute~/Seasons go and seasons come, Bring the corn and bear the fruit~/" I sing.

"I don't recognize that song," YanLi smiles.

"It's mine," I tell her, no copyrights were a wonderful thing.

"Really?" Jiang Cheng sounds shocked and flick his head.

"I did sing in taverns to get a free room," I inform them, "Want to hear the rest?"

"I do," YanLi smiles, "It sounds like a nice song."

It was, one of my favorite disney movies, and perhaps a story I could later tell them.

I sing the rest of the song while putting Jiang Cheng's hair up in a rather elaborate braided bun, attaching a small simple hair clip thing to keep it in place.

"There," I pat his shoulder, "All done, can we go eat now?"

Truthfully, it took me less time doing said hairstyle on someone else than to recreate it on my own hair.

"It looks really pretty, A-Cheng," YanLi smiled and smoothed his robes, before turning to me and doing the same with a smiling face.

I tried not to flush a deep red.

This girl was a saint and no one could ever tell me otherwise, I swear she'd be the picked to become a goddess somewhere.

_and all she gets in life is that Jin ZiXuan._

He doesn't deserve her.

_Love is love._
Urgh.

*Speaking of love!*

No! No! Oh, God, no! We are not starting this discussion! Again!

I gently push Jiang Cheng out the door," Gogogogogo..." I tell him.

"Why in such a hurry?" He grumbles.

"Maybe your mother will love your hair so much, she forgets about me!" I grin jokingly.

"So you're using me as bait?" He bats away my hands.

"Exactly!" I cheer," You're so smart, platypus!"

Jiang Cheng makes an annoyed growl and pushes me.

I laugh and push him back, carefully not to throw the kid into anything.

Jiang YanLi sighs and ushers both of us in the direction of the main hall.

Madam Yu hadn't arrived yet and I briefly thanked a lucky star, and sat down on one of the tables with Jiang Cheng next to me. There were already plates on the table and I followed the siblings example and waited for either Jiang FengMian or Madam Yu to arrive.

Thankfully, it was Jiang FengMian who arrived first, greeting us with a soft 'Good morning' and stopped to talk to us before moving to his own desk.

"New hairstyle, A-Cheng?" FengMian smiles," It suits you."

Of course it does, I did it!

Jiang Cheng essentially preens and sits straighter, evidently pleased with himself, and YanLi and I share amused looks.

"Careful, Platypus," I bait him," Or you might turn into a peacock!"

Jiang Cheng goes red and pinches my cheek," Stop calling me that!"

"Neber!" I laugh as he pinches my cheek.

"Boys," YanLi tuts us, but FengMian only chuckles.

"Let them," He tells her," Boys will be boys."

"Yes, quite," Madam Yu's sudden remark startles us and Jiang Cheng immediately lets go of my cheek.

How the hell was that woman bypassing all of my senses?

*Obviously she's better than you.*

...  

*What?*
That makes so much sense.

Ike laughs at me in the back of my mind.

*Did you honestly believe you were the only person capable of sneaking around?*

...No?

*Idiot.*

"'Boys will be boys'," Madam Yu sneers," Which was why I found those two out of bed during the night, all the way on the other side of the Sect Compound," She tells FengMian.

The man blinks before the gears turn in his head and his eyes widen sightly, he frowns and turns to give a stern look to Jiang Cheng and I," What were you two doing?"

"We weren't doing anything," I explain," I snuck out and Jiang Cheng got out of bed to find me, it wasn't his fault!" I tell him,"...Sir," I add lamely.

Jiang Cheng elbows me," I chose to go look for him, and he wasn't causing trouble!" He hurries to tell his father.

Honestly, kid, take the easy way out!

*Against better judgement, the kid actually likes you.*

Why the hell do you sound so surprised?

*Nothing.*

"Yes," Madam Yu walks closer to us," Your choice to break curfew, which you are well aware exists, to find this... this boy, when you had no idea where he could be!" She scolds.

Jiang Cheng looks down not meeting her eyes, effectively cowed.

"Jiang Cheng thought I was leaving," I tell her," He was looking for me to keep me from leaving, which I wasn't doing," I quickly add when FengMian looks ready to blow a gasket over that statement.

"No," Madam Yu looks down on me," He was reading."  

What the hell?! Was reading a frikin' crime?

"Reading?" Even FengMian looked confused.

"I found him in the Library, in total darkness, starting to read a book under the moonlight," Madam Yu told him," After having walked on the roof of the Sect, jumped through a window and made his way into the Library," She elaborates.

Jiang Cheng slowly turns to look at me with wide eyes.

I blink.

"Oh," I intelligently say.

"Do you know how dangerous that is?" FengMian turns to me with a stern expression," You could
have fallen off the roof!"

"I'm used to doing it, though," I tell them.

*You're such an idiot.*

I blink and process my own worlds before closing my eyes and wishing for a hole to hide in.

"Why were you walking on roofs?" FengMian asks.

I remain tight lipped and silent.

"Wei Ying," FengMian tries again," Answer me!"

I stubbornly stay silent.

"Clearly, you brought home more than you bargained for," Madam Yu laughs at her husband," You two," She points at Jiang Cheng and I," You're dismissed from lessons today, go kneel at the Ancestral Hall, Wei Ying in front of the honor altar," She instructs.

Honor altar?

Jiang Cheng quickly hurries to comply and grabs me firmly by the arm.

"Come on," He hisses," Before Mother gets any angrier."

"She's always angry," I mutter, and get smacked on the arm for my troubles," Right, your mother, sorry."

He leads me to a separate building in the back of the Sect with very ornate doors and banners hanging down from the beams. And we get sympathetic glances by older disciples, apparently kneeling in the Ancestral Hall isn't infrequent.

"Come on!" Jiang Cheng pulls me harder.

"I don't get why I have to kneel before your ancestors," I tell him.

"You're kneeling in front of my ancestors," He rolls his eyes," You're kneeling in front of the honor altar."

"Who is at the honor altar then?" I ask him, indulgently.

"I don't know," He answers," They were friends of my Father, I think, he was very sad when their ashes were brought in."

The smile slips off my face instantly.

Instead a ball of lead drops on my stomach.

The ashes of CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe had been brought to YunmengJiang years ago.

Oh no...

Oh no.

OH NO!
Ike!

I took a sharp intake of air and felt my hair stand on end.

It couldn't be.

_Calm down. Breathe. Don't scare the kid._

I focus on Jiang Cheng's grip on my arm and let out the frozen air in my lungs.

_Stay calm. Everything is alright. Be calm._

Yes.

I took shuddering breaths quietly, calming my racing heart, and fought the uneasiness swirling in my stomach.

Inside, there wasn't much light, the sun still hadn't completely invaded the building, but there was the smell of incense and of offerings.

"The honor altar is there," Jiang Cheng points to a different wing," Go kneel there and don't dare leave before my Mother tells you to."

He lets go of my arm and walks deeper into the Ancestral Hall.

I stand there before the intersection connecting to the wing and find myself rooted to the spot.

_You're going to have to enter there one way or another._

I am afraid.

It isn't an easy admission to make.

_ I am right here with you._

I take a deep breath and step forward.

Step by step I inch closer to where the Honor Altar had to be.

I can't bring myself to look as I walk closer and my eyes focus instead on my feet.

I am afraid, Ike.

_I am here._

By my feet I can see the base of the altar, and feel the strong smell on incense.

_Look up._

I can't.

_You can. Look up._

I close my eyes and lift up my head.

_Open your eyes._
I... I...

*It is alright. Open your eyes.*

I am afraid.

*I am right here. You are not alone.*

I slowly open my eyes and my lungs freeze at what's atop the altar.

There was an intricate sculpted incense burner in the shape of a lotus flower in the center of the altar, with two empty plates to hold offerings on either side of it, and candles unlit decorating the altar.

There are two plaques with their names carved on them, and painted in the YunmengJiang purple, secured on the wall the altar rests against.

And underneath the name plaques there's a stand.

Holding two things I never thought I'd ever see again.

This isn't canon.

This isn't a story.

This isn't a game.

It hurts...

Being held on that stand were ChangZe's and CangSe's swords.

They were my parents swords.

---

I reverently let my fingertips brush across the sword sheaths, feeling the cool material, and my eyes immediately watered.

Ike stayed silent, knowing to leave me to my grief, for just a few moments longer.

I traced the characters on both their swords, my mother's JianYu and my father's HuiZhong, and I clutched at them, at the link they gave me to the both of them.

Knowing they were here, how could I bear to leave them behind?

*You can't take them with you.*

These belong to them!

*And as such they are present on their altar, the closest they can be to them.*

My hand goes to clasp the pendant hanging from my neck.

They should be with me.

They should be here.

Why did they have to die?
Follow canon, allow canon to pass, let these people disappear, do not see them as people but characters on paper...

Impossible.

I love them.

I did not say those words to them often enough.

Looking back, nothing was ever enough.

It hurt...

I leaned on the altar to rest my hand on their swords, crying silently into my arm, and feeling hopelessly alone.

You are not alone.

I knew I wasn't.

But there were no arms around me. No welcoming hug or a kiss. No warmth.

I miss them, so much.

I miss my family.

Old and new, the people I'd grown old beside of, watching them grow, and those that I'd grown to love, that I'd watched glow with so much love and kindness and life.

And I missed them.

An ache that kept on throbbing no matter what you tried to do to stop it.

A hole that just kept getting wider and wider in the very center of your being.

Grief was... agonizing.

You thought you'd be ready for when the time come, but time sneaks up on you at the worst moments, no matter your preparation you are never ready to meet it.

And then you tell yourself, it's okay, we can move on.

But you can't.

You can't because it hurts, it hurts so bad you can't even think, you can't do anything, you just... hurt.

You can't stay still.

I know.

You have to keep moving.

I know.

Time is running out.
I KNOW!

In my mind I howl at the sky, scream to the very heavens for the injustice they pile on these two small shoulders, the weight of responsibility and duty, and honor, and devotion the just press down on me.

Millions of things could go wrong, I could change things and turn this world into a wasteland devoid of life, so many things that could turn south.

But they won't.

How do you know?

Because I know you.

I know you, and I know what you are like. And I am certain that whoever placed you in this world knew it too.

To play the game of life is to play blindfolded with only a handful of cards and trying to get the rest of the stack. And you, my dearest, are playing it beautifully.

Don't give up. Keep going. Keep moving.

You can do this.

I can't.

You can. Do you know why?

Why?

Because you are not alone. See those two blades beneath your hand? Do you know who they belonged to?

Of course I know who they belonged to! What are you tal-...

They belonged to the first two people who looked at you and said 'I believe you'. The first ones who held you close and taught you to be yourself. Who never doubted you would take this world by storm.

It hurts...

You can't stop now. You can't stop here. You made a promise to them, remember? You promised-...

That I would have my mountain.

A mountain that everyone would stare in awe of.

A better future.

I know my promise.

Then hold that promise tight in your hand, hide it deep inside your heart, and remember this:

You are not alone.

I open my eyes to see their name plaques glow as the morning sky filters in.
The water and tears run down my face, I can't stop them no matter how I rub at my eyes.

It hurts.

I miss them.

I wanted them here.

*It's okay to cry, to miss them, to just... cling to the ideal of them. But you must keep moving.*

I know.

I know!

I just...

I miss them so much.

"When he had them brought here I despised the idea of having them inside this Ancestral Hall," Madam Yu speaks from behind me, and I hear her footsteps draw closer to me.

I don't move from my position, still clutching at the swords, and hiding my face in my arm, awash with tears, and do react to her presence.

Already Ike had a mantra for me to remain calm no matter what.

I just felt empty.

It hurt...

"When they said their child was missing I first thought that they'd find your body soon enough," She told me," That my husband's search for you would be in vain."


No, it wasn't.

"When he swore he'd bring you here I knew that I wouldn't be able to stand you," She told me," And the more time passed, the longer he kept searching for you, the stronger my hate grew."

I remain silent. I wasn't sure if she even wanted me to say anything.

"And then you arrive, and you are nothing like I expected you to be," She says," You do not act like a child should-..."

"I am not a child," I tell her, voice raw," I'm no longer a child."

Chapter End Notes

Tissues anyone? *presents box*

CangSe's sword JianYu means "Building the Universe" (fitting, in terms of personality) and ChangZe's HuiZhong means "Wise Loyalty" (again, to fit his
The names were selected by me, seriously knowing they had to have had swords, and that nothing remained of them after they died (in canon) always bothered me. So here, because there was such a huge scandal, everything that had on them the moment they died was sent to Lotus Pier along with the ashes.

Also, AGF!WWX mental state flip-flops at times (there's a reason for this) so he'll try to be happy even when he's not really feeling like being happy, but there's only so much he can bottle inside before having to take a break to cry in a corner. Seeing his parent's swords just sped up the process.

Madam Yu has the worst timing ever, but!, she knew exactly what she was doing when she sent him to kneel in front of the swords. (There's also a reason for this, although I as the author am tight lipped about the matter, sorry not sorry peeps)

I just had this picture in my head of WWX brushing and braiding JC's long hair while singing tangled, but then I couldn't find a song that fit with the theme so I just went with Pocahontas. Yay, disney songs make a comeback! And JC shocked that WWX can actually carry a tune and 'create' his own songs, with Big Sister just sitting there smiling at her little brothers being too cute together.

The "Jiang Cheng will remember that!" will come into play far off in the future, and I am going to be crackling all the way until it does. It's also a reference for a video game, but I'm 80% certain that there was more than one game that had notifications like that. If not, it's the Walking Dead video game by Telltale.

Fun fact about me: I once actually got in trouble because I had stayed indoors reading instead of 'going out' with 'friends'. Like, my mother got angry at me for being a 'good girl' and staying out of trouble by not following peer pressure and go be like other teenage girls.
Chapter Summary

Where a long overdue discussion happens, truths are laid out, a famous soup makes an appearance, and letters incoming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+A Game for the Fool+

"Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain but it takes character and self control to be understanding and forgiving." - Dale Carnegie

Chapter 44: Understanding

I don't know what led me to say those words, so matter-of-factly, but I just felt the swords underneath my fingertips and the hollow emptiness in my chest and I just couldn't stop talking.

"A child has a home and a family, a child is carefree and happy and safe," My fingers tighten around the blades,"A child doesn't spend three years in the wild, under rain and frost, high winds or scorching heat, they don't carry weapons on their back, or blades at their waist, and look into the eyes of beasts twice their size with teeth the size of chopsticks!" I rage.

"A child does not startle awake at the barest of sounds because instinct tells them that something is coming to kill them!" I tell her,"A child should never have to walk the streets and have people just grab them, as if they were playthings, and wish to have their way with them!" I howl.

"You-..." Madam Yu is shocked.

"I am not a child, and you keep insisting that I am..." I sigh,"I don't remember... What you want me to pretend to be, I don't remember."

"You are a disciple of YunmengJiang," Madam Yu says,"You have a duty to perform and an image to maintain. My husband has brought you into the Clan, so you have an honor to be grateful too."

"You hate me," I groan,"You just admitted to it, why keep me here? Why don't you just send me away?"

I look at her, feeling utterly miserable, and I am confused when she looks away from me.

"Do you know what people are already saying?" She asks me instead.

"No," I answer.

"They are talking about the child the Sect Leader brought home, the child he has spent years looking for, and when people start talking about that child two things always come up: That it is
the well-known child cultivator the rumors talk about, and that his mother was the woman FengMian had unsuccessfully courted." She tells me.

"And do you know what the people in the Sect whisper about?" She asks me.

"No," I answer her, closing my eyes.

"Why did the Sect Leader brought the child into the Main House? Why not as a mere guest disciple? Why foster the child so close to his own family?" She tells me,"And most importantly, why give such an honor to a servant's child?"

Anger.

I quickly look up at her, eyes blazing silver," My mother was CangSe Sanren, a disciple of the Great Baoshan Sanren, and I follow in their footsteps and teachings!"

"And your father was Wei ChangZe, the footman of Jiang FengMian since his early childhood," She tells me,"And in this world of our sons are always their father's children. In their eyes you will always be a servant's son, never forget that."

I grit my teeth," Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, like it or not, you will bear the pride of this Sect and you will bear it well," She tells me.

I give her a suspicious look.

"My husband may not see it but I am perfectly aware that we're not even through with half of your problems," She sniffs,"And I am here to prevent any more."

"Why are you doing this?" I ask her,"You hate me."

"This is my Sect," She hisses,"My home, my family, and I will not have her child destroy it!"

"I don't need to, you're already doing it yourself," I scoff,"You can't send me away, so you yell and hiss at me, the seven year old, like that would make things better."

"Do not speak to me with such disrespect," Madam Yu warned.

"Sometimes, if one does not speak frankly, one runs the risk of forgetting the important things in life," I tell her,"You hate me because your husband loved my mother, do you want to know what's funnier?" I cock an eyebrow at her.

"My mother did not love him," I sneer.

Madam Yu's nostrils flare and Zidian's purple lightning sparks up in her hand, her fingers subconsciously start toying with the ring.

"My parents loved each other, so much," My voice cracks,"And they are dead. And all you people care about is a non-existent love affair?" I can't help but to bristle at the words,"I mean, what are you doing? Condemning the child for the sins of the parents? A non-existing sin, at that!"

"You don't know what your talking about," Madam Yu warns me.

"I do know, actually!" I growl at her,"I do know what it is like to have a family broken apart, and you're the one who doesn't understand how despicable it is to watch a family, who is whole and hale, shatter itself because they are acting foolishly!"
Zidian sparks up again, but Madam Yu remains silent.

"I never got to say goodbye," My voice trembles,"They were just gone. And I could never have them back," I look at her,"If you were gone, right now, if you just disappeared... Wouldn't you regret it?"

"Regret what?" She asks.

"All the lost chances, the wasted time," I shake my head,"You sit there in the hall, eating, but no one is talking. Too tense to make a wrong move, too afraid to be 'imperfect'... You fight and the children get caught in the middle. When you are gone, they'll ask themselves needless questions, and there will be no one left to answer them."

"Needless questions?" Madam Yu frowns.

"Did they love me? Was I enough? Did they even care about me?" I tell her,"Were they angry with me? Was it my fault?"

Madam Yu stops playing with her ring.

"And how do you know that children ask themselves those questions?" She asks me.

I look back on their swords,"Because no one is there to answer them."

Madam Yu stares at the swords.

"Why were you reading at night?" She asks.

"Because I had to do something," I answer her,"Everything in here seems so... slow."

"Slow?" Madam Yu frowns.

"I was always moving," I tell her,"Always traveling. I couldn't stop moving. No matter what, I had to keep going," I continue,"But here... I can't move. I have to sit still and listen and it's so hard because every part of me is screaming 'move!'"

"It's like having both my feet trapped in mud," I give her a helpless look,"Something's coming, every hair on my body is standing on end, shrieking at me that something is coming... And I can't move."

"So you decided to read," Madam Yu had an odd tone to her voice,"Because it was better than nothing."

I nod, leaning my head on my arm.

"Why did you agree to teach Jiang Cheng?" She asks me.

I look up again.

"He's... a child," I tell her,"It's... sad but, at the same time, happy, to see him be so, well... childlike," I answer her.

"Because you're not a child?" She sighs.

"I don't remember how to be one, but I thought that, maybe, I could try to be like him?" I shrug,"It's not working."
"Why not?" Madam Yu asks,"It can't be too hard to listen to lectures and then entertain yourself for two hours at lunch."

"Even I can't pretend to be happy all the time," I grumble,"And they keep calling me family."

Madam Yu's eyebrow twitches and she frowns.

"No need to look so revolted," I sigh,"I already told them no, several times."

"Why?" She frowns harder.

"Because my family is dead,"I monotonously answer her,"I don't need a replacement one, especially one where I am not wanted."

"They obviously want you," Madam Yu sneers.

"And you hate me," I give her a soft look and sigh,"You are their mother, I'm just a street rat at this point. I won't get in the way of your family," I look away from here again,"It'd have been if your husband had never set out to look for me."

Madam Yu doesn't have anything to say at that.

"You are different that what I expected you to be," She finally tells me.

I snort, amused,"I don't think anyone ever expects me," I chuckle tiredly.

"You are not like her, but sometimes you are," She muses aloud,"I can barely see any trace of ChangZe in you yet you sometimes manage to convey the unspeakable wisdom he would advise FengMian with."

I smiled slightly at the thought that I still managed to represent them, despite having only known them for around two years.

"You are going to remain with the Main House of the YunmengJiang Sect," She told me.

"Why?" I groan, looking at her dejectedly,"You hate me, you don't want me here, why put us both through the trouble of having to interact with each other on a regular basis? Just send me to the disciples barracks, punish me for sneaking out, I don't know..."

"I will not," She tells me,"You are not welcomed in the barracks because of what my husband has already done for you," She explains,"And we can't send you away without sending the message that YunmengJiang can't handle you."

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

I turn back to the swords.

"You will join the older students for spars," She tells me,"And if I find you are slacking in any of the lessons because they're 'too slow' for you, I will make you run the older disciples training course," She warns me.

I blink, and look up at her bewildered," Uh?"

"You will only bring trouble to this Sect," Madam Yu sneers,"And Gods know my husband will never see it that it is your fault, so I am taking measures to prevent it. If I find you causing trouble, I will only have to make sure you don't have enough energy to cause trouble."
...That... That sounds... reasonable.

Madam Yu goes to walk away, "And one more thing," She gives me a chilling look, "If you harm my children, if you ever bring harm to them because of your problems, I will end you myself."

I nod, "You should probably tell them that you care about them and not letting them guess whether or not it's true," I tell her.

Zidian sparks in her hand, "Do not interfere with my family's affairs, do you hear me, child," She sneers.

I tiny little bulb lights up in my brain.

"Yes, Ma'am," I acknowledge her warning.

She leaves and I am left alone with my parents' swords once more.

That was interesting.

That was intense.

No, sh*t, Sherlock.

You're absolutely crazy.

Won't argue with that.

I sigh deeply and slump over the altar, utterly spent, and stroke the CangSe's blade as my eyes finally stop tearing up.

I'm tired.

I know, dear.

I close my eyes and rest my head on my arm, falling asleep in seconds.

YanLi is the one that comes by later to fetch me, hours later, and find me slumped over the altar fast asleep.

Having learnt from previous experiences that walking closer to me whilst asleep is a bad idea she knocks on the stone pillars in the Ancestral Hall loudly, and looks sad when I instantly jump awake.

After the initial jump-start of adrenaline that sparks my body into awareness, I slowly blink and relax when I see that there's no danger.

"Shijie?" I mumble, rubbing at my eyes, "Why are you here?"

"A-Ying," She smiles, "Punishment is over, it's lunchtime now, I'll make you my special soup, come," She reaches out a hand to me.

I blink again and yawn, before pausing to look back at the swords.

"These are my parents' swords," I tell her.

"They are?" She walks closer to the altar, "Father never said, just that they had been good friends of
"I thought that their swords would've been stolen," I tell her,"I didn't think they'd be brought to Yunmeng with their ashes."

Jiang YanLi puts her arm slowly across my shoulders and I lean into her.

"Their swords will be safe here," She assures me,"You can come her and light incense to them wherever you wish," She adds.

I nod silently, still tired and emotionally wrung out.

"Come on," YanLi gently starts leading me out of the Ancestral Hall,"A-Cheng always says my soup makes him feel better, let us see if it does the same to you!" She giggles.

My lips twitch into a soft smile,"Platypus loves you, so he's biased," I pout.

YanLi giggles harder,"A-Cheng is a good boy," YanLi nods,"A-Ying is a good boy too," She pats me on the head.

I burst out laughing.

"Shijie! Shijie!" I laugh,"I'm totally not a good boy!" I tell her.

"A-Ying is a good boy," She pats me on the head again,"He's just been a little naughty."

Pfft, a 'little' naughty.

I keep laughing.

Seriously, Jiang YanLi had to be a Goddess reincarnated.

There was no other explanation for it.

I let myself lean into her side, warmth and lively presence, and emptied my mind.

Calm. Peace. Quiet.

The wind blew by and carried the scent of salt water and of spices, the sounds of a bustling city just outside of the gates, of disciples training in the yard and walking around like busy ants, the sun shone high on the sky and everything glistened underneath it.

One day, all this would be gone.

Could I stop it?

I looked up at YanLi, smiling and carefree, and then thought of Jiang Cheng. Both the sole remnants of this place in the future, and broken for it, and decided that no, I'd change things.

I would think of something, anything, and change it.

Be better, stronger, cleverer.

Be the change you want to see in the world.

I thought of Madam Yu and her words, her passion to this Sect, and something akin to understanding blossomed in my mind.
Jiang Cheng was already waiting for us in the kitchen, staring intently at the pot of soup, when we arrived.

Immediately he looked at me and frowned,"What happened to you?" He asks.

"Why, Platypus, are you saying I don't look like my usual cute self?" I make a scandalized expression,"How rude!"

Jiang Cheng gives me a deadpan look,"You're fine I see, forget I even asked," He scoffs.

YanLi giggles and ushers me to the seat next to her brother.

"Boys, don't fight," She tells us,"Shijie made soup!"

Jiang Cheng's attention is turned back to the soup pot and he meaningfully extends his bowl.

I roll my eyes at him but do the same, wondering if this was the heavenly pork ribs and lotus root soup that Wei WuXian had absolutely adored.

YanLi removes the pot cover and immediately my mouth waters.

...  
...

Oh, hell yes.

I'm feeling faintly jealous right now.

Why, Ike? Is it because lil'Ike doesn't have a stomach?

Yes, darling dear, it is because I don't have a stomach.

Ooh, I am soooo sorry, poor lil' Ike, he can't eat this delicious soup~

I'll remember this, you know, so expect payback.

Oh, I am sooo scared.

Truthfully, I shouldn't antagonize him, but as YanLi filled in my bowl and I felt his growing envy, I just couldn't help myself.

"A-Jie, it's delicious!" Jiang Cheng immediately told her.

"It's heavenly, Shijie!" I seconded.

Jiang Cheng paused, as if he was processing the words, and then turned to me with a sh*t-eating grin,"What was that? I don't think I heard you correctly."

I busied myself eating the soup and did not reply to him.

Not that it stopped him from being all smug for the rest of the day.

"How do you send letters here?" I ask Jiang Cheng,"I used to use the town's post service, but I doubt your parents will let me leave the Sect Compound so I can post my letters."
Jiang Cheng gives me an odd look, "Letters? Who are you writing to?" He asks.

"Friends," I shrug, "I've not been entirely anti-social these past three years, you know?" I shake my head in disbelief.

Jiang Cheng frowns but answers, "A servant takes the letters to be posted, you just have to put the letters in the 'out' box near the Sentinel's station by the gates," He explains.

I smile, "Thanks! It'll be fun to see if they send me replies back, now that I have a fixed mailing address."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes, "Who'd want to send letters to you?"

A rural clan heir, the GusuLan heir, an old widow that's profiting off of my amazing talisman-making skills, a couple odd rogue cultivators with permanent housings in the various regions, a boy all the way up in the mountains between Lanling and Gusu, and, finally, a Peter Parker wannabe that I somehow got fond off after one night-hunt.

You have issues.

Tell me something that I don't already know.

I go to my pack and pull back my writing utensils, using the wooden desk Jiang Cheng had in his room, and started writing my letters, taking great care to make them legible. Jiang Cheng obviously noticed because he snorted and muttered something about me not 'making enough effort in class'.

My dear Platypus, when I have my fountain pen, you will never have anything bad to say about my handwriting ever again.

"What will you teach me?" He asks me.

"What do you want to learn," I ask him as I am writing MingXia's letter, "If you tell me what you want to learn I can think of something up," I tell him, "And don't just say night-hunting," I stop him just as he's about to open his mouth.

He pouts and me and crosses his arms, "Why not?"

"Because you are not ready," I sigh, "You don't know how to use any weapons, you don't know talismans and much less how to use other cultivator tools."

"Then teach me!" He uncrosses his arms, "How to use weapons, talismans and the other tools!"

Yes... That would be a safe spot to start with, wouldn't it?

"Weapons will have to wait, mine were kind of confiscated," I gesture airily, "But I can teach you about talismans and the other tools, I still have those with me."

Jiang Cheng brightens.

"Let me just finish writing these and I'll start teaching you the basics," I tell him, "While you're doing that, I'll get that platypus drawing done."

He frowns, "Won't you have to be paying attention to what I am doing?" He asks me.

I make a 'so-so' gesture with my hand, "I'm giving you a talisman to copy, teaching you where to
start and what you have to do," I answer him,"If you copied it correctly and done everything right, the talisman works, if not, then you screwed up somewhere and I'll need to show you how to do that part again."

Pretty basic stuff I didn't really understand why children didn't already know how to do this.

The different components of talismans, at least, should be easy to teach and identify.

_They're teaching them calligraphy now, so that there's not as much waste of paper when teaching them how to correctly make the talismans._

You could teach both things congruently.

_Yes, but this is how they've probably always taught their disciples, in their eyes they still have plenty of time to learn all that._

But in reality they don't.

The world won't end tomorrow.

But they should be ready for it, just in case.

It'd be better to be ready to face anything, than to be caught unaware of the danger lurking outside.

Think. Think. Think.

Plans formed from tendrils and vines from the void in my mind, reaching out to every possible course of action.

What would I change? What would stay the same? What to do differently? What to preserve as is?

_Breathe._

I filled my lungs with air and focused on finishing my letters.

I wasn't alone.

I could do this.

I could.

I would keep my promise, I would build a better tomorrow, I would keep them safe.

I would have my mountain, the pinnacle of the future.

Yiling.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, WWX wasn't just talking about his current life. Thing is, to AGF!WWX, his life has been a continuous line, he was Sarah before, and now he is Wei Ying, there was no pause in between so, to him, all of his 'family' and 'past' are mishmashed into a singular mess of a life.
When he talks to YZY he kind of 'lets down' his guard and gets all this things off his chest, but he also incidentally confuses Madam Yu, because he's talking about all these things that make sense to Sarah but not to WWX.

The Madam. Now, way I see it, she's not just jealous she's also crazy protective/possessive of what she considers hers. Her husband, her children, her sect, her house. And she's seeing WWX as an extension of CangSe Sanren, the woman she absolutely despises.

Does it make her actions justifiable, hell no, but it sheds light on why she acts so irrational towards WWX. They both have issues, AGF! WWX just has a modern view on them (and several decades of experience dealing with those issues) and is able to identify his own triggers and what he can do to make them less of a problem.

YZY doesn't. And it makes her a very odd character to write, I need to make her angry, and hateful, and very hostile to our MC, but at the same time she's, in her mind, defending what belongs to her from what she sees as a threat. (Even if that threat comes in the form of a cute-as-a-button seven year old WWX)

The understanding that WWX got from this chapter is that Madam Yu is not entirely heartless, she's very cold and she will drop-kick anyone calling her soft and 'motherly', but she's complicated, let us say.

She knew exactly who the ashes, and swords, in the honor altar belonged to. And she specifically sent WWX there, why?, because she knew that he had to 'let off steam' or 'decompartmentalize' and that was a surefire way to get him to.

You've probably not caught it, but when they're shouting and everything, JC doesn't show up once. And later, when YanLi comes get him, JC is already in the kitchen. JC wasn't there when the whole showdown happened, but he was there when WWX first entered the Ancestral Hall, which was why he asked what had happened for WWX to look so down.

It's the littlest details in the narrative that I take pride in.

As a side note, I'm feeling slightly ill right now, so Imma lay down, chow down some chocolate and cue up a movie. I'll reply to comments when I'm feeling better, or tomorrow (whichever happens first)
Chapter Summary

In which Platypus gets a gift, the letters arrive and someone gets jealous, and Wei Ying has a great, very bad, potentially disastrous, ingenious idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The secret of business is to know something that nobody else knows." - Aristotle Socrates Onassis

Chapter 45: Expand

Jiang Cheng didn't have a knack for talismans.

And, no, I wasn't being too harsh with the kid, I was being patient and understanding that I was dealing with a child and not a mini-adult. But, he did not have a knack for talismans.

Oh, he could copy talismans semi-decently, no worries about that, but I had absolutely no hope for him to ever create his own talismans.

To create talismans one needed to have imagination and creativity, copying already existing talismans only required you to have decent penmanship and an understanding of the components. Without those two traits one wouldn't be able to figure out ways to link seals and characters in ways that, once infused with energy, would activate and cause a reaction.

Hopefully not explosive.

Unless you wanted to make explosives.

Ike, don't give me any bad ideas.

They're not bad ideas, they're just not child-friendly ideas.

I huff.

In the three weeks that had gone by since I had first arrived here, things had... calmed down, for lack of a better word.

Madam Yu and I were in a very carefully balanced agreement that unless I messed up, badly, I could exist in her immediate surroundings, but one foot out of the line and, well...

It wasn't pleasant.

Having run the entire perimeter of the Sect hefting a sack of sand on my back and then copying the older sect disciples during the martial arts formations straight after was brutal.
Having to repeat the same process three times led me to calling it suicide runs.

Because they absolutely killed me.

The first time I had to run that course I had drug myself back to the room and just collapsed on my bed, pratically going unconscious the moment my head touched my pillow.

Jiang Cheng had sworn off ever tempting his mother into punishing him like that.

I wished him luck.

And, of course, Jiang YanLi was a heaven sent angel to bring me food and not mind when I latched onto her like a particular clingy koala.

Sue me, I liked her.

If only my nieces had been this good and well-mannered!

*They had you as an aunt, it was essentially a lost cause from the very beginning.*

I didn't deigned him a reply.

Classes were going. Not much to say about them really, some lessons were good and interesting, others made me want to nap. Jiang Cheng had taken as his personal duty to prevent me from blanking out during lessons and to stop doodling whenever I just got too bored, with some success.

I had an afternoon with a art tutor, learning about traditional art styles and using my modern techniques and knowledge whilst the tutor documented them.

Already I had had to buy the recipes on how the art supplies were made, and had to show the art tutor how to make them, but thankfully no one had yet questioned about my readily available supply of them.

Even so, I had grown extremely carefully about using modern art supplies around people, which was ninety per cent of the time.

Jiang FengMian wasn't taking any chances of me going 'on a walk' across the nation again, so someone was always with me, and if they weren't then someone had already been alerted and was keeping an eye out for me.

Honestly, these people had so little faith in me!

Anyway, following talismans, I decided to show Jiang Cheng other cultivator tools, nets and traps he could set, elixirs and other miscellaneous things cultivators had invented over the generations.

He fared decently well in that area, he was smart and a cunning little thing, and I was pretty proud of him.

Although gushing about how cute he was when he was all 'see, I did it!' and generally being adorable was a surefire way to get punched. And kicked. And yelled at.

Honestly, wasn't my platypus just the most huggable thing ever?

*You and I clearly have two very distinguishable definitions of 'huggable'.* You just don't know how to appreciate life.
And just like that you've lost me, moving on.

I had started to join the other disciples on spars as per Madam Yu's orders and got toss around more than I'd like. It wasn't that I was weaker than them, but they had the height advantage I didn't and they shamelessly used it against me every single time.

Being grabbed by my arm and thrown out of the ring was a common occurrence, and it made me very, very eager to grow more flexible and agile to get close to them to strike them and retreat before they could retaliate.

That said, that was fighting hand to hand using strict martial art forms, in a brawl I'd have tossed dirt in the brat's eyes and kicked him in the balls.

But that was 'underhanded' or 'unsportsmanlike' or some other crap.

I couldn't wait to have my daggers back, or Liling.

I'd written to ShouShan telling him I'd had Xiaodan confiscated because of my age and jumpiness, and I just knew he'd laughed himself silly at that information. And maybe gotten a bit annoyed because the Bai Clan had gifted me that dagger as a thank-you gift.

MingXia would simply say that it was my own damn fault and that I shouldn't come crying to her skirts for being a 'precocious brat', her words not mine.

*It was kind of your fault that you had them confiscated.*

I'm ignoring you!

*Like you ignored me when I warned you to stay calm and not be easily provoked?*

Lalalalala~!

"What are you doing?" A disciple with a pointy nose asked as he watched me fiddle with piece of leather and rope.

"I'm making a slingshot," I answered him.

He frowns," A what?"

I don't look up from what I'm doing, just finishing up the last knots and adjusting the pouch," A slingshot, Jiang Cheng can't fully pull back the string on a bow, so I'm trying something new to work on his accuracy."

"Crafting Skill leveled up!"

Having finished what I was doing I look up at the older disciple.

He has an ugly look on his face.

"Why are you always with him?" He asks me.

"Why do you want to know?" I shrug," What does it matter to you if I'm always with him?"

"He's the Sect Leaders' son, the heir of the Sect!" The disciple tells me.
I nod," He's also my roommate, and my classmate, and essentially my shidi," I tick off my fingers," Again, why should it matter to you if I hang out with him?"

The ugly look on his face darkens," You shouldn't act so high and mighty, you're no better than us."

I let out a sigh through my nose," I'm not acting high and mighty, I'm merely telling you that what I do, who I choose to hang out with, or who I choose to be friends with, has nothing to do with you and your opinions," I tell him.

"You're just a servant's son! You shouldn't even be allowed to become a cultivator," The disciple spits at my feet.

I smile widely at him and get to my feet, eyes shining silver," The question, shixiong, isn't who's letting me become a cultivator," I walk to stand right in front of him, slowly like a predator approaching a cornered prey," It's who's going to stop me."

And then I knee him in the balls.

"Never let down your guard," I airily inform him, already walking away," Hasn't the Madam taught you that yet?"

"You're paying for this!" The disciple grunts.

I roll my eyes, people were idiots, people with big egos were even greater idiots.

And the world is full of them, if you keep kneeling all of them in the balls there's going to be a massive dive in population growth.

I snort.

I didn't knee him that hard.

Where's your sense of manly compassion, hitting such a vulnerable area?

Right where I left my sense of dignity after having been bathed by CangSe despite attempts of telling her I could do it myself.

Ah! I'd forgotten about that!

I find Jiang Cheng in the main yard talking with YanLi.

"Platypus!" I call out," I have something for you!"

"Don't call me that!" Jiang Cheng yells back, red in the face as the disciples in the yard stare confusedly at him.

I grin genially at him and show him the slingshot I'd made.

"What's that?" He points.

"Come here, I'll show you!" I gesture him closer.

Jiang Cheng warily walks closer to me.

Jeez, only three weeks in and the kid already knows me so well.
I don't think you should take that as a compliment.

Shush you.

"Here," I take his hand and teach him how to hold the slingshot," That's the pouch there, when I put the rock in, you swing it back and forth to get momentum, and then you take your aim," I instruct him.

Jiang Cheng doesn't look too impressed but nods.

I take a rock out of my pocket and put in the pouch.

Jiang Cheng follows the instructions and after getting a bit of momentum strikes.

The rock flies into an arch and hits a wooden pillar, shattering on impact.

Jiang Cheng gaps and turns to me with wide eyes.

My grin widens wickedly," Pretty cool, huh?"

You're a terrible role model.

I am an excellent role model!

Doubt.

"Again!" Jiang Cheng snaps me back to reality," Let's do that again!"

I take another rock out of my pocket.

What a lovely way to spend an afternoon. And on the bright side, there's no glass windows to potentially shatter!

"Letters have arrived, Sect Leader," A servant bowed at the entrance of the main hall as we are preparing to start our morning meal.

"Thank you, A-She," FengMian smiled and indicated the servant to deliver the letters.

A-She handed the majority of the letters to him but then turned around and handed me a packet.

I read the name on the top-most letter and grinned," Oh, ShouShan wrote me back!"

Jiang Cheng frowned," Who's ShouShan?"

"Ah, he's a friend," I tell him," I stayed with his family for a few weeks before moving further into Gusu," I clarify.

You know, FengMian doesn't look too happy to me.

At Ike's comment I look back to the front of the hall and see Jiang FengMian staring at the letters in my hands with a complicated expression on his face.

"A friend?" Madam Yu raise an eyebrow at my words," A peasant?"

Imagine her surprise when you tell her you're on speaking terms with both Gusu Lan heirs.
Hush, she's not learning that!

"No, he's a cultivator," I answer," His family has a clan out in the outskirts of Gusu, bordering Lanling, Ma'am."

"And they did not know that your appearance was to be reported?" Jiang FengMian asks.

Oh, yeah. That.

"I asked them not to," I inform him," Or to give me a head-start before they did, I didn't really want to come here at first."

"But you're here now," Jiang Cheng frowns.

I grin at him," Yeah, and now ShouShan can write back to me, I kept correspondence with them, it's been fun," I shrug," He's my friend." 

"I'm your friend too," Jiang Cheng mutters.

I laugh," We share a room, why would I write letters to you when I'm right by your side most of the day? You really are such a platypus!" I tell him.

Jiang Cheng reddens.

"I'm glad A-Ying can keep in touch with his friends," YanLi says," Friends are important," She tells me.

I nod," Yeah!"

Jiang FengMian drops the matter, but I can clearly see that it's not over yet.

Honestly, was he upset just because not everyone had complied with his request, not order, to report to him in case someone ran into me?

Really, after I sent those letters to the Great Sects the searches for me pratically because negligible. What was he so worked up for?

I checked to see who had written to me, and was surprised at the bulky letter I got from MingXia.

What is so important that she had to write so much?

*Maybe the talismans aren't working?*

They should be, I made sure to check them before posting them, they worked fine. And it wasn't a matter of the people not knowing how to use them, you just stuck them on the walls of the house, everyone knew that.

*Then I don't know, read the letter and see for yourself.*

I can't read it here, I'll never heard the end of it.

I save the letters inside my robes to read later.

"You have Teacher Fang for the morning, don't you?" I ask Jiang Cheng.

He gives me the stink eye," Yes."
"Meet you in the courtyard for lunch?" I suggest, "We can work more on the slingshot."

"Yes!" Jiang Cheng cheers himself up.

"Then it's a plan," I get back to my breakfast."

"A-Jie," Jiang Cheng turns to his sister, "Are you joining us? Maybe Wei Ying can make you a slingshot too!"

I look up," That's not a bad idea."

YanLi smiles at us," I am busy this afternoon, Mother and I are going to Lanling soon to have tea with Madam Jin."

Jiang Cheng makes a face and I laugh at him," What's that face for?"

He ignores me," Do I have to go too?" Jiang Cheng asks his mother.

Madam Yu gives him a stern look," Not this time, but I expect you to be on your best behavior whilst I am gone," She tells him, before glaring at me," And that includes you too."

I smile brightly at her," Yes, Ma'am!"

Don't antagonize her.

Jiang Cheng elbows me in the stomach.

Madam Yu gives me one last glare before turning back to her meal.

You have a death wish, that or you are eager to get back to those suicide-runs.

I barely suppress a shiver.

Oh, Gods, no.

Then stop needling her.

I just can't help it!

She makes it so easy!

Like a porcupine!

...

...

Oh, my God, yes!

God, no! No no no no! You are not calling her that!

Madam Porcupine and baby Platypus!

I swear you have a death wish.

Live a little, Ike!
"I will live a little if you stop trying to get us killed."

You are such a stick in the mud.

I was excited to read the letters once we got back to the bedroom.

I kicked the boots off and launched myself onto my mattress, Yunru, who had been napping beside the pillow, jumped and squeaked angrily at me, biting my ear.

"Sorry, sorry! I didn't see you, Yunru! Sorry, sorry!" I laughed," Where have you been girl? Living the life of a water rat?"

Yunru lets my ear go to curl up back in her spot, completely ignoring me.

"She goes around causing trouble," Jiang Cheng tells me," I think Teacher Fang said something about a large rat stealing a bun off his meal plate last night."

I laughed harder," Way to go, Yunru! You're so smart!"

"It's not funny!" Jiang Cheng tells me.

"Try saying that without a grin on your face!" I point at him and he quickly covers his twitching lips," It's not funny!"

I chuckle and roll my eyes, pulling the letters out of my robes and opening ShouShan's first.

It read:

'A-Ying, it's been a while! Man, you are such a treat! I have to say, for being missing for two years, being caught only now isn't so bad, although it is pretty hilarious, and when you were eating melon?! Oh, I wanted to be there to see that!'

Of course he'd find this funny.

To be fair, ShouShan does seem like a fellow who'd enjoy a bit of schadenfreude every now and then.

Ugh.

'A-Xi, you remember her right?, we're going to be married soon, I'll send you an invitation when it's settled, maybe you can come visit us then! Father is eager to meet you again, he still hasn't let go the idea of having you join the Bai Clan.

Hell, he'll certainly try to have you marry any daughter I may have!'

Gods, no.

Yeah, you're already taken.

I am not!

You're totally taken.

'But about that idea you had, I was intrigued by it. None of us really know much about the origins of cultivation, and we use our own family's traditional method, so we can't
really help you much, but it does sound plausible.

If you're that interested in finding out if it is, or isn't, then the GusuLan has the most extensive Library of all the Great Sects, and I'm sure the YunmengJiang has too, you can try to look things up there.

And about that MoGui you fought, damn you are crazy, those things are deadly. Well, who am I kidding, you practically live to hunt down the deadliest beasts there are out there. Maybe being in timeout might teach you more patience.'

Oh, ye of so little faith, how you wound me so!

He's totally got you pegged.

'Hope the letter reaches you alright, and before you ask me, again, yes! We got that kid you recommended to us! Yes, he has talent alright! And, yes, he's doing fine!

Honestly, you'd think that him being older than you would make you stop acting like such a hen!'

How nice!

I can't believe they actually took him in.

Hey, kid's got a head-start on life, I personally recommended him.

True, but the Bai Clan isn't a sect, to take in an outsider... That's gotta be a first.

Meh, lame first. I'm just glad the kid can have his chance to become a cultivator.

'Anyway, I hope you're doing alright, I'll be waiting for you letter next month.

Now that I can write back to you, let us have actual conversation and not just reports on what madness you've gotten yourself into now!'

I smiled and put his letter aside.

The next letter was Yan MingXia's packet and I kind of hesitated before opening it.

There were a full five pages of writing, the last three of which were a long, long list of names and numbers.

What is this?

Read the letter.

'Brat'

And we are off on a great start.

Shush you.

'Brat! I'm sure you found it funny, jumping all over the place and letting all the good people worry about you, and don't even get me started on those monsters that would, most definitely, be able to eat you whole!
Yup, this is Yan MingXia's letter alright.

Oh, how I missed her, she remind me of Mrs. Bert from number 6.

...You know what, I can see what you mean.

Right? It's totally a Mrs. Bert lookalike!

'But fine, it's your life you're endangering anyway. We've got bigger problems.'

Oh? Something happen?

Keep reading.

'...We've got bigger problems.

Apparently someone, who I am certain was that damn Tang Qi and his brood of gossips, told the nearby villages that I was selling talismans at a lower price than the norm and I started getting requests for more.

The amount you sent, with extras in case something happened, are all spent within days of your letters arriving, and there's a waiting list. Business is too damn good!'

Oh... That's a problem?

Apparently?

How is that a problem?

Keep reading.

'...Business is too damn good! I can't keep up with the constant flood of requests and inquiries about when you're sending the next package, despite them knowing very well that you only send one every other month, so I had to hire help.'

Hire help?

Keep reading!

'I'm no spring chicken, Wei WuXian, and so I had my distant cousin send in one of his sons help me manage things. Kid's not too bright but it'll do.'

Ouch, I pity the kid, dealing with MingXia every day? Poor, poor kid.

Oh, my Heavens, keep reading!

'We're expanding business. I don't want to listen to excuses, or arguments, I'm telling you as it is. We're expanding.

I'm sending you a list of what people are requesting and the quantity they want, no need to fill out every order, unless you're that crazy and setting a precedent, be smart brat, but at least get me rid of this headache.

I've also contacted a friend of a friend who's willing to sell your talismans in their
store, they're also on the list, and I'm in the process of getting another shop to consider your things.'

What?

*Oh, my god, what have we done?*

Business?

*Contraband!*

They're my talismans, how is this contraband?

*Sects and local clans sell talismans, you're releasing them out into the streets, for pennies!*

They're practice...

*They were practice, now they're a legitimate business! You can't keep up with this orders forever!*

...

I might not need to.

...*What?*

I might not need to personally write each talisman forever, just for a while longer.

...*I don't like that look in your eyes.*

I had a brilliant idea.

*It's a terrible idea.*

Books were hard to print because they all have different characters and sentences. No two pages are alike.

But talismans... Talismans all looked the same.

You didn't need a printer to copy those.

A wide grin split my face.

You just needed a stamp.

Chapter End Notes

Starting from the top of the chapter, the slingshot WWX made was more of a David Goliath type of sling, that's a small leather pouch with a string that'll be attached to your finger. You rotate the sling to gain momentum and then you take aim and shoot. If anyone's played/seen Plague Tale: Innocence, that's what my idea for the sling was.

This Shixiong is older than him but not by much, I think it gets mentioned in later chapters (really sorry for constantly typing that out, but as is, I'm writing /on average/
ahead of what you're reading by 5 chapters, so you're reading Chapter 45, and if I hadn't taken an early night yesterday, I'd be writing Chapter 50), but older disciples of the Sect are actually pretty impressed with WWX. Half of them wouldn't mind going over to befriend him, but don't because they're unsure if they're welcomed, and the other half is content with admiring his skills from afar. The reason for this difference in attitude is that, older disciple know, pretty damn well, just how WWX survived out there, and more than a few had been roped into looking for him. The younger ones? They just know that a new kid arrived and he's getting treated like a little prince.

Jiang FengMian is totally pissed off that someone out there (actually more than just a couple of someones) knew where WWX was and did not tell them. No, he's not calling Madam Yu a porcupine. Ike has thoroughly advised him that, unless he wanted to spend a week running suicides back to back, it'd be best to let that one go.

I love ShouShan so much that I kind of forget that I wrote him as an early-twenties heir that's about to get married. Seriously, WWX is going to have mini ShouShan's running around by the time he's 17 and freaking out about the war, and he'll get to play cool auntie again!

I don't want to reveal much about Yan MingXia, because her contraband (It's not really contraband) operation and her scheme will be very important in later chapters, and throughout the story, so I won't answer any questions about it (unless it's like, Who's MingXia again?)

And the stamp! Explained later, like... Next chapter. Speaking of next chapter! Do you know who's coming up next? You've guessed it, It's the beloved Lan Brothers! (Is that a fangirl mob I hear?)
Chapter Summary

The much awaited return of the Lan Brothers, the Lan Brothers' letters, and a devious Wei Ying makes the best insane plans that somehow work in his favor (must be the Luck Stat actually working)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"When its gone, you'll know what a gift love was. You'll suffer like this, so go back and fight to keep it." - Ian McEwan

Chapter 46: Cherished Friend

"Young Master Lan," A fellow disciple stops him on his way to the Gentian House," A letter has arrived for you, your Uncle instructed us to wait to deliver it personally to you." The disciple bows holding out the rather bulky letter.

Lan Huan immediately knows who that letter is from and smiles, accepting the letter, and the disciple quickly bows again and leaves.

*Maybe his brother would feel better after reading A-Ying's letter.*

Lan Huan resumed his way towards his late mother's former residence. The house nestled deep in the mountain surrounded by the blue colored gentians looked heavenly under the warm sunlight, but to him, it was as if there was a perpetual black cloud hanging over it.

Sitting primly on the step in front of the house was Lan Zhan, waiting patiently for the door to be opened.

*Uncle would scold him again for coming here.*

"A-Zhan," Lan Huan called him from the path leading to the house," Mother is not here anymore, A-Zhan," He tells him.

His brother looks at him with saddened golden eyes, so alike his own, and asks him," Where is Mother?"

*Dead.*

Lan Huan swallows, throat suddenly dry, and forces a smile onto his face," Mother isn't here, A-Zhan," He tells him," Come now, Uncle will scold you if you keep coming here."

His brother doesn't move, if anything, his words only make him more resolute in waiting there, on
the step of the house.

Lan Huan sighs, and joins him.

"Mother isn't going to open that door," He tells his brother," Mother is gone, A-Zhan, remember? Uncle has told us this."

"Where is she?" His brother asks him," Why can't I find her?"

"She's gone," He answers him," She can't be found."

"Why not?" Lan Zhan looks so sad," Why did she leave? Was she unhappy?"

Yes.

"No," Lan Huan smiles," Of course not, A-Zhan. Mother was sick," He tells him instead.

"Oh," His brother looks down on his hands, correctly poised on his lap," Will she come back?"

"No," He answers him," That's why you don't need to keep coming here, as Uncle has told you many times already."

Lan Zhan's hand clench in his lap.

"I..." He opens his mouth to say something but closes it again.

Lan Huan sighs," Whatever it is that A-Zhan wants to say, I will listen to, and I will not tell Uncle."

His little brother looks up at him with golden eyes shimmering with unshed tears, lips pressed into a thin line to keep from trembling.

"I want to stay..." He says," I want to stay here waiting."

For what?

Lan Huan does not say anything in response, though he feels his heart is being squeezed between unforgiving hands, and smiles gently at his brother, nodding," Then Big Brother will stay here with you."

"Uncle will scold you," His brother tells him," Brother should go."

"No," He smiles," What sort of big brother would I be to leave my little brother to be punished alone?"

His brother's eyes shimmer and his mouth opens slightly in wonder, before he presses his lips together again and nods, looking back down on his lap.

Lan Huan looks out over the gentians blooming all around the house hidden deep within the mountain, lost in thoughts of what has been done and what no one thought to questions about being 'righteous', he restrained his emotions from showing on his face as his thoughts turned to his father.

His father who barely stepped out of seclusion these days and wouldn't even look at his own sons before retreating like a cowed dog.

A mixture of heavy emotions built up in his stomach and Lan Huan knew he'd have to talk to his Uncle about how to let them go.
He griped his hands tighter and suddenly remembered the letter.

"A-Zhan," He calls his brother," I almost forgot, a letter came for us."

His brother's eyes light up in interest," From A-Ying?" He asks.

Lan Huan knew that his brother would never call his friend like that to his face, but it lightened his heart to see him grow so fond of his friend. He hoped they stayed friends even after they grew older and had their own lives to live.

A friend like A-Ying was a blessing.

"Yes," Lan Huan smiled," Let us see what he's been up to recently."

Immediately his brother gets this tiny knot on his brow, worried and displeased that the slightly younger boy kept getting into dangerous situations, and Lan Huan has to try very hard to not let his smile grow wider.

He carefully opens the letter, pretending not to notice his brother's growing restlessness, and pulls out the paper sheets.

There are two letters, one for him and one for his brother, plus the usual assortment of drawings that A-Ying loved to send.

His brother reverently help the drawings that A-Ying had sent for him, a city glowing with lanterns, of fishermen out in their boats, and of a strange creature A-Ying had titled 'Platypus'.

His brother held that drawing the longest, baffled by the creature's appearance, before opening his letter.

Lan Huan followed suit, and blinked at the first few lines.

' Lan Gege! I hope you're well, I'm doing fine too, no need to worry! In fact, I don't anyone has to worry about me from now on, Sect Leader Jiang found me this week and he's brought me back to his sect. I guess I'm a guest disciple here now? Ahah! I don't really now!'

"He's in Yunmeng," His brother said, blinking in surprise," He's staying with the YunmengJiang Sect."

Lan Huan tries very hard not to cheer," Well, Sect Leader Jiang has been looking for A-Ying for a long time, I'm sure he's very happy right now that he's found him."

Lan Zhan nods," He said we could write to him, if we wanted, but he doesn't want them to know who we are."

Lan Huan blinks," Why not?"

His brother frowns," He says that the other disciples think he's only there because the Sect Leader favors him, he doesn't want them to know he has friends in other Sects."

Aah, Lan Huan thinks, that would certainly make things difficult for the boy.

Although no one outside GusuLan knew that the two heirs received letters from the much discussed 'Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian', as he was referred to in every rumor - and the GusuLan had strong rules against gossiping - it wouldn't be 'proper' for a simple guest disciple to be close
friends with the Two Jades of Lan.

Not that the boy knew they were the heirs, his letters never indicated anything and they'd never introduced themselves by title, only by their birth names. Certainly, now that he was in a Great Sect, he'd learn about them, but considering how ditzy A-Ying could be at times, Lan Huan wouldn't put it past him to think the heirs were simply two other boys that had the same exact names as his friends.

"Well," Lan Huan cheered up his brother," A-Ying still wants us to write, we'll just not use our names. Then all that A-Ying can tell them is that we're from Gusu," He proposes.

His brother thinks it through and nods, decisively," I will write to him. Needs more practice in calligraphy."

Lan Huan let out a chuckle and quickly covered his mouth, not supposed to have laughed at that.

His brother gives him a surprised look before pouting, despite A-Zhan stating, quite vehemently, that he does not pout," It is not funny."

Lan Huan nods," Yes, it is not funny, A-Zhan. But you should also tell A-Ying about your studies or Gusu, I'm sure he'd like to hear about you."

*And not just complaints against his shaky handwriting.*

Lan Zhan looks down at his letter again and slowly nods," Yes, I will write of Gusu."

Lan Huan smiled at his brother and went back to his letter.

"I will tell him of Gusu rules," His brother suddenly says and Lan Huan starts laughing.

He couldn't seem to stop, even when his brother looked startled at his unusual behavior, he just couldn't seem to stop laughing.

He couldn't help it.

The image of A-Ying getting a letter full of Gusu Lan rules and a scolding for his handwriting when all he had sent these past two years had been adventures and beautiful scenery, was just too humorous to contemplate.

He'd have to write a more elaborate letter to A-Ying to compensate.

After setting MingXia's letter aside to review on it further, I am left with a letter from one merchant in Qinghe and two letters from Gusu, signed as 'Lan Gege' and 'A-Zhan'.

After snorting at the names I picked up Lan Zhan's and opened it.

Oh, this is priceless.

*What?*

My lips twitched and threatened to break into a wide grin, stomach hurting from trying to contain the laughter bubbling in my chest, and my hands trembled as I held up the letter to read it.

This is absolutely priceless!
I lost the fight against the hilarity of the situation.

I collapses back on the bed in a fit of giggles, tears leaking out of my eyes with how hard I was laughing, clutching at my stomach.

"What the hell?" Jiang Cheng looks flabbergasted at my laughing fit," What's wrong?"

I review the letter in my head and handed it to him.

Jiang Cheng takes it with hesitation before reading it.

It's not long before he's laughing just as much as me.

"He's... He's... He's sent you... Tips on... on calligraphy!" Jiang Cheng howled in laughter.

"I know!" I laughed harder in response," And... And he knows me!"

Jiang Cheng was curled up in a ball on the floor, laughing and crying," To you! Of... Of... Of all people!"

"I know!" I struggled to get enough air to breathe.

Which was how YanLi, whose bedroom was down the hall, found us, having grown worried with the amount of noise coming from our room," What are you two doing?"

"A-... A-... A-Jie!" Jiang Cheng managed to gasp out between laughter," Letter!" He showed her the letter.

YanLi takes it and reads it, quickly connecting the dots as to who the letter was addressed to, and started giggling," To you, A-Ying?"

"I know!" I managed to take a deep breath," A-Zhan... Oh, A-Zhan..."

We're never letting him live this down.

Never.

I'm keeping that letter forever.

He'll be so embarrassed of it years down the road.

I can't wait.

Finally, Jiang Cheng and I manage to calm down our laughter and just laid there, panting and rubbing at our teary eyes. Jiang YanLi rereading Lan Zhan's letter with a trembling smile, trying hard not to start giggling again.

"A friend in Gusu?" She asks me once things calm down.

I nod," I met A-Zhan years ago, around the time I met ShouShan, actually, we're close friends!" I smile at her.

Lan Zhan will totally deny it.

Let him deny it, I have proof.

"It's good A-Ying has such good friends," YanLi says.
"He sounds so stuffy though!" Jiang Cheng interjects, "How did you befriend such a boy?" He wonders.

I ran into him on the streets of Caiyi Town at night, teased him and taught him a nursery rhyme.

"I'm just that lovable," I shrug, with a haughty grin.

Jiang Cheng scoffs, "And that's why his letter to you is a bunch of GusuLan Sect rules of conduct and about six lines of reprimands about your handwriting."

A beat of silence.

I start laughing again and Jiang Cheng desperately tries not to join me.

"What about the other letters?" YanLi asks me.

I rub my eyes and pick Lan XiChen's letter, opening it.

'A-Ying, I'm glad you are all right. YunmengJiang is a very good place for you to stay in, A-Zhan and I are happy for you. Thank you for all the letters and drawings, Lan Zhan really likes them. What is that 'platypus' creature you sent? Not even Uncle has seen such a creature.'

That's why I told you not to send that picture to them.

Shush, this is hilarious.

'Everything has been peaceful here, A-Zhan has begun to learn the guqin, maybe he can play for you one day? I'm sure he wouldn't mind.'

I just know that Lan XiChen did not ask Lan Zhan about that before writing this.

'...I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Gusu is very beautiful this time of year, if you ever come here to study I'm certain you'll find many pretty scenes to draw, and the forest surrounding the mountains will surely delight you.'

Damn, Lan XiChen sure is winning the 'potential hubby award' isn't he?

Oh my God, Ike...

He is! Look, he's even inviting you to go take a stroll through the woods, that's a date invitation if I ever saw one.

He's just being nice!

Like Walter was nice when he offered to go get coffee with you?

...

Ooh? Is that a bit of red I see on your cheeks, my darling dear?

No! No, it is not! It's totally different!

My, my, your Lan Zhan will really be jealous. Poor thing doesn't even know his brother is competition yet!
I had to take a deep breath to prevent myself from responding.

I focused back on the letter.

'I wish you good fortune in your studies, there is much to learn at Yunmeng and I am certain you will make the most of it. Best of wishes, Lan GeGe.'

_You're totally calling him that to his face later._

You think I'm that shameless?

..._Do you want me to answer that?_

Forget it.

_Ah, Lan-er-gege~!_

IKE!

I suppress a full body shudder and carefully fold Lan XiChen's letter.

"At least his brother knows how to actually write a letter," I chuckle, "Those two couldn't be more different from one another!"

"So why did you befriend the two and not just the social one?" Jiang Cheng asked, getting a soft wack from YanLi for the impolite question.

I laughed brightly, "Where would be the fun in that? I'll get A-Zhan to write an actual letter to me!"

"Keep dreaming..." Jiang Cheng massaged his head, "That letter looked like it has been written by an old man!"

_Well... He is the pride and joy of Lan QiRen..._

I tried not to break down laughing again.

Really, Lan Zhan made it so easy for me to tease him.

---

I sent the letters into my inventory once Jiang Cheng had fallen asleep and started to make plans on how to deal with Yan MingXia's situation and how to get the ball rolling.

Obviously, if I did it and it worked, things were going to change significantly.

I'd have to find a way to make sure this wasn't tracked back to me, because God knew I had enough problems already without being called out for _unintentionally_ creating a whole new market for working talismans, of high quality because I had standards.

The stamp thing was workable, I'd carve the required stamp on wood or bamboo or whatever material conducted energy and ink better, then use seals on the sides to be similar to the Wen branding stick.

But instead of burning it'd press ink.

If I was smart about, I could actually make several talismans at once and then cut them into separate slips of paper.
Uh, this required further experimentation, Ike make a mental note.

Noted.

Okay, so, the stamp idea was great, and potentially workable, but what about the 'non-traceable' thing?

Don't use your address? MingXia knows where to find you in case of an emergency.

Not enough. People will want to know who the hell is creating that many talismans and selling them for discount price.

Technically, you're not selling them. You're providing them for someone else to make a fortune off of.

It's not like I need the money now, and I have better ideas for future inventions to make money out of.

You could've had a head-start.

Not needed.

Seriously, my credit in the Store wasn't even the complete amount because I still had piles of loot to sell.

Back to business, how can I make sure no one thinks to look at me when asking around for this mysterious rogue cultivator?

...Fake identity? Make a decoy?

...Go on.

So, you don't want people to know it is you doing all these things, so make a decoy, a red herring, and they'll go on a merry goose chase tracking down this 'rogue cultivator'.

I blink.

Actually... We could use that for more than just the talismans.

We can?

Safe houses, contingency plans for the mountain, stopgaps.

What? You've lost me.

If I can get someone to play decoy for me, I can get to open so many doors of possibilities! Why settle for one decoy?

Get a network of decoys working with each other to elude detection, have them constantly change locations, and inspire misdirection.

...You're devious.

I am a genius.

This could backfire immensely on you.
Or it could be the longest heist anyone has ever played on the nation.

*How are we doing this?*

Thankfully, Jiang Cheng was already fast asleep, the evil grin on my face would've given him nightmares.

That said, he wouldn't be much better when the wise scope of what I was about to do was finally unearthed.

All Power to the People.

Chapter End Notes

Show of hands, how many remembered Lan Zhan lost his mother when he was six? So, yeah, they're back! (Temporarily) How happy are you?

I find it so funny that Lan XiChen went under the name 'Lan GeGe' and I can't wait for JC to go 'You're the Lan GeGe?!' and LXC just passively smiling 'Yes, I'm A-Ying's Lan Gege' (speaking of gege's, Ike totally moaned 'Lan-er-gege' right into WWX's brain, let that sink in)

The idea WWX just had was/is insane. That's all ya' gonna know.
Chapter 47: Grounded

I had the first packet of talismans ready to go but I couldn't send such a bulky package through the sect, already I'd used practicing along side Jiang Cheng as an excuse as to why I was writing so many talismans and had been given odd looks by more than one servant or disciple.

So, I needed to use the Yunmeng City post house.

Now, to find an excuse to be out on the city without Jiang FengMian thinking I was trying to run away.

"Jiang Cheng," I moaned in despair," I'm so bored! There's nothing to do!"

"There's a lot of things to do!" Jiang Cheng rebuffs me," You could be practicing like me, for one!"

He was going through the basic motions of sparring while I played spotter for him in case he messed something up.

"But, I don't want to..." I pouted," Can't we go out?"

He stops and looks at me confused," Go out?"

"To the city," I point to the sect gates," Can't we go out and have fun?"

"We're not allowed to leave the Sect Compound until we are ten," Jiang Cheng shakes his head," A-Jie goes out but there's always a servant or guard with her nearby, just in case."

"So I can ask Shijie instead?" I perk up," Thanks, platypus!"

Jiang Cheng's eyes widen and he reaches out to grab me," Wait!"

Too late.

I nimbly dodge out of his reach and take off running to where YanLi usually was at this hour. I could hear Jiang Cheng's hurried footsteps after me, grumbling something along the line of 'crazy
idiot', and so I ran faster, pushing the kid to his limits.

Training came in all sorts of ways, and playing cat and mouse was rather simple, in comparison to my plans for street parkour when he got some muscle into those arms.

*And you can actually leave the sect compound.*

That too.

Up ahead I spotted YanLi carefully arranging flowers.

"Shijie!" I called out to her," Jiang Cheng had a brilliant idea!"

"I did not!" Jiang Cheng yelled, offended," This was not my idea!"

YanLi paused what she was doing and looked at us with an exasperated smile," A-Ying, A-Cheng, what have you done now?"

"I haven't done anything!" Jiang Cheng stomps his feet," I was practicing, this idiot is the one that wants to get in trouble!" He points at my grinning self.

YanLi turns to me," A-Ying, what have you done now?"

"I haven't done anything yet, Shijie!" I pout at her," I just came to ask you if you were going out to the city today!"

She blinks," To the city?"

I happily nod," Yes! If you were going, maybe I could come with you for company!" I smile cheerfully at her.

Jiang Cheng gives me a baffled look.

YanLi chuckles," Well, I don't mind taking a walk to the city," She says," But A-Ying can't go far from me!" She instructs me.

I nod quickly," I won't! A-Ying promises to be on his best behavior!"

Jiang Cheng's eyes look at me up and down, clearly revealing just how much he believes that statement.

Jokes on him, I only needed to get in the post house, drop off the package, and be back at her side. Shouldn't take me more than thirty seconds.

"We are not allowed to leave the sect compound," Jiang Cheng reminds us.

"Eh?!" I grumble," But I'll be with Shijie and I won't go anywhere!"

"It's okay," YanLi smiles," I'll hold A-Ying's hand so he doesn't cause mischief. Does A-Cheng also want to come with us?" She asks him.

Jiang Cheng looks unsure but I make puppy dog eyes at him, and he crumbles.

No one withstands my puppy dog eyes.

"Then let's go, before lessons start," YanLi gets up and holds out both her hands.
I happily take hers in mine, walking beside her with a skip in my step, grinning all the while.

Jiang Cheng tried to remain perfectly prim and proper but even he was happy to be spending time with his beloved sister.

Honestly, these kids were just too cute!

We were walking happily through the city and I was subtly luring them closer and closer to the post house, Jiang Cheng had never been in the city before, unaccompanied by his parents, so he was watching the markets with wide-eyed amazement and jaw slack.

Too cute.

Jiang YanLi didn't mind taking us on a scenic route, especially knowing that a guard was following not five feet behind us, and just indulged on letting us pick the direction to walk and running commentary about what we saw.

Two streets from the post house I released my secret weapon.

I tapped twice on the satchel at my waist and Yunru poked her head out, jumping onto the ground and taking off running.

"Ah! Yunru!" I take after her, hearing YanLi and Jiang Cheng call out, surprised.

Yunru expertly weaves through the crowd and into the post house, and I enter it not a second later, having already pulled the packet out of my inventory. I place it on the counter of a stunned teller, place the sufficient coins on top of it and, after grabbing Yunru, cheerfully wished him a good day and walked out.

Not even thirty seconds.

"A-Ying!" YanLi and Jiang Cheng catch up to me, and see me 'struggling' to hold a wiggling Yunru," You had her with you?"

"I didn't even realize she was in the satchel..." I grumble trying to get Yunru to calm down," I thought she was playing around somewhere."

"Didn't you notice the satchel was heavier?" Jiang Cheng huffs.

"No," I pout at him," I'm used to it."

He rolls his eyes," And this is why dogs are better," He tells me.

This time I roll my eyes," Yes, yes, platypus, we all know how excited you are to be picking after puppies for the foreseeable future."

Jiang Cheng redsens and cuffs me over the head," Hey! Careful or I might let her go!" I whine.

YanLi sighs," That's enough excitement for one day, let us go back now," She puts her arm over my shoulders as my hands are occupied with holding Yunru.

You seriously owe Yunru a lot more than just a bowl of berries.

I'll get her a side plate of meat.
Who knew she was such a great actress?

She's mine, what else would you expect?

A lazy procrastinator.

The betrayal!

We start walking back and Jiang Cheng continues his rant about how dogs were infinitely better than any other animal, and that his dogs would be the best behaved dogs ever.

Knowing what I knew, I was tempted to say his dogs would be the most spoiled dogs ever.

And then our afternoon of friendship goals and subterfuge was over.

Jiang FengMian greets us at the gate.

He doesn't look too happy.

No, I observe the way his eyes fly over the cowed Jiang Cheng and the sheepish YanLi to settle on my form and stay there, trying to check me for injuries, No, he doesn't look happy at all.

"A-Li," FengMian starts," Where did you go?"

"I took the boys on a walk, Father," She answers," Just a small walk through the city."

"A-Li, they are not allowed outside of the compound yet," FengMian tells her," What if something had happened?"

YanLi bows," I am sorry, Father, I won't do it again."

"It's not Shijie's fault," I interject, frowning," I asked her to take me outside, so if you're going to scold anyone, Sect Leader Jiang, it should be me."

Seriously, if he liked me so much he wouldn't ruin me for life by letting me act the way I wanted.

FengMian doesn't even turn to me, instead turning to Jiang Cheng," A-Cheng, why didn't you tell someone about leaving the compound? I know you know the rules, so why did you decide to break them?"

Oh, hell no.

"I said," I speak louder," That it was my fault, Sect Leader Jiang."

Jiang Cheng looks at me with wide eyes and YanLi grasps my shoulder in warning.

"A-Ying," FengMian looks kindly down at me," You do not yet understand the rules-...

"I know the rules! I just wanted to go outside because, need I remind you of all people, I am used to coming and going as I please!" I tell him," And as I was the one breaking the rules and Jiang Cheng and Shijie were the ones making sure I wasn't going to cause trouble, then the one that needs to be punished is me and not them!"

"Well said," Madam Yu claps from around the corner, walking with her two maids behind her," You are the one that instigated the children to break the rules, as you have readily admitted, and has to receive punishment for it."
"My Lady-..." Jiang FengMian goes to interrupt but Madam Yu makes a slash gesture with her hand, quieting him.

"YanLi and Jiang Cheng could've been hurt or troubled because of this child, you may do as you wish with it outside of propriety behind close doors, but I am the one responsible for discipline in the Sect and this is a matter of discipline," She sneers, "Wei Ying, you will wait in the training courtyard, I will be there shortly with more instructions."

To think that of the two, I would appreciate the woman I can't stand to the man I thought I'd grow fond of.

*Expectations not always meet reality.*

Disappointing.

I give an awkward bow to the Madam and Sect Leader and hurry away, letting go of Yunru once I turn the corner.

"I'll get you your reward when I get back in the room, you were a lifesaver, YunYun!" I grin at her.

Yunru squeaks at the nickname and does a quick little donut run before scampering off into the bushes.

She's cute too.

*Lord have mercy on us if you can't find something cute in your vicinity.*

If I can't find anything cute in my vicinity it only means that I am the cute thing in the vicinity.

*Ego.*

Well, you have to stretch your legs somehow, don't you Ike?

*Touché.*

No disciple really bothers me as I make my way to the training courtyard but I do get a few unfriendly glares and 'quiet' gossiping behind my back.

Really, these people would learn, sooner or later, that just because they talked about me it didn't mean that I'd suddenly start paying attention to them.

And the ones spreading rumors were underachieving disciples who, obviously, felt threatened about my rapid achievements and reputation.

Older disciples I sparred with didn't really care about me either way, and, after seeing my seven year old body withstand three consecutive suicide-runs, weren't too keen on believing rumors when proof that I actually worked hard to get to where I was was right in front of their eyes.

Truthfully, I felt like I could perhaps befriend them, but I was already kind of busy with Jiang Cheng and dealing with my plans for the future that I didn't have the time right now.

So much to do, so little time to accomplish it.

But I would still get it done.

I was going to win this.
It didn't take too long for the Madam to arrive, sneering in such a familiar way the hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and bark orders for the older disciples to line up.

One of the maids, I don't remember their names at the moment, presents the Madam with a training sword.

She takes it and tosses it at me, I grab it and nearly drop it, not having expected it to be so heavy.

The sword was almost as tall as me, made of bamboo carved in the shape of a sword, but it was far heavier than it looked to be.

I gave the sword a suspicious look before looking up at the Madam.

"Disciples," She ordered," You'll spar one by one with this junior, whenever he loses you'll switch, until he either wins or collapses," And then she walks away.

I stare after her and then down at the sword I had the certainly was tampered with, and I can't help the bubble of resentment at the punishment.

Liling was perhaps half of the length of this blade, and she knew I wasn't proficient in using it, and not only that, this blade was too heavy and unwieldy for me to maneuver with it.

Furthermore, these were disciples who had already spent, at the very least, a year studying swordplay.

I was never going to win this.

Well... She did warn you that she'd tire you out in order to prevent more misbehavior.

This goes a bit beyond 'tiring me out'.

Yeah, well, she doesn't like you very much.

I growled in the back of my throat and walked into the circle of the sparring ring.

I twisted the sword to experiment on fighting stances and had to grimace at how limited my movements were. That said, I couldn't very well drop the sword and fight hand-to-hand because, if nothing else, I'd use the sword to block their attacks.

After some hesitation, understandable given the sudden change of plans and how young I looked like, one of them stepped in the ring with me.

"Don't go easy on him!" Madam Yu yelled out," The one I see holding back will be joining in on his punishment."

Sure, go right ahead and tell them to split my head open while you're at it!

Temper!

I gripped the sword tightly and glared at my opponent.

I wasn't going down easily.

I never expected you to.
If she thought this was enough to break me, she was wrong.

*Give them hell.*

I was going to take my mountain, and I was going to raise it high above all others, just taunting my opponents to try and rival it.

*Keep your mind on the target, don't lose focus, stay calm.*

I take a deep breath through my nose and exhale out of my mouth.

My eyes start shimmering silver underneath the afternoon sky and my opponent shivers almost unnoticeably.

*Game on, punks.*

I don't really remember how long we sparred for, how many times I lost, or how it ended, I really only remember waking up in the infirmary, in the middle of the night, to Jiang Cheng sneaking in to snuggle beside me.

Seriously, I woke up to him jostling me awake trying to get under the blanket with me.

*Your heart totally melted on the spot.*

Shut up.

I ended up helping him get settled, and teased him obviously, before going back to sleep for a few hours until I get roused a second time.

By YanLi who was looking for Jiang Cheng.

I heaved a sigh and mourned the youth's disregard for valuable sleeping time.

"I was worried," YanLi sat beside the bed," A-Cheng wasn't in his room, he wanted to sleep in my room but Mother forbid it, he still broke the rules so he still has to kneel in the ancestral hall tomorrow as well."

Dear Lord in Heaven, these kids needed a cool aunt.

"How are you, A-Ying? Are you hurting?" She asks me, worried, and gently brushing the hair off my face.

"Not really," I yawn," I'll be bruised and sore tomorrow, but I'm just tired," I answered.

*Lie. Your hands are completely raw and they'll be bandaged for a day or two still, your knees got pretty banged up and you are lucky you have no broken bones.*

...Could be worse.

*With you? I'm surprised you still haven't split your head open.*

"A-Ying..." YanLi frowns," Don't lie."

I give her a sheepish grin," I'm fine, Shijie, you'll see. I'll be back in lessons tomorrow morning!"

She doesn't look very convinced and sighs, pressing her hands gently on my cheeks, fingers
caressing my scar.

"A-Ying gets hurt too much," She tells me.

My smile trembles," Don't worry! I'll get better!" I say.

What else could I tell her?

That I wouldn't get hurt? That I wouldn't do it again? That I wouldn't break the rules again?

It was practically impossible, in a world like this one, even if there wasn't a war brewing on the horizon and I dead-set on becoming the world's first necromancer, I'd still get involved in night-hunting, fighting and a society based around how powerful and influential you were.

I'd get hurt either way.

It wasn't fair to her, a girl too soft and loving for such a lifestyle, to witness what life would bring to her doorstep and watch it take away bits and pieces of her brother, threatening to leave him a shell of his younger self.

I couldn't do much, but what I could I promise I would. I'd do my best in making sure her brother and herself got a better future.

Even if it meant that I would get beaten up by six odd teenagers with bamboo swords.

I'd survived worst punishments.

Besides, it helped me get stronger.

Always find the silver lining. The bright side of a situation. The break in the clouds.

The doctor didn't want to clear me come morning, because underneath my robes I looked like a mottled grape that had been stepped on, but I had showed him that I was perfectly comfortable with moving about and was ready to take on the world.

I wasn't, not really, I actually wanted to go lie down on a nice bed and sleep the rest of the afternoon, but this was a matter of determination.

And pride.

That too, I guess. The look on Madam Yu's face when I walked in like nothing had happened would be worth it.

Priorities, right?

Not such, more like I can prove that beating me up won't work on me.

She'll just try again.

And I'll survive it again, I shrug, besides I did level up my swordplay skill, leveled up and, this is kind of important, got close to actually beating one of them.

Sure by the time that nearly happened the disciples were already tired and falling a little behind, but I'll take improvement in any shape or form I can.
So, when morning arrived I left the infirmary, with permission!, and made my way to the main hall for breakfast.

Jiang Cheng looked up and stared at me in surprise, and I just couldn't help it:

"What is it, platypus? Shocked by my good looks?" I joked.

Jiang Cheng jolted, frowned, and then started tearing up.

You done goofed.

Oh crap.

I quickly hurry to him and ruffle his hair messing it up," Don't mind, don't mind, I'm fine! What are you upset about? Want me to join you kneeling in the hall? Ah, but I do that I'll just bore you to death with my whinging."

Jiang Cheng bats my hands away but leans slightly on me, thankfully not hugging me or something because that would make it hard not to grimace.

YanLi hadn't arrived yet, so it was only Jiang Cheng in here, which was surprising.

"Where's Shijie? And your parents?" I asked him.

"A-Jie was getting ready," He answers," Mother won't be eating with us today, and I don't know about Father."

Goddammit, and here I wanted to show off my stamina.

Serves you right, I already told you not to antagonize her.

I can't help it! Whenever she gets this look on her face I just want to shove it under her nose that she can't control me like that.

Yes, and it works out great for you.

I sighed.

"Are you hurt?" Jiang Cheng asks me.

"Nah," I wave him off," I'm fine."

He frowns," You were hurt last night."

"And now I am fine," I grin," No need to look so down, platypus!"

He gives me a look," Who says I'm sad about you?" He mumbles.

Kid's so cute, seriously, how can such a grumpy kid be so damn cute.

You find him cute because he's grumpy.

Totally.

"We'll if you're not sad about me, what are you sad about?" I ask him," You can tell me, I'm your shixiong, I'll look after my shidi!"
Jiang Cheng visibly reddens and gets away from me, sitting at his table for breakfast, "Who'd want you as their shixiong? Always getting in trouble, always daydreaming in class, and rude."

I sit down at my own table and clutch my heart, "Ah! How could you, platypus! And after I made you your slingshot too!"

Jiang Cheng looks away and fiddles with his sleeves.

He's too cute for his own good.

"Hey, Jiang Cheng," I call him.

"What?" He grunts.

"Thanks for being my friend," I smile at him, "You're a good kid."

He goes red as a tomato all the way to the tips of his ears, "Who are you calling a kid?! You're barely any older than me!"

I laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

If only you knew.

*Feeling old again?*

A bit, reminiscing mostly.

*What are you thinking about?*

Colin. He was my daredevil child, little troublemaker always getting into something the minute you turned your back on him.

*Ah, I remember him. He grew up surprisingly well-mannered.*

He grew up to be a counselor, certainly not the first thing that came to mind when he was a kid.

*Why are you thinking about him?*

Jiang Cheng kind of reminds me of his little brother.

*Ah?*

Yeah, I was wondering if I should use Colin as an example on how to act around him.

*Anything worthwhile?*

Just that Colin was a good big brother.

*You are too.*

Coming from the person constantly telling me I'm a bad role model.

*You are a bad role model, but you're not a bad caretaker, you just... need a handler, sometimes, frequently, advisably always.*

Gee, thanks.
It's true.

I know.

I rested my head on my hand as I watched Jiang Cheng try to get his composure back, still visibly red and glaring at nothing, and couldn't help but feel nostalgic.

Only now, instead of being an outsider looking in on these two brothers fooling around, it was a this serious little boy and myself in a second chance at life.

I still felt like an outsider.

But part of my heart yearned to latch on.

Warmth.

Family.

I missed it.

Chapter End Notes

Yunru is best girl, who's with me?  
Also, who can guess who made the rule that children couldn't leave the compound until they were 10? (It was not Madam Yu, that's for sure)

Speaking of Madam Yu, the punishment might've sounded brutal but! She knows WWX is not like a normal child, she did not leave for the duration of the punishment just in case something went wrong, and this gave her an excuse to push WWX to his limits.

Suicide runs do wonders for stamina, agility, and strength. But he needs to actually fight using a sword to get practice done (because YZY still remembers the short sword he had on him)

I get it that, up until this point, I've painted Madam Yu like a big baddy, but take her actions with a slightly skewed viewpoint. She hates WWX but at the same time, she's not about to sink so low as to keep him from reaching his full potential.

WWX getting mad at JFM for only scolding his children when he admitted it was his fault was a bit of self-indulgence. The "Seriously, if he liked me so much he wouldn't ruin me for life by letting me act the way I wanted." refers to canon!wwx, who grew up naturally arrogant, and would frequently toss insults back when insulted, or resorted to violence.

Not only did JFM favoritism cause a rift in the family, he essentially spoiled WWX into not thinking too much about his actions (whereas JC was lectured, at length, about never letting any 'harm' befall the family name, to the point where that approach wasn't the most helpful either)

People are complicated, marriage just adds another level of complication to them. And these two have a lot of problems to work out between them.
**Chapter Summary**

In which there is much panic, a letter, more friends, and Jiang Cheng has lost all hope that his best friend could be considered sane.
Good times.

**Chapter Notes**

Run boy run! This world is not made for you
Run boy run! They're trying to catch you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you." - Satchel Paige

**Chapter 48: Necessary**

I was late.

*Color me surprised.*

I was late!

*I did warn you.*

Oh, dear Lord in Heaven, Goddess GuanYin, all the deities out there that might take pity on this poor fool, I was fucking late!

*I have no sympathy for you.*

Ike! I am dead! Do you understand that?! Dead!

*I warned you. I told you, you wouldn't make it back in time.*

I am so dead.

*You are. Run faster, you might make it before the alarm is sounded, and will only scare Jiang Cheng out of his wits by barreling in through the window.*

I push my legs further, dashing through the still deserted streets of Yunmeng to reach the Sect Compound before the sun rose. Unfortunately, the sky was already lighting up and I could faintly hear the first fishermen and merchants start their day.
This is not good.

*Your fault.*

I bit my tongue so that I wouldn't yell profanities in the middle of the empty street and vaulting through the opening in the lotus insignia on the white walls and dropping into a roll on the ground on the other side.

I literally hit the ground running and take off towards the residential wing of the main building.

When I get there I scale a tree to jump onto the roof and jump through the window, letting myself drop to the wooden floor and start getting my robes and boots off.

"What the hell?!" Jiang Cheng startles awake and stares down at me, utterly befuddled about what just happened.

"Go back to sleep!" I hiss at him,"Lay down and pretend to sleep!"

After getting the clothes and boots off I quickly arrange them neatly at the foot of my bed and toss the blankets I'd used to fake a body into the adjacent room, I'd find a place to hide those later, and threw myself in bed, desperately trying to calm down my breathing.

"What's going on?" Jiang Cheng asks me.

"Jiang Cheng," I look at him, dead serious,"Lay down, go to sleep, you do not want to be awake."

"Why?" He complies and lies down,"What did you do?"

"For the sake of your continued health and mine," I bark a, slightly hysterical, laugh,"You really don't want to know."

Jiang Cheng looks up at the ceiling as if begging for patience," Did anyone see you?" He asks instead.

"I'm still alive," I chuckle," What do you think? Now sleep, we don't have much time."

Jiang Cheng closes his eyes," Much time for what?"

"Shh!" I hiss and him, already 'calm' and seemingly sleeping peacefully.

There's a lull of silence and I can sense that Jiang Cheng is just about to start talking again when the bedroom door slams open.

As if rehearsed, Jiang Cheng and I jump 'awake' and stare at the person standing in our doorway.

Jiang FengMian does not look happy.

*You are so dead.*

Jiang FengMian, in fact, looks like he just spent the last hour chasing a rumor of someone through a forest and all the way back to his own Sect.

*Oh, wait...*

"Father?" Jiang Cheng gulps," What's happening?"
Jiang FengMian takes a deep breath to reply before blinking and taking in the scene. Two little boys sitting up in their beds staring wide-eyed and startled at the person who just burst in their room.

Boots perfectly placed by the foot of their beds, robes folded for their early start in the morning, seemingly having been asleep up until he entered the room.

He asks,"Have you... Left the room tonight?"

To which both Jiang Cheng and I shake our heads.

Jiang FengMian slowly nods, observing our room again,"Ah, I see... There were reports of a disciple out of the Sect Compound at night."

It must've taken a great deal of sheer force of will for Jiang Cheng to not look in my direction. "Go back to sleep," Jiang FengMian decides,"It's still to early for you to be awake."

He smiles.

*I seriously think there can't be anything more terrifying than that.*

Even the Bo looked less scary than that.

*If he finds out the truth, you are dead.*

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

Jiang FengMian nods and leaves the room, closing the door on his way out.

I quickly put a finger to my lips, indicating for Jiang Cheng to remain quiet, and get out of bed to join him in his.

"What did you do?" He whispers in my ear, terrified.

"The letter I received," I whisper back,"A friend asked me to go on a night-hunt like old times."

"You went night-hunting?!" He hisses.

I shush him,"Quiet! Yes and no, I got there and me and my friend got to talking, then someone must've commented I was there, the next thing I know your father shows up!"

Jiang Cheng's eyes go wide,"Father was leading a night-hunt tonight."

I groaned,"And it just so happened I showed up at the same night-hunt."

He looks at me as if he's never seen me before,"How are you alive?"

I grin at him.

We are never doing this again until we have permission.

*I did warn you.*

Ike, I want you to put this day marked on my calendar, we are never doing this again.

*Won't mean much if you're constantly ignoring my advice.*
*Fifteen hours previously*

"What are you doing?" Jiang Cheng asks me, seeing me work on a slim piece of wood.

"I, my dear shidi," I distractedly answer him," Am about to create something revolutionary."

Jiang Cheng gives me a doubtful look.

Oh, you poor, poor child. You're going to be so grateful to me for what I am about to create.

*Yes, it's the invention of the ages, the world couldn't possibly exist without this.*

It really couldn't.

I blow the wood chips off and hold up what I have in my hands in front of my eyes, really, in all honesty, the System was amazing and I'd give it a 11/10 review if I could.

Once you bought a recipe of any kind, the System would guide you on how to actually get it done. Things like, how your hands should be positioned, how hard you should press or the amount of any thing you had to add.

It wouldn't just let you know how to get it done, it'd actually show you how.

It was amazing.

*Stop idolizing it, it'll probably screw you over soon.*

I've told you so many times before, the System loves me.

*Doubt.*

"What is that?" Jiang Cheng leans in to see it better.

"This?" I grin smugly at him," This is a fountain pen."

I got it.

*Stop being so happy about it.*

No, I waited almost three years to get my hands on it. I deserve to be enthusiastic about this!

*Not to the point where your passionate becomes Jiang Cheng's fanatical.*

I roll my eyes.

"What is a fountain pen?" Jiang Cheng pokes at it.

"You use it to write," I explain to him," This is hollow, and it has a cap with a tip, which I still haven't finished, and then there's this little tub thing that goes inside that has ink on it."

"Like a brush?" He frowns," Won't the ink spill out?"

"I'm working on it," I wave him off," This is better than a brush because it allows you to write neatly."
“I already write neatly, you’re the one that writes like a toddler,” Jiang Cheng scoffs.

“How dare you! My handwriting is perfectly legible!” I lie with a straight-face.

Jiang Cheng gives me a disbelieving look,” The characters look like chicken scratches.”

They’re not that bad, kid’s exaggerating.

Well, they certainly won’t win you any calligraphy awards.

I huff and get back to my crafting, I’d get the tip done later and amaze everyone with the fact that I could, in fact, write legibly.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” I ask Jiang Cheng.

“I dunno,” He pouts,” A-Jie went with Mother to see Madam Jin, you’re not doing anything, and Father is busy.”

“Really?” I blink,” I mean, I know Sect Leader Jiang is usually busy but you never point that out.”

Jiang Cheng hits me on the shoulder,” Father is leading a night-hunt tonight, so he won’t be back until morning.”

That’s interesting.

“Well, I’m almost finished here,” I inspect the body of the pen,” So if you want to do something, we can.”

Jiang Cheng jumps to his feet,” I want to spar!”

I groan,” Why, of all the things you could ask me to do, is it always something that involves physical exertion?”

Jiang Cheng frowns and bonks me on the head,” You won’t teach me the bow yet, the swords are too heavy, and we can’t go outside.”

“‘There’s talismans?” I try.

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes,” I’m not crazy about them like you, so no, I want to spar,” Then he very noticeably pouts,” Besides, what are you complaining about, you never lose.”

“I do lose, frequently, just not with you,” I chuckle and put the pen in my pocket, or so Jiang Cheng sees, having sent it to the inventory once it was out of sight.

“Of course you’d lose against the older disciples,” Jiang Cheng grumbles.

Eh, if I had my daggers and I wanted to seriously maim them, then it wouldn’t be ‘of course’.

Ah, but they can’t know that can they?

Ugh.

I get up and follow after Jiang Cheng to the training courtyard.

Spending an afternoon rolling around in the dirt, correcting grips and kicks for a couple hours wasn’t the worst that I could be doing.
"Young Master Wei," A servant found Jiang Cheng and I as we were resting under the shade on one of the covered piers," A letter arrived for you."

I didn't get why half the servants and older disciples liked to call me Wei-gongzi. Really, they just called me that from day one, and I doubted it was because Jiang FengMian asked them to.

"Thank you," I got up and accepted the letter.

The servant quickly bowed and left.

"Another?" Jiang Cheng sighed," And just one? They usually come in packs, don't they?"

"And early," I nod," I don't think this is my usual type of letter," I turn it around to read who it is from.

Mao PeiZhi.

Ooh!

I open the letter quickly, eager to see what news he brought me, and wow, word traveled fast that I was in Yunmeng.

Although, to be fair, I had asked ShouShan to speed up the process for me and try and get into contact with my other cultivator contacts, just so that FengMian didn't grow too suspicious for me to receive five letters in reply and send out more than twenty in response.

Of course, with Yan MingXia's decision to become the Godmother of Talisman Contraband (when it wasn't contraband no matter what Ike said), the option to be out of contact with them for a while wasn't possible.

Thankfully, and hopefully, ShouShan had explained things correctly to them so I wouldn't have to worry about foreign cultivators trying to 'break in' into Lotus Pier to talk to me.

I push the thoughts aside and start reading the letter, if it could be called that, they were only a few paragraphs explaining he'd be appearing on a night-hunt happening in a village nearby and that he had other of my contacts with him, so if I could meet with them we'd be able to discuss things properly.

...

...

Damn, I love these people.

You met them when you were five, at best, how the hell did you manage to make such strong connections?

Like I've said, many times, I am just that lovable.

And you teach them tricks that no one else has figured out yet.

That helps too.

Seeing the names of who'd be there I was surprised at how many small time clans had decided to travel in order to meet as close to Yunmeng as you could possibly get without actually being in Yunmeng.
ShouShan probably helped with that too.

Probably.

But, I do have one question.

What?

How are you getting there?

Uh?

It's a night-hunt, even if they're not actually there to participate on the night-hunt.

It's relatively close to Yunmeng, if I leave before midnight, I can be there by 1 am.

But you won't be able to make it back in time.

How do you know?

Gut feeling.

You, my dear old friend, don't have any guts.

Fine, my metaphorical gut feeling.

I can totally make it back in time, besides, I need to take this chance. I need to talk to everyone about what's going to happen in the next few months, a year at the latest.

You think you can get your talisman contraband operation rolling in a few months?

I'm spending my nights bulk drawing talismans, hopefully I can max out the skill before winter, which is when the talismans hit their peak in orders, and then I'll create the stamp machine. Once that machine is done, and it works, I can get it to one of my little helpers to send to MingXia, where another little helper should be helping out.

Hopefully, she wouldn't be too angry at me for suggesting she get a young cultivator from a nearby clan, well... nearby-ish, to help with actually dealing with the talismans.

And that the kid didn't get on her nerves too much.

Much woodcutting awaits that young padawan.

Ugh.

Anyway, once the first machine was with MingXia, and it was working as it should, we'd stop the actual door to door selling of the talismans and move things underground, not in the literal sense, but have merchants pick up the bundle of talismans and inconspicuously leave the money for them, before going back to their hometowns.

Yan MingXia would handle that part, though, as she was the one in charge of getting the talismans sold. And was the one that let this get out of hand.

Furthermore, no one would think that a widow past her prime, with no connection whatsoever to the cultivation world, save for one odd 'rogue cultivator' that spend a few weeks of winter in her home one year, would be capable of operation such a wide-scale talisman production.
Which was my goal entirely.

Except you did not expect have her ask for over a hundred talismans a month.

And that's why the stamp comes straight after the fountain pen!

"What does the letter say?" Jiang Cheng asks me,"Anything interesting?"

I hum,"You could say that, it's just a friend checking in on me. He heard I was staying here and wanted to send a letter."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes, less than impressed,"Well, he sent the letter."

"Platypus, I've told you many times, if you get too jealous you'll really turn into a platypus," I needle him,"And I will laugh if you do."

He smacks my back - and ouch! - before walking away from the pier, towards the training courtyard,"Lessons are starting soon, c'mon!"

I roll my eyes and pocket the letter.

It was a lucky night that FengMian and Madam Yu would both be gone for the night.

I only needed to make sure Jiang Cheng didn't wake up during the night and think I had disappeared.

*The pillow trick?*

Hmm, yes, that does sound like it could work.

*You still won't make it back in time to Lotus Pier.*

I will make it back in time! Where's your faith in my skills, Ike?

*Lost somewhere between your good luck and your ability to keep your foot out of your mouth.*

I was not that bad!

...

I wasn't! Ike!

There's no reply.

---

FengMian had left shortly after dinner, he was also helping organize the night-hunt he was going on so he had to be there early, and so, after a bath and a few squabbles in the bedroom about stupid childish topics, and a lot of needling about my near constant 'practice' of talisman-making, Jiang Cheng finally went out like a light.

I quickly arranged a mount of robes and blankets I had in my inventory, and would explain their appearance never, into a vaguely human shaped mound and covered it. I took a step back and determined that, if Jiang Cheng woke in the middle of the night, he wouldn't notice I wasn't actually there. Taking my task as completed I when out the window and scaled down a tree to get off the roof.
Getting out of Yunmeng was a lot harder than getting in, which I presumed was the entire point, but once you knew the guard's rotations and were small enough to fit through the little 'vent windows' as I called them, getting out only required you to be creative.

So, before long, I was running towards the village where my contacts awaited me.

*You're going to get caught.*

I am not getting caught!

*You're not making it back in time.*

Ike, we've discussed this already, everything will go smoothly.

*Uh uh - He didn't sound very impressed - Don't come crying to me when it doesn't.*

Nothing is going to go wrong.

_____________________

See? I told you! Everything's fine!

*Yes, yes, I heard you the first three times.*

"So, what is going on?" Mao PeiZhi asks me.

"A lot is going on," I chuckled,"What do you know?"

"Bai-gongzi told us one of your projects got out of control," Mao PeiZhi grins.

The other five cultivators around us chuckle in response.

I sigh - ShouShan really liked taking digs at my reputation of troublemaker -"I guess you could say that, but it wasn't *my* fault."

Mao PeiZhi grin widens," Of course not, Wei-gongzi, we'd never think that."

I give him a deadpan look - seriously, these guys loved making fun of me -"Here's the thing, I need you guys to do this-"

And then I explained them my plans.

At some point of the of the cultivators had to sit down before he passed out and held his head in his hands.

Mao PeiZhi was staring at me with a slack jaw, not saying a word.

"So?" I tilt my head to the side, looking up at him with a smirk,"An investment you are interested in participating?"

"Yes!" A cultivator gasped," The Tan Clan will take part in this proposal!"

"The Duan Clan as well!" Another one was quick to agree.

"Me too! I'll get my Clan to consider this too!" One of the younger cultivators put his hand up like a little schoolboy.

"If this works..." Mao PeiZhi finally murmured.
"It has no reason not to work," I inform him,"It might take a few months for it to become completely independent and longer to show visible results, but I don't see why it shouldn't work."

"If it works," Mao PeiZhi enunciates the word carefully,"Then you will take control of a whole new trade route."

"Not me," I shake my head,"I'm not the one who started this process, I was only trying to help an old woman."

Troublesome old woman too!

"And now you may very well be on your way of taking control of a whole new trade route," Mao PeiZhi repeats.

I roll me eyes,"Fine, yes! Yes, I may be accidentally taking control of a trade route, are you interested?" I ask him again.

"The Mao Clan stands with you in prosperity," Mao PeiZhi grins,"More so if you marry my daughter."

The cultivators laugh.

I groan,"I am not marrying anyone!"

Mao PeiZhi just smirks,"She'll grow up to be a beauty, you know, just like her mother."

"Mao-gongzi," I give him a look,"I am not marrying anyone."

He shrugs,"It was worth the try, I wouldn't approve of anyone else marrying my little girl."

*I think you might need to cut this short.*

Uh? Why?

*Listen.*

I make a gesture and every one goes quiet, I tilt my head slightly and listen.

At first there's only the usual forest sounds and critters and I start to lose patience at whatever it was Ike thought he'd noticed, when I hear it.

"They think it was him, Sect Leader," Someone was speaking,"I don't know if it's true, but a cultivator mentioned seeing a 'Wei WuXian' joining the night-hunt."

"Did they?" Another voice asked.

I freeze in place.

Oh, no.

*You're dead.*

I quickly look at Mao Peizhi,"We'll have to discuss this through ShouShan, I need to run, you never saw me tonight!" I point at them.

And then I quickly take off running.
"What do you think happened?" One of the cultivators asked.

"No idea," Mao PeiZhi shrugged,"But it spooked him."

"I don't think it spooked him," Another shook his head,"I think he just didn't want to be seen."

"Seen by who?" Mao PeiZhi asked.

Immediately after his words are spoken three purple clad disciples stumble out of the bushes.

Everyone knows which Sect wears purple robes.

Mao PeiZhi can't quite contain the bark of laughter that overwhelms him.

Apparently someone was out of bed past their bedtime.

Aah, he thought, what interesting times they lived in, where the person who just proposed the most ambitious and outrageous scheme, was a seven year old kid that had a bedtime curfew.

"Good evening," One of the purple-robed disciples bows politely at them,"Have you seen a young child in the forest tonight?"

Mao PeiZhi grinned,"No, sorry, can't say I have."

"No, what would a child be doing here anyways?"

"No children here, just this big baby!"

"Hey! No, sorry, haven't any kid around."

"Who would bring their kid on a night-hunt?"

The disciple grimaced and bowed again,"Thank you, anyways, and please have a wonderful night-hunt."

"You too!" One of the cultivators waves happily as the disciples walk away," Such a polite youth!"

"Don't embarrass them," Mao PeiZhi shakes his head.

God knows we wouldn't stand a chance finding the kid once he stopped looking too young to be walking around by himself.

"Back to work," Mao PeiZhi ordered,"We'll get our fill of hunting and then it's time to head to Gusu! Hope you've brought your clean knickers because I am not stopping until we get there."

The others groaned.

"That's what I like to hear!" Mao PeiZhi laughed.

Aah, what a time to be alive.

Chapter End Notes
Hey! Hope you enjoyed a slightly lighthearted chapter (they won't last long)
Okay, so things to discuss:
WWX got his fountain pen! (a prototype, it works meh) But hooray!
JC will know the wonders of this new device, he will be taught the ways of modern calligraphy. Or else he'll turn into a real Platypus.

Mao PeiZhi, I think you guys will like him, I personally envision him like Rochi from Naruto (only with black hair and the thing on his face is either paint or non-existent) slightly short and stocky kind of guy.
He's already in his thirties, married with children (including a little girl he continuously tries to get WWX to consider marrying) and belongs to a minor clan in *drum rolls* Qishan.
(Yeah, WWX is going that far to 'steal' Wen Ruohan's 'serfs' right from under his nose. There's a reason for this but *mimics sipping mouth close* not telling)

The other guys aren't so important, they are from other smallish clans from around the Qishan area, but Mao is the highest ranking among them so he's something of a leader during these meetings.
And now they're off to Gusu to pester ShouShan and have many drinks to laugh about WWX getting chased home because of curfew.

Finally, sorry not to have posted a second chapter last night (to me, at least, for most of you it's day/afternoon) but this next week schedule is kind of wonky. My brother will be out of country on holiday, and there's a surgery scheduled for the 16th (not me, but the person who's getting it might make a run for it)
So, only one chapter per day might be the best until things settle down again.
And thank you for all the comments and support, I know I haven't been replying to all of them, but I do read them!

Hope I'm not forgetting to address anything (it happens) and I'll see you on the next chapter!
Familiar

Chapter Summary

Where a portrait is painted, memories made, and what did you just say about my mother?!
Plus puppies galore and a very, very, very familiar nickname.

Chapter Notes

Another fun chapter before I make you drown in feelz.
Aren't I a considerate author? 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"We are best friends. Always remember that when you fall, I'll pick you up, after I finish laughing." - Unknown

Chapter 49: Familiar

As far as the world knew, I hadn't left the room the entire night. Which was why I was still alive two weeks later with only the suspicious glares Madam Yu sent my way and the exasperated air Jiang Cheng had whenever it was brought up.

Maybe the curious mystery kept getting brought up to trip me up?

I don't know.

It's mid-October now, and I was just a week and a half away from turning eight.

Time flies by while you are having fun.

Letters with the Lan Brothers kept being monthly things, but Yan MingXia and ShouShan's were regular occurrences as we coordinated business efforts. ShouShan's father was unfathomably entertained by the mess of a project I had created, and wisely staying out of the meat of the dealings.

ShouShan mentioned he'd be responsible for investing the money they'd earn for helping Yan MingXia so I worried slightly over that.

XianLiang was no fool, but he could be... exuberant, in his festivities.

And getting a pretty fat paycheck, from what ShouShan had written, certainly boosted one's merriment.
Wei WuXian, the Godfather of this world's Underground operations.

It's all Yan MingXia's! She can have that title. I'm just... the supplier, of sorts. Temporary supplier! Once I get the stamp thing up and working everything is getting sent to her and she can decide what way to go from there.

You're going to need several stamps.

I know, and I'll probably need to figure out a way to get in contact with them faster than letters, just in case something happens.

How are you doing that?

I don't know, I'll think of something. Now help me concentrate, drive away all unnecessary thoughts.

I'm busy.

I carefully paint the details of the beautiful lilac and soft pink robes with embroidered lotus flowers of YanLi's dress robes, Jiang Cheng sitting beside me, completely silent, transfixed at my skill.

This morning, YanLi received a package from Madam Jin, a present they'd apparently discussed when she had gone over for tea, and it looked so pretty that I had begged her to let me paint her portrait (which I had sort of forgotten about, oops) with her wearing it.

I even managed to do her hair and a soft shade of makeup.

Jiang Cheng asked me, with an odd look in his eyes, how I knew how to apply makeup.

In my brief panic to find a worthy excuse, I'd blurt out something about courtesans and them being nice.

Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi looked alarmed.

I need to stop doing that.

Yeah, you need to stop doing that.

Thankfully, I managed to divert the conversation back to how pretty YanLi looked and how the portrait was going to look amazing.

Which led us to now, Jiang Cheng awed at my art skills, and the portrait almost completed.

I was using oil paint, because of how vivid the colors were. And also because no one had ever used them before and I wanted this painting to be immortalized.

You just want YanLi to be amazed at it.

Shhh, every lowly human wants the admiration of the Goddess that is YanLi.

You're such a bloody sap.

And you can't get rid of me.

"Teach me," Jiang Cheng murmurs.
I grin not taking my eyes off the painting, "I'll teach you, in time, you're still learning how to sketch properly."

Jiang Cheng nods, "I'll work harder."

I let out a small chuckle, "You're already working hard, Platypus, this things take time, I've been doing this for years, you've just started what? A month ago?"

"Almost two months," He nods.

"Then you are already pretty advanced for when I was when I first started," I tell him, "Must be my incredibly good teachings."

Jiang Cheng lets out a huff of breath, already used to my halfhearted and joking bragging.

I add the final details and put the painting brush down, "There," I smile, "All done, Shijie, it just needs to dry, want to see?"

YanLi gets up from her position and walks over to see the portrait.

"Oh!" She puts her hands over her mouth, "A-Ying, it's beautiful!"

I grin up at her, "I told you, Shijie! I'd paint you the prettiest portrait!"

She smiles and brushes my head, doing the same when Jiang Cheng pouts, "A-Ying did promise, and A-Ying is a good boy that keeps his promises!"

"A-Ying does!" I agree with her, "Do you like it, Shijie?"

Her smile widens, "Hn," She nods, "It's the most beautiful painting I've seen."

"That's because Shijie is the prettiest, most beautiful person in the world!" I laugh.

YanLi goes pink to the tips of her ears, "Oh, you!" She bats at my head.

*Your Lan Zhan will be sooooo jealous.*

'My' Lan Zhan can go take a hike to cool off in the cold spring.

*Oh, he will, no doubt about it, but he might want you to join him.*

Bad thoughts!

Ike laughs at him and continues to laugh until the first few note of 'It's a Small World after all' start playing.

Then he just shrieks in terror and goes quiet.

"Mother should see it!" Jiang Cheng's eyes lit up as if he just had a brilliant idea.

I look at him in horror, "No!"

"Why not? She can't get mad at you for it!" Jiang Cheng retorts, "Maybe you can paint her portrait!"

*And title it, The Devil wears Purple.*
I choke on my spit and hesitate long enough for Jiang Cheng to take off.

That kid is going to get me killed.

*You're friends, I think that's their job in life.*

You're my friend.

*I'm a slightly different variation of friend... I'm literally stuck inside your brain.*

Correction, you were born from my brain.

*Do you want me to call you Mama?*

Die in a ditch.

Madam Yu was faintly impressed, not that she told me such but the fact that she didn't refuse when I politely - begrudgingly - asked if she wanted me to paint her portrait told me all I needed to know.

She accepted of course, if only to brag about it or have it in plain view of visitors and go 'oh, yes, disciples of YunmengJiang are *very* talented' and increase their prestige at my expense.

But whatever, I enjoyed painting quite a lot so I didn't mind it.

And painting a serious Jiang Cheng next to an equally serious Madam Yu was a one in a lifetime experience.

They'd both gotten dressed up for the portrait, using robes reserved for very special occasions, and looked quite 'royal-like'.

It made me happy that Jiang Cheng would have a painting of him and his mother together years down the line.

Because if I had to, I would - and could - recreate this scene from memory. Just with slightly less details.

It would take a few weeks for the paint to dry completely, so I had warned everyone to place the portraits where no one could stumble upon them and ruin them, and they might need a second layer of paint later but as long as the client - which weren't really clients anymore, I wasn't getting paid - were happy, I was happy.

Or something along those lines, I was eager to go read books or continue working on my plans.

The fountain pen, which was still a prototype until I could devise a better one with the details and fine writing I wanted, was working wonderfully and I had gloated so much over Jiang Cheng about my perfect calligraphy.

He said I was cheating.

I was not cheating!

*You kind of are cheating.*

I am not! My handwriting as always looked like this.
When using a pen, not a brush.

Who writes with brushes anyway...

Are you asking just to waste oxygen or do you want a detailed list of those who write using brushes?

Shut up.

I carefully painted the light touching Jiang Cheng's bun ornament and the slightly wispy hair escaping it.

He looks so happy standing by his mother's side.

Don't get emotional now!

But he looks so happy!

So be happy for him, not start crying like an overemotional grandma watching her grandson get married.

I was never that bad!

Colin's marriage.

...

Need I continue?

No, I see your point.

I was actually less emotional than I was before. Prone to crying whenever I got too stressed or scared? Sure, but I hadn't had any really big bawling sessions since the basement.

That's a good thing.

Hm, yes I guess. Just weird.

Whilst not a frequent occurrence the times that Walter walked in on me having a meltdown over something insignificant and then be super bubbly and happy the next would be enough to fill up a ledger.

One of the things that had contributed to our mutual decision to split.

I had wanted a better life for Walter, a better wife, while he wanted to give me the freedom to be whoever I wanted to be.

We had both been stupid back then - really stupid - but when we realized that, the love we'd once had just... simmered down. There was love there still, but no passion.

I wonder if that was the same with Madam Yu and Jiang FengMian.

Had there ever been love? Or were the children just the 'wife's duty to produce heirs'?

It was a sad thought.

If they were, they didn't that. They deserved better.
So much better.

Jiang YanLi marries for love, she builds a family for love.

And Jiang Cheng?

...He was blacklisted by all the single ladies.

I suppressed the bubble of laughter as I remembered that.

Guess, Aunt Sarah still has a few sessions of match-making planned for the future.

And you know what makes this easier?

What?

Girls love dogs, and Jiang Cheng's getting three.

Oh, yeah!

Madam Yu had announced that Jiang Cheng would get to pick his dogs out of a litter on his next birthday, November Fifth.

Oh, my Heavens, I'm going to have puppies sleeping in my room.

Technically not your puppies.

Technically I don't care, and they won't either as long as I give them treats.

Jiang Cheng will murder you for getting close to the puppies.

Jiang Cheng will murder me for breathing if I do so too loudly, what's the difference?

And you still call the kid cute.

He is cute, adorably so, and I would just squish him in a bear hug if I didn't know he'd kick me in the kidneys.

Aren't you happy you taught the kid the natural weak spots of the human body?

Well, he's more prepared for the future, so...

Worth it?

Worth it.

Hey, did you tell ShouShan your birthday is coming up?

Yes, I did, why?

Did you ask him not to tell the others?

...

...

Oh, sh*t.
This was getting old.

"So you stay away from him, do you hear us?" The kid in front of me was poking me in the chest with his still soft fingers.

"Yeah, we don't want you here causing trouble!" Another kid agrees.

How am I causing trouble when all I was doing was showing Jiang Cheng how to get out of a hold?

Kid wasn't even getting hurt or distressed - in fact, as usual, he was the one pestering me into teaching him this stuff - he just got called by a servant to go to his mother for something and told me to wait here, in the middle of the training courtyard, until he got back.

"You're just a servant's son, you don't deserve to be here," One of them jeered.

I stayed quiet, I had no desire to go run suicides with the older disciples or have another sparring session that left me feeling like a stepped on grape, and silently chanted to myself Mary Poppins songs to keep myself calm.

I swear if I opened my mouth and responded to them, I would send these children away crying.

And they were just children. They felt it unjust that I was getting different treatment than them while not knowing who I had been prior to coming here.

Which I couldn't say I understood.

The older disciples obviously knew who I was - having chased after me more than once on night-hunts - but the younger disciples were ignorant of what I had been doing for years before starting my formal education on cultivation.

*Maybe they didn't want children to try and emulate you and get hurt?*

I could see that happening.

"Are you listening?" A hand grabs the front of my robes and jostles me.

Instinct screams at me to thrust out my palm and break their nose.

I stay perfectly still, if tense, and take a deep breath.

*Stay calm. Everything is fine. All you got to do is stay calm until Jiang Cheng arrives.*

Easy.

"Listen to me, servant!" The kid yells and shakes me,"I'm talking to you!"

No, you are insulting me and yelling. Sorry to correct your misconception, that is not talking.

"What did you expect? Don't you know what they were saying?" The burler kid sneered,"About his parents?"

...
Stay calm.

I am calm, Ike.

I was, actually, and despite the flicker of anger that came at the mention of them in such tones of voice, I didn't feel like punching their teeth out.

Good.

"Nothing good comes from bastards," The kid said.

...What?

A flicker of confusion.

Everyone knew my parents were married, for years before my birth even.

Why would anyone refer to me as a bastard?

Unless they're just using the name as an insult and not as the literal meaning to the word.

"The Sect Leader only brought him home because his bastard was causing trouble outside!" The kid pointed at me.

...The Sect Leader... his bastard?

Oh.

Oh, no.

No no no no.

You did not just imply what I think you did!

Don't do it.

"It's why Madam Yu hates him," The kid laughs,"He's the Sect Leader's bastard!"

I punch him.

"I am Wei WuXian, son of CangSe Sanren and Wei ChanZe, and if you dare say one more word I am going to beat you so badly you won't be able to talk!" I stand over the kid, eyes blazing, and anger shrieking at me to just pound him into the ground.

How dare he.

Not only disgrace the memory of two of the brightest cultivators of their generation, but to besmirch the honor of their own Sect Leader, his wife, and of the Sect as a whole?

How dare they.

Kid is clutching his nose and staring at me like a deer caught in the headlights, and I have the small split second grasp that these children had never seen me fight.

Before actual sparring lessons as a class I'd been sent to fight with the older disciples, and at most they saw me get tossed around like a rag-doll. They didn't know I had been night-hunting since I was four, so they didn't realize I was holding back all the time - especially against Jiang Cheng
who I could seriously hurt if not careful.

They had been poking a sleeping bear and they hadn't even known it.

What was I doing? Beating them up?

"Wei Ying?" Jiang Cheng stood a few feet away, confused.

I looked at him and then back down at the sniveling child that thought they were the best thing since sliced bread.

"If I were you, I'd go apologize to the Sect Leader now," I said,"And stop trying to insult me, or I will take offense to your words and no one here will stop me, do you understand?"

"You can't do that!" The kid yelled.

"Oh? Why's that?" I fake confusion,"Because you said not to? Well, tough luck, cookie. I am Wei WuXian, and if you had thought to ask any senior disciple of this Sect who I am and why I am here, you'd figure out that I'm not someone you can push around."

I step over him and head towards Jiang Cheng,"Let this be a lesson, unless you know what your target is, don't taunt it into attacking you. Most likely it'll just try to kill you first and then move on to its intended victim."

I pull Jiang Cheng away from the scene and punch the wall hard enough to crack it once we're out of sight.

"Wei Ying?" Jiang Cheng jumps.

"If anyone ever tells you I'm your father's bastard you tell them to go to hell," I tell him,"Do not believe them for a second, because that will be an insult to both of us."

Jiang Cheng's face twists in confusion, anger, and repulsion,"What are you talking about?"

"Promise me!" I put my hands on his shoulders,"If nothing else, you have to remember that you are the heir to the Jiang Clan and Sect and I am just Wei WuXian, the weird kid that showed up one day."

"Why are you telling me this?" Jiang Cheng doesn't push me away.

"Because I don't want you to think for one second that someone can replace you," I tell him,"No one can ever replace you! Promise me!"

"I promise," He says,"Are you okay?"

I'm fine.

"No," I chuckle,"Want to give me a hug to make me feel better?" I joke.

Jiang Cheng huffs but surprises me by hugging me tight.

"You're not alone," His mouth is muffled against my shoulder,"We're here too."

I chuckle and hug him tighter.

I know. I want to hold you so tightly to me. I want to call you mine.
We're friends. Best friends, perhaps, but I want more.

*Let them in.*

It hurts.

"Whatever you say, Platypus," I sigh against him.

"Don't call me that," He groans.

I laugh.

I want this.

*Then let them in.*

I can't.

I can't.

But I want to.

"You know you can only pick three, right?" I smirk down at Jiang Cheng who's currently buried under a pile of fluffy puppies, sprawled on the floor.

I'm sitting on the floor beside him with a happy puppy with a wagging tail trying to lick my face.

"They're so fluffy!" Jiang Cheng was literally in dog heaven.

Today was November Fifth and, as promised, he was getting to choose three puppies from a well known and respectable breeder of spiritual dogs. I had somehow ended up tagging along although I had no desire for a puppy.

Gods knew what Yunru would do to me if I showed up home with yet another small critter to look after.

*Yes, worry about Yunru, not Donkey's reaction or my opinion.*

Clearly Yunru's opinion is the only thing that matters in situations like these.

*I can see when I am not needed.*

He says that and then goes quiet.

What a drama queen.

"Have you decided?" Jiang FengMian comes over and asks.

Dude, he's not leaving this place unless he brings the whole litter.

"...Just a few more minutes?" Jiang Cheng pleads.

I snort,"You sure you don't want another hour? Today's the only birthday you're gonna get until the next year."

Jiang Cheng gives me a 'Well, duh' look,"No, just a few more minutes."
Jiang FengMian chuckles,"Well, alright. But just a few more minutes." He walks away.

"Which ones are you getting?" I ask him quietly.

Jiang Cheng points to a very light copper colored husky puppy that looked like a creamy white ball of fluff, then to a black and white puppy, before finally settling on an pie-bald one with what the breeder called 'a dirt-face'.

I nod - they look pretty cute - "What are you naming them?"

"Princess, Jasmine and Little Love," He answers.

"What?" I laugh.

I look at him only to find him dead serious.

"You can't name them that!" I squawk.

"Why not?" Jiang Cheng frowns,"They're my puppies."

"Yes! Puppies!" I gesture,"So why are you naming them after courtesans?"

Jiang Cheng goes red from his toes to the tip of his ears,"They're not courtesan names!"

"Really?" I grin,"Want to go ask?"

Jiang Cheng growls and pulls the newly dubbed 'Jasmine' closed to him,"They're not courtesan names."

I snort,"Sure they're not, just try to use their names in polite conversation and watch as everyone goes confused."

"Like you can name them better!" He yelps.

"I totally can! I named all my weapons and Yunru!" I remind him.

And Donkey.

Shh, that's a point in his favor.

"You named a black rat after clouds!" He points out.

I laugh,"She's fluffy like a cloud! Think outside the box, Platypus!"

"Don't call me that!" He hisses.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" I smirk.

"I'll call you a name too!" He points at me.

That only makes me laugh harder,"You said that months ago! What are you going to call me?"

Jiang Cheng frowns, biting his lower lip, clearly struggling to think of something up.

I open my mouth to tease him on it when he suddenly shouts: "XIANXIAN!"

The whole room goes quiet, the adults turn to stare at us confused beyond belief, and Jiang Cheng
turns redder than a tomato.

"XianXian?" I echo, blinking at the name," From Wei WuXian?"

"A-Xian?" Jiang FengMian, who had been talking to the breeder asks, not having understood the shout for what it was.

"Checkpoint Finished!"

XianXian.

A-Xian.

Oh, god.

I burst out laughing, struggling to breathe, and Jiang Cheng pushes me down to be overwhelmed by the energetic puppies.

That name!

Of all the possible names he could come up with...

It had to be XianXian!

Chapter End Notes

Painter WWX strikes again, with two beautiful portraits that will be very well-known in later years.

I can just imagine Jiang Cheng quietly sitting beside WWX and going 'Oh, I want to do that' whilst being all starry eyed and cute. (Don't tell him I called him cute)

Before anyone asks, no the birthday scene won't be shown, nothing happens (because WWX quickly writes to ShouShan and tells him not to send anything) but once he gets older I'll make a note to write one. It's funnier when WWX can legally go get drunk and have a dozen or so guys from all over the nation come be his embarrassing friends on a night out.

Progress! WWX didn't immediately flip into a rage. But yeah, don't diss his parents or make assumptions at what went down between CangSe and FengMian, nothing happened.

And the kids were lucky Madam Yu wasn't there, they'd have been skinned alive. (Figuratively speaking)

WWX worried JC heard that conversation and thought it true, AGF!WWX knows very well what it is like to feel as if they've been replaced by 'a better model' (Sarah was the second child of her parents, having an older brother, and after three other younger brothers her mother finally had another daughter. With none of Sarah's 'problems')

What WWX was scared would happen would be that JC would believe he's dispensable, to be thrown away when no longer needed, and not realize that he's so much more than what he believes himself to be.
WWX is fighting a losing battle against getting attached to these people, seriously he should just give up.
But when have I ever made it easy for any of my characters? Muahahahaha 😈

I'm using the dogs from the webcomic flashback we've seen them, and not the donghua version ones that looked like brown Chow Chow puppies. Yea, they're also big balls of fluff, but huskies are better.
And WWX totally just invited JC to go check out courtesans without realizing it.

And who saw that nickname coming?
"Doing what you like is freedom. Liking what you do is happiness." - Frank Tyger

Chapter 50: Time Flies

"You have to grip the reigns tighter," The instructor was explaining,"If the horse doesn't think you're in control, it's going to try and control you."

I nod, proving that I was indeed listening, and grasp the reigns tighter.

In truth, sitting on top of a horse, when all my other experiences riding anything were my father's shoulders, a donkey, and a caravan - and on one memorable occasion Madam Yu's sword - was a nerve-wrecking experience.

Especially since I knew people could die from being tossed from a horse.

You stared down a Bo when you were four, fought a six foot bear and made a Measuring Snake explode when you were five, night-hunted by yourself until you were nearly eight, are the first ever human being to develop a golden core at age ten, and fought off three Water Ghouls with a pole and a gutting knife a month or so later. What are you afraid of?

Falling off a horse, obviously, I don't need you quoting my achievements back at me, Ike.

"Horses are easily spooked," The instructor tells me,"They feel the rider's energy, if the rider's energy is too stressed, the horse will be stressed too."

Great, I'm sure this horse is loving me!

Think happy thoughts!

Like what?

I don't know... Teaching Jiang Cheng archery?

I thought back on it.

I adjusted Jiang Cheng's hands on the bow, the recently turned eight year old was stronger than
your usual kid, but he still couldn't pull the string all the way back.

"Breathe in," I teach him, "Focus on the arrow tip, keep your hands steady, and when you're ready to take your shot remember to aim higher."

"I got this," Jiang Cheng tells me.

I step back and let him take the shot by himself.

He had made a lot of progress over the last year and a half, so much so that it baffled me. In the novel everyone talked about how Jiang Cheng came second-best in everything he and Wei WuXian got into, but - in comparison between normal children his age - Jiang Cheng was actually head and shoulders above them.

He didn't compare to me because I wasn't a child.

Instead I was more like a coach teaching him one-on-one every day. Sparring, giving tips and advice about all sorts of topics, a friend whenever he needed one.

I was always there.

And he was always there for me when I needed.

Even without asking, I knew he had my back.

The release of an arrow and a 'twack' sound brought me back to reality.

I blink my dry eyes and see Jiang Cheng's arrow hit the bullseye, I smirk.

Jiang Cheng is looking stunned at the target before he beams at me.

"I did it!" He cheers.

"You did, good work," I congratulate him, "If you can hit the next three in a row, we'll go tell your mother, how does that sound?"

His dark eyes glint and his hands grip the bow tighter.

The next time he nooks the arrow he corrects his position by himself, not even needing me to correct his feet, and takes his aim.

It's another bullseye.

A bubbly feeling wells up in my chest.

Without question, I know that it's pride.

He's growing up so strong.

I'm happy.

"We're going to start at a steady pace, understand?" The instructor looks me in the eye, "I don't want none of those tricks you youngsters think are so funny, unless I say so, you do not pick up speed."

"Understood, sir," I nod.
The instructor doesn't fully believe me but moves on, "Here we go," And kicks his horse into a steady trot.

I mimic him and my brown mare trots after him.

"We're gonna go through the woods, the trail is completely safe, just twists and turns," The instructor looks back on me, "Follow after me."

"Yes sir!" I respond.

The man goes back to look straight ahead and turns to trot up this trail.

I carefully maneuver the horse after him, still not used to the long leather reigns.

*You're getting better at this.*

Thanks.

*You are! Last week you were freaking out just by being on top of it.*

My lips twitch, thanks for reminding me, Ike.

*You're welcome, dearest.*

You know what I was thinking about? That time I took Jiang Cheng camping. *The one where you left a note stating 'I'm teaching him how to forage, be back in the morning'?*

I chuckle under my breath.

That's the one.

"What is this?" Jiang Cheng gaped at the old weathered tent.

"It's my old tent," I explain, "It's the one I used when I spend my days in the wild."

"It's so big!" He is in awe.

Should we tell him this is actually one of the smallest ones you can buy?

Nah, let him be shocked when I inevitably bring out a bigger one someday in the future.

Oh, he's going to love that.

"Why couldn't we bring the dogs?" Jiang Cheng asks.

"First, you mean to tell me we could've sneaked out of the Compound with three big puppies under our arms - *plus* our packs - without being noticed?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

Jiang Cheng pouts. "They're going to miss me."

"Platypus, they're too busy drooling on your pillow to care about where you are right now," I snort.

"They do not drool!" He gasps, affronted.

"You and I know what happened to Shijie's hairbrush," I give him a meaningful look.
Jiang Cheng flushes, “That— That wasn't— I mean— I—...” He tries to think of something to say.

“It's okay, Platypus,” I pat his head, “At least Shijie wasn't too worried about the missing hairbrush.”

“Don't call me that,” He brushes my hand away, “XianXian!”

I chuckle, “You know... It's more embarrassing for you to call me that in public than to actually get called that, right?”

He huffs, “You're just shameless. You're face is so thick you don't feel a thing.”

This culture's way of referring to wounded pride were just too funny. Already I could feel the corner of my lips threatening to break into a wide smile.

I scratched at my cheek, as I grew older the scar started to become smaller, not by much but enough to be noticeable. Whereas before it went from above my eyebrow down the side of my face to the jaw, now it only reached about the lower half of my cheek.

It made me hopeful that by the time I was an adult I didn't look like someone had taken a slash at my face.

*Technically the Bo tried to stab you.*

Semantics.

“What are we going to be doing?” Jiang Cheng asks.

“Survival,” I smirk, “The basics, I'm teaching you how to make a safe fire, then I'm going to teach you how to set a perimeter using the talismans I taught you, and finally, I'll take you around the woods for some good old fashioned foraging session.”

Jiang Cheng is sitting at the edge of his seat, “And hunting?”

I look at the sky to check the time and weather, “If you managed to learn the first two quickly, we'll keep an eye out for game while we forage, but only if they're done correctly!” I playfully wag my finger at him.

“Yes!” He raises a fist in the air, a gesture he'd learnt from me.

Damn, this kid was too cute.

“Well, then, c'mon,” I wave him over, “Let's start today's lesson.”

“Do my parents know we're here?” He asks me.

“Don't worry, I left a letter,” I roll my eyes, “Everything's fine.”

Jiang Cheng didn't look like he fully believed me but dropped the matter when I crouched down and started explaining how to build a campfire.

And to be fair everything was fine, up until the letter was found and everyone went wild looking for us.

Bright side? Jiang Cheng's perimeter talismans worked perfectly.
"Jumping over obstacles is the hardest thing to learn when riding," The instructor said,"Once you master this, then there won't be anything left for me to teach you."

I nod, absentmindedly petting the horse's mane,"Understood."

"I'll lead you through some of the jumps, but you'll have to do them by yourself the rest of the way," The instructor tells me.

"Understood sir," I nod again, gripping the reigns tightly, and sitting straighter.

The instructor, seeing I was ready, nods picks up the reigns of his own mount,"Let us go."

He starts at a trot before going into a full gallop and I quickly follow after.

The bumps of the horse galloping and the sound of the powerful hoofs hitting the ground reverberate through my bones.

Stay calm.

I am calm, Ike, I'm not scared.

Are you sure?

Yes.

I felt fine.

Excited even. The wind in my hair, whipping past me and making my long ponytail swish behind me like a smoky tail, the smell of the forest thick in my nose, the earthly stench of dirt and leaves, coupled with the scenery around me seemingly flying by...

I couldn't be more at peace.

When the instructor's horse jumps over the first hurdle a brief twist of apprehension bubbles in my stomach, but it quickly disappears. There's this second where the world stops and my whole body is filled with light. Energy.

And I feel... free.

I grin. Eyes wide open and aware of everything.

The powerful beast underneath me, the forest and all its critters moving at the edges of my senses, and the life flowing in my chest.

Perfection.

The horse makes that jump.

I laugh.

I laugh. And laugh. And laugh.

Again. More. Once more!
Let's keep going! Keep moving forward. Keep running!

Let us see more. Feel more. And be more.

I am here, I want to shout at the world, I am here and I am free.

I am free.

I run through the streets of Yunmeng a group of senior disciples bemusedly following after me.

"I am free!" I cheer,"Free I tell you!"

"Don't shout!" One of the disciples shushes me.

"Oh, let him be," Another elbows them good-naturedly,"Remember our first time outside of the Sect Compound?"

"Hard to forget, you threw me into the river," The other elbows him back.

I admire the sights around me, feeling like it's been forever since I last walked here - which wasn't true because YanLi let me sneak out with her more than once for shopping - and greeted everyone with a polite and cheerful smile.

The disciples behind me joked quietly about how I could look so adorable and not as the titan of a disciple everyone in the Sect knew me as.

Honestly, everyone was spooked of me after I had shown them exactly why I was so well-known in night-hunts.

Remembering that day brought a smile to my face.

Jiang Cheng and I had been wrestling in the grass after a minor disagreement when one of the disciples had walked up to us and invited us to join them on their game of 'Shoot the Kite'.

Jiang Cheng wasn't really invited to many group games - not helped by the fact that all the juniors our age either hated me or were too afraid of me to ask him to join them - and so he was eager to try it.

I dutifully followed after him, teasing him and joking about his archery skills.

In hindsight, seeing that it had been one of our classmates holding the kite line, I should've expected a trick.

Jiang Cheng took a perfect position to shoot down the kite and fired his arrow.

The kite suddenly flew higher and the arrow sailed beneath it.

Jiang Cheng's eyes widened in disappointment, and he looked at me as if he expecting a mean comment about it, unfortunately I wasn't looking at him. I was looking at the smarmy looking disciple holding the line.

He did that on purpose.

"Guess the great Wei Ying's teachings aren't so great after all," He called out.
The senior disciple frowned, seeing that there was more to this 'accident', and Jiang Cheng opened his mouth to say something but I stopped him.

I put my hand on his shoulder and took his bow, removing three arrows from the quiver on his back.

I took my position.

There were three other kites flying high in the sky.

I nook the three arrows at once.

*Hawk's Precision* [Activated]

*Pelting Hail* [Activated]

I fire the arrows.

I see them fly in perfect arches and pierce the three kites simultaneously, dead center.

I lower the bow and take another look at the, now pale, disciple.

I don't need to say anything. Whatever it was that I planned on telling him, looking into his eyes, I knew that he could think of scarier words.

I gave the bow back to Jiang Cheng and grinned,"So, want to go practice so I can teach you how to do that?"

Jiang Cheng has stars in his eyes and his smile rivals the sun.

"Yes!"

I chuckle,"Then let's go, come on, didi, let your shixiong teach you his methods!"

Jiang Cheng catches up to me and we walk side by side.

I'd stay if I could, Jiang Cheng, I want to tell him.

If I could, I'd stay this way with you forever. We'd walk side by side and wow the world with our strength.

But I cannot.

A storm brews on the horizon, and it will tear out the very foundations of the world you grew up in.

I am sorry, I cannot shelter you from it.

There is only one thing that I can do for you, until the day I am called to walk down the path less traveled, I will stay here by your side, guiding and teaching you how to be stronger.

I will teach you until there is nothing left for me to teach you other than how to say goodbye.

I am sorry, Jiang Cheng.

I am sorry I cannot stay by your side, brother.
The horse breaks through the treeline ready to take the final jump, and my heart swells in my chest at seeing the end goal just within grasping distance.

"Go!" I push the horse forward,"We can do this! Go! Push past! Go forward!" I grip the reigns so tightly in my hand the leather threatens to cut through my skin.

Home is just beyond that final jump.

One more jump and we did it.

It'll be over.

One more jump.

I can barely contain the excitement inside of me.

I feel the powerful muscles underneath me shift and tense and then-

The horse vaults over the obstacle.

The world holds still for a moment, the light of the sun in my eyes makes the skyline of Lotus Pier glow, and the air in my lungs freezes.

For that single moment, gravity has no hold on me and I float in mid-air an unspeakable connection to the world shifts and falls in place, and the moment passes.

Time resumes flowing.

The horse's hoofs hit the ground and keep galloping towards Lotus Pier.

I let out a yell of ecstasy.

My instructor, Jiang FengMian, Jiang Cheng and YanLi are waiting in the courtyard for me. Patiently impatient.

Jiang Cheng is all but trembling in place - talking YanLi's ear off - only being held in place by his sister's hand on his shoulder.

FengMian is speaking softly to the instructor a knot on his brows, clearly worried about something.

It didn't take much to guess he was worrying about me.

I withheld a sigh and reminded myself that he truly believed he was doing what he thought was best for me, and we'd already had many, many disagreements over time about how he treated me differently and was cold to Jiang Cheng.

Not that he saw his behavior as cold, just- There was a certain degree of disconnect between what he should be doing and what he saw as his role to do at all.

Getting Jiang Cheng his dogs had endeared the boy to his father, but he had done it because Madam Yu had made it so that Jiang Cheng had to have his own pets - and he had even tried to get me to accept one of the puppies from the litter, which I had vehemently refused because that had been Jiang Cheng's special day.

Truly, fathers should seriously take a more direct approach in raising their sons.
I tried to think of any positive father figures in the Great Sects and I could only shrug and maybe point at Qinghe's Sect Leader, the father of Nie MingJue and HuaiSang sounded like a cool guy who loved his sons dearly, whilst the rest of the Great Sects...

Yeah, fathers should really learn how to be fathers instead of just leaving them up to their mothers, nannies, and tutors.

I pulled the reigns and kicked the galloping speed up a notch, eager to burst past the gates and cheer with Jiang Cheng and YanLi the ending of my riding lessons.

"He's here!" Jiang Cheng spotted me first and waved his arms,"Hey!"

I laughed and halted the horse before I could accidentally trample someone,"Miss me, Platypus?"

"Who'd miss you?!" He shouts.


I smiled and jumped off the horse handing the reigns to the stable servant that hurried over - and who gave me a happy smile in congratulations - and threw an arm over Jiang Cheng's shoulders.

He let out a yelp,"You stink!"

I laughed and pulled him tighter to me,"How cruel! Shijie, did you hear this injustice?"

YanLi giggled and covered her mouth,"A-Xian shouldn't tease A-Cheng too much," She tells me.

I pout and mess with his hair,"Ooh, but he makes it so easy!"

"Stop! XianXian! Stop!" He tries - halfheartedly- to get out of my hold,"I'll tell mother!"

"Not if you stink as much as me you're not!" I put all of my weight on him, essentially draping myself over him.

"A-Jie!" Jiang Cheng whines - although he holds up my weight surprisingly well - "He's too heavy!"

I let out a scandalized gasp," Are you calling me fat?!"

Jiang Cheng gives me a serious look but his eyes glint with amusement,"Well, you did eat about three servings more than usual, so..."

I let him go to clutch at my heart,"How could you? You know I was practicing until late last night! I was starving!"

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes,"You're always starving, you and that water rat of yours!"

I burst out laughing, Yunru had developed the habit of hogging food out of everyone over the years and, if she didn't exercise so much and got into so much mischief, I'd worry about her getting too fat to fit through the small openings she'd find here and there.

"You always badmouth Yunru but never your three mistresses wagging their tails for treats!" I point at him.

"They do not!" Jiang Cheng turns cherry red.
YanLi covers her mouth again.

Everyone knew I always gave the dogs treats behind Jiang Cheng's back frequently enough that they always wagged their tails and came over to me when they saw me.

Jiang Cheng thought that it was because we had shared a room for much of their puppyhood, but everyone else knew the real reason why.

I smirked down at him. Despite there only being a year difference between us, I'd hit a growth spurt recently and had a couple of inches on him now. Wouldn't last for long, especially once he entered puberty, but it was funny.

"A-Xian," Jiang FengMian walked over to us,"Congratulations on finishing your riding lessons."

I smile brightly at him, too happy to begrudge him a little 'cute nephew' moment before Jiang Cheng and I went off on another mischief run.

"Thank you, Sect Leader Jiang!"

He had tried, several times over the years, to get me to call him Shibo as my father's letter had stated all those years ago.

Almost five years ago.

*Time flies.*

"You can have the rest of the day off from lessons," He tells me,"You must be tired."

I shake my head,"I still have time to rest, besides next lessons are with Shijie!" I grin.

*Man, who'd think you'd actually look forward to those embarrassingly 'feminine' lessons, didn't they start out as a punishment?*

I thought back on it and had to bite the inside of my cheek so as to not break down laughing.

They did.

I was laughing, jumping all over the piers and courtyard with Jiang Cheng futilely trying to catch me. In my hands I had one of his bun accessories, the one he refused to wear because it was entirely wrapped in golden flowers - obviously a present from Madam Jin - and was singing "Mother knows Best" from Tangled at the top of my lungs.

He'd been told to to get ready to head with them for Carp Tower and to wear this headpiece but, in a brilliant moment of independence (and entirely my bad influence shining through, I was so proud) he told his mother no, he was not wearing it and that he didn't want to go.

I wasn't present for the fallout, Madam Yu had taken one look at me - torn between horror and beaming with pride - and sent YanLi and I out of the room. There hadn't been any shouting either, or none that I heard, but a significantly cowed Jiang Cheng had walked out, grabbed me, and headed straight to his room to go get ready.

When he had finished getting ready and all that remained was the headpiece I felt his will buckle under the strain of obeying his mother and, as I was prone to do, I decided to make light of the situation.
So I took it, escaped out the room and led him on a merry chase around Lotus Pier while singing that embarrassing song on repeat.

"Mother knows best, listen to your mother~" I sang and dodged yet another tackle from him,"It's a scary world out there!"

Jiang Cheng laughed,"Stop singing!"

His eyes shone with mirth, even he couldn't keep up his anger when all I had been doing for the past twenty minutes was being a complete goofball and dramatically crying and making a fool out of myself.

But hey! My Acting Skill and Acrobatics Skill were going up!

I kept singing and singing until Jiang Cheng suddenly freezes in place and I look behind me to, obviously, find a very unamused Madam Yu staring down at me.

As punishment, because if I was going to be going around singing in dancing in public I would do it well, I joined Shijie on her mystery lessons.

Turns out she was learning how to take care of a household and be a good wife.

The lessons were surprisingly fun.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, after this chapter the timeline goes kind of wonky. Because, if I made it clear enough, the 'riding lessons' occur throughout a period of time. So it starts when he's then and the last riding segment actually happens when he's 12/13, because that's the next big 'stage' in the kid's lives as they go on night-hunts and such.

But the next few chapters still happen when WWX is around 10, so yeah... wonky.

WWX being a proud momma of JC is my life right now. Like, he's teaching him and sees JC applying that knowledge somewhere else and goes all gooey inside.

That said, mess with his little brother and you're going to regret all that you've done with your life.

(But don't worry, the occasional bullying will stop after the 'truth' about WWX comes out. It's one thing to bully a random kid, it's another to bully a sleeping dragon... and they get warned off by the older disciples)

JC hasn't noticed it yet, and neither has WWX, but he's starting to really value his opinion about things and is afraid to disappoint him, similarly how he acted with his parents. (So I guess I could say WWX mother-hen instincts were put to good use)

I imagine Madam Yu looking out the window and just seeing WWX being a typical drama queen singing the most embarrassing song at the top of his lungs, while her son is torn between strangling him or collapsing in a fit of giggles.

And sending him to have 'feminine' lessons was half punishment half actual training, girls usually learn how to be more 'demure' and WWX certainly needs to learn how to stay quiet and be polite, but they also learn dancing and other forms of traditional/cultural teachings (like tea ceremony).

And dancing, for example, improves balance and is considered a good hobby/past time
to know. I mean, no one will really look twice at a guy knowing traditional dances, but they'll certainly stare if the guy is fake crying while leaning on a wall while bellying out "Mother knows Best".

JC was entirely too amused at his situation to get angry about him taking his hair ornament. And you best believe he teased the hell out of WWX when he found out what the lessons were.
Chapter Summary

A passing storm brings things to light, a bond is forged and tempered, and an unexpected conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"When the storm rips you to pieces, you get to decide how to put yourself back together again." - Bryant H. McGill

Chapter 51: Great Storm

Jiang Cheng and I were in the courtyard practicing with the practice swords - ones that weren't tempered with to be twice their usual weight - when I first notice the clouds. Dark grey ones stretching over the sky calling forth rain.

It was summer and two months away from ShouShan's wedding, I had been putting the finishing touches in his wedding present - one of - and was very excited to have received permission to attend.

Well, I was technically allowed to wander away from the Sect now that I was ten, but traveling all the way to Gusu without telling anyone where I was going would most likely restart the manhunts after me. So I had, after making sure nothing incriminating was written on the invitation, showed it to Jiang FengMian and Madam Yu and asked permission to attend.

Madam Yu's reaction at seeing that this ShouShan I had frequently talked about was from a minor Gusu Clan was, in hindsight, amusing. As was Jiang Cheng's when he realizes that the guy sending me letters and calling me his little brother wasn't just another kid I'd befriended but a grown-up.

Technically a grown-up, ShouShan's personality - so much like his own father - made him look younger than he was.

Jiang FengMian got that complicated look on his face again but conceded to let me attend their ceremony and festivities.

But only if one of the adults went with me and I had an escort.

So, unless a saint fell off the altar, Jiang FengMian would come with me to the Bai Clan Residence - along with Jiang Cheng because it was a good learning experience apparently - come the start of fall.

It wouldn't be unbearably hot anymore and there were less chances of a monsoon happening.
"You're not paying attention," Jiang Cheng stops, irritated.

I point up at the sky,"It looks like it's going to rain," I tell him,"Might want to head inside."

Jiang Cheng looks up and, after evaluating how dark and thick the clouds seemed to be forming, nodded. We head inside after putting the practice swords away.

"How are A-Jie's lessons?" Jiang Cheng asks me,"Having fun?"

I grin good-naturedly at him,"We're learning how to sew, why, Platypus, want to join us?"

Jiang Cheng gets a look of horror on his face,"Why are you still going to the lessons, isn't the punishment over?"

I shrug,"They're fun, Mistress Zhu is actually pretty nice."

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes,"You told me she teaches you dancing and singing."

"She does," I nod, amused,"And poetry too, but I'm not so good at that apparently."

He makes a repulsed noise,"Those are girl jobs."

Yeah, well, I was female about seven years ago before I woke up in this body so...

I shrug again,"I find them entertaining, relaxing if you will, and it's not bothering anyone."

Jiang Cheng scowls but drops the matter, honestly if it impinged on his time with me I'd concede that he had a point in me going to these 'useless' lessons, but now that I had a Golden Core my free time had tripled.

I was excused from the remaining classes from Master Xu - now it was my own responsibility to develop my core further - so I could only keep myself busy until Jiang Cheng's lessons ended to meet up with him or go join the senior disciples in their lessons.

Or, as I had done, shadow after YanLi and spend two afternoons a week listen to this teacher about traditional songs, dances, and lessons about how to take care of a household.

I actually fit in so well that Mistress Zhu stopped a lesson mid-way to rant about men and the practice of concubines only to stop suddenly and look at me alarmed. I was just as confused as she was until I realized that I was male and therefore should feel offended? Or something?

I just played it off and asked what concubines were.

I honestly couldn't decide whether the practice was a good or bad thing.

If everyone got along and all the women were respected and didn't mind that their husband had more than one wife under the law, I didn't see a problem? Polyamorous relationships were a thing. If everyone was fine and happy about it why did it matter?

But then again, I could say the same about same-sex relationships and everyone else would lose their minds because 'it wasn't natural' or something.

I shrugged, I honestly didn't really care much about what was socially accepted in society, never had and probably never will.

Jiang Cheng and I had just finished taking our baths, in turns because while we could still fit both
of us in the same bathtub we weren't little kids anymore, I dried and brushed his hair for him.

It wasn't something I regularly did, because we both had busy schedules, but it was relaxing. Joking and telling little anecdotes to one another while taking turns to do each others hair.

To me, from a western perspective, it was a really girly way to pass the time, but I kept mum about that little tidbit.

Jasmine, Princess and Little Love - who wasn't so little anymore - were curled up in a pile by the foot of Jiang Cheng's bed and I could see Yunru's black fur peeking out from under one of their heads.

"Yunru is loving their fluff," I point it out to Jiang Cheng.

He rolls his eyes. "I swear she gets into everything," He mutters.

I chuckle,"She probably does."

"Why don't you put her on a leash or something?" He grumbles.

"Yunru is wild, she's natural to Qinghe and I probably shouldn't have taken her out of that habitat. She can come and go as she pleases, I hope that she eventually leaves to start her own family," I told him.

"You don't want her to stay?" Jiang Cheng frowns.

I look back down at Yunru and notice her beady black eyes peering up at me, I smile at her,"Yunru is welcome to stay with me for as long as she likes, I will never chase her away."

The eyes blink and disappear back underneath the fluffy pile of dogs.

*You're both two bloody saps.*

I chuckle,"What do you want to do, Platypus?"

He scowls at the nickname,"We can't do anything outside, it's started to rain," He looks out the window,"But I don't want to do any talismans or anything like that."

I pondered on what the two of us could do.

What sort of thing did I do with my nephews when there was a rainy day?

*Board game?*

Yeah, but Jiang Cheng will appreciate it?

*He'll be a future Sect Leader and War General in another five or six years.*

I want to ease him in it, think that strategy can be fun.

*Naval Battle?*

I blinked.

"What?" Jiang Cheng gave me a weary look.

*He knows you too well.*
"I have an idea!" I smile.

He slowly edges away from me,"What idea?"

"A game!" I get up,"I'll be right back, need to grab something from my room."

Upon forming a Golden Core, Jiang FengMian had given me permission to have my own room, which was right across from Jiang Cheng's, and I had finally got my first taste of privacy since I first joined the Sect.

Sure, I still had to keep everything hidden or inside my inventory, but now I could actually take things out and work on my projects.

Like the stamps and ShouShan's gift.

During the last two years I had mastered Talisman-Making - and a couple other Skills - and had set to work on getting as much work done before the war picked up and I had to put a pause on all my projects until peace returned to the land.

I had finished perfecting my fountain pen, which I used everywhere except in calligraphy lessons, and bought all of the crafting recipes I could feasibly create with my current skill set plus all the books that could help me in the coming years.

Now that I was free to walk through Yunmeng I had set to work on getting to know the people living here - and jumping back and forth between Yunmeng and Yiling where it was easier to meet with a random cultivator on 'pick up' duty for Yan MingXia - I could expand my 'home territory' past the Sect walls.

And Quests had showed up again.

I was pretty damn happy when bubbles started popping up all over Yunmeng and Yiling and I could restart my hoarding of Stat Points.

The only thing I got upset about was FengMian's rule of 'No Night-Hunting until thirteen' - which was coincidentally when disciples got their swords - because, dammit, I was so ready to get back into night-hunting.

I could still try to sneak out.

_I was instructed to remind you of how last time went._

...Better to wait.

_Yes, it's better to wait. Get your baby brother ready to face the world first._

He's not my baby brother.

_You sure about that?_

I didn't answer him, I got in my room grabbed a bunch of paper sheets and a wooden ruler, and walked back inside his room.

I set the sheets of paper down and drew rudimental grids on them, as the most basic Naval Battle portable boards had, and held out a box of crayons for him,"Pick a color."

He eyed the crayons - which he knew perfectly well what they were from my painting lessons - and
picked purple.

I gave him an eye roll and picked red, if he was going to be like that then so was I, before explaining the game to him.

I had to do quick work on what the various sized ships names were but he got the gist of it.

Each of us sat facing each other and keeping our sheets out of sight, so we couldn't cheat, and after a trial run to explain rules and the mechanics of it, we started playing for real.

YanLi came looking for us later, wondering why we weren't at the main hall for dinner yet and found us surrounded by many colorful sheets and Jiang Cheng and I locked in an argument about who had won the most games.

I had kept track - and I had lost - but it was funny arguing with him, especially when he got all frustrated and red faced.

Seeing that we had gotten sidetracked we agreed on a truce and followed YanLi to the main hall for dinner, teasing one another on the strategies used and how many times we screwed the other over by a single tiny boat in the middle of the grid.

Jiang Cheng regaled his parents with the new game I had come up with, to which I just shrugged - like it was nothing new to me - and continued eating as usual, and gestured happily when it got to his victories over me.

I watched him with a fond grin, sharing looks with his sister, and interjected my own anecdotes here and there but mainly focused on eating.

I was holding my chopsticks and eating some noodles when a flash of lightning followed by a deep rumble of thunder shake the house framework.

*Crack*

I blink and look down at my snapped chopsticks.

Huh... That's new.

*That doesn't look good.*

"A-Xian?" YanLi looks concerned.

"It's fine!" I laugh,"I just held them too roughly!"

Another flash of lightning and loud thunder and my hands visibly shook.

*Not good.*

I try to remain smiling but all of a sudden it feels like a ball of lead is swimming around in my stomach and I feel sick. I shift in my seat and hide my hands, trying to keep the facade up for Jiang Cheng who still hasn't noticed.

YanLi looks at me and opens her mouth to say something but her mother interrupts her:

"If you are done eating you are excused," She says with a scowl.

*Lifeline.*
I take it.

"Yes, Ma'am," I bow and get up off the floor, tensing when the next lightning flash passes and leaving the room as quickly as I could without making it seem as if I was fleeing.

Lightning storms weren't rare by any means, but they usually happened at night, when everyone was already in bed and all I had to do was get under several blankets and cover my ears. This one just had to hit during dinnertime.

Goddammit.

I would definitely get interrogated about this later but I could try to pass it off as a mild aversion and not the panic-inducing phobia I had developed after that asshat bastard loc- shut the cellar door.

Already tremors were traveling through my body and my hairs stood on end, which was as much of a warning as I was gonna get telling me to get into my room asap.

Thankfully the residential wing wasn't too far from the main hall, and there were no people walking about, so I just got into the room shucked off my boots and got under the covers.

The door was kept slightly open and the window had no glass, which made me feel better because I wasn't shut in, but, at the same time, it meant that the thunder sounded loud enough to shake my bones.

I breathed through my nose and curled up tightly into a ball pressing my hands tight over my ears.

I don't know how long I laid like that until something heavy jumps on the bed. I remain unmoving underneath the blankets.

Then another heavy something jumps on the bed.

And another.

There's a slight pull on the edge of my blanket.

I wearily peek lift the blanket off my face and blink at Jiang Cheng holding Yunru and all his dogs piled on my bed.

Jiang Cheng doesn't say a word.

I stretch out my legs and make room for him on the bed. He puts down Yunru to kick off his boots and cuddles up to me.

"I thought you weren't afraid of anything," He whispers to me.

I huff a tired breath,"Everyone is afraid of something, Platypus."

He has his head right beside mine and he holds my hand.

"Mother says that you shouldn't be afraid of anything," He tells me.

I chuckle,"Mothers want their children to be brave," I sigh,"But fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's when fear becomes irrational that there's a problem."

"I don't get that," Jiang Cheng frowns.
I hum, "A man fears losing his family, it's a normal fear to have. He loves them very much and he doesn't want to see them getting hurt. Rational fear, right? Nothing wrong with that fear."

Jiang Cheng nods.

"Well, that man fears losing his family so much that he one day decides to never let them leave the house," I continue, "If they never leave the house then they won't ever get hurt! That's an irrational fear."

Jiang Cheng frowns, "It's wrong, he shouldn't lock them in the house. It's-"

"Cruel. Irrational. Awful," I nod, "But that man let his fear grow until it overwhelmed him. The man was ruled by his fear, and that is what one must never let happen."

Jiang Cheng nods. "But you're afraid of the storm."

I let out a deep sigh.

I ponder on how to approach this, "The storms is like a... flag," I settled on, "A signal."

"A signal?" Jiang Cheng's dark eyes grow confused.

I nod, "For bad memories. Each time the light flashes or the thunder rumbles the flag waves and brings out bad memories," I explain.

"So you're not afraid of the storm but of the memories?" He frowns, "They're just memories, why are they scary?"


Jiang Cheng snuggles closer to me, his head resting on the crook of my neck, I feel his breathing on my skin.

The storm outside continues to rage throughout Lotus Pier, the dogs yip and yawn at random intervals with Yunru squeaking whenever one of them lays too heavily on her.

"I'll protect you," Jiang Cheng finally speaks.

"Protect me from what?" I ask him quietly.

Jiang Cheng snuffles against my neck, "From the memories. If they scare you, you come to me. I'll protect you from them," He tells me, dead serious.

I hug him tighter against me and chuckle, hiding my face in his hair, glad he can't see my eyes tearing up.

Well, what do you say to him?

"Okay," I nod slowly, "It's a promise. If my memories ever start frightening me again, I'll come find you. I'm trusting you here, didi."

Jiang Cheng nods against me, "It's a promise."

And I will do the same to you.
If you ever need me, even if you never tell me you do, I will be there for you.

Through thick and thin, I will do my best to look out for you until I know you can brave any storm that weathers your way.

I promise.

His heart beats through his inner robes, his breathing gradually slows in his sleep, and his body is soft and relaxed against mine.

It brings back memories of good times.

This warmth. A scene bathed in a glow of love. Family.

I missed this.

Brother.

My heart tells me this. Accepts it. Embraces it.


My little brother.

I will teach you. I will protect you. I will love you.

I already love you.

My brother.

Thank you.

Words I will never be able to say to you and get you to understand how true they are.

Thank you. So much.

Thank you for being born.

Thank you for being my friend.

Thank you for letting me be your brother.

My perfect Platypus.

I chuckle and breathe in his scent, willing myself to never forget it.

Another little set of hands and feet that plant imprints on my heart.

I welcome them.

This amazingly bright soul curled up next to me, the strong and extraordinary man I know he'll grow up to me, is unspeakably fragile yet so valiant.

I am so proud of you.

How much you've grown already in such a small amount of time.
So proud.

I love you so much.

Thank you.

The next morning dawns bright and early, quiet as if the storm of last night never occurred, and I open my eyes to see Jiang Cheng drooling on my arm.

I stifle a chortle and carefully extract myself from the bed, over him and try not to jostle the dog pile at the foot of my bed. Yunru rolls out from under then and blinks up at me.

I put a finger to my lips.

Pushing the blanket up to cover Jiang Cheng's back I tuck him in carefully and silently get dressed.

It's still too early for breakfast but I have someplace I need to be.

Yunru follows after me so I let her climb up my arm to settle on my shoulders.

I head towards the Ancestral Hall, to my parent's altar, with a light heart.

The storm last night left its marks on the Sect, fallen tree branches and a mess of lotus petals for the servants or disciples on scut work for the day, and I observe them with barely a thought of apprehension.

The wound was still there, the fear still kept at bay by delicate threads, but it felt less crushing. A balm, of sorts.

I felt comfortable, ish, in the presence of the storm's evidence.

I enter the Ancestral Hall unnoticed, the heavy door easily pushed open enough for me to sneak in, and my feel find the way to CangSe and ChangZe's swords on instinct.

I smile at them and materialize a stick of incense to burn for them, and two buns to place on their plates.

I press my hands together in prayer.

Too many words are exchanged in silence. Too many promises and dreams and wishes. Far too many to name.

Footsteps echo behind me but I remain exactly where I am.

If they wish to come over and talk, then it is on them, if they are here merely to observe me then they can do so at a distance.

The steps halt when they come in view of the altar but after a few seconds they continue walking towards me.

My eyes are closed and my posture is relaxed but we both know that I am aware of their presence.

They remain silent and wait.

I breath quietly through my nose and open my eyes.
I feel... at peace.

I'm sure that wherever they are, in the Pure World, Underworld, in Heaven or inside the cycle or reincarnation - hell, they could be living inside of a toddler's body somewhere with a Game System guiding them through a brand new world, for all I knew - they accepted and understood my actions.

I wasn't replacing anyone, just adding to it.

I look to up to the side and see Madam Yu staring dispassionately at the swords.

"When did you meet them?" I asked her,"In Gusu?"

Madam Yu's sharp eyes cut straight into mine,"Your father was always with Jiang FengMian growing up, we met when our betrothal contracts were being written. I met your mother the year after FengMian returned from Gusu," She answered me.

I frowned, confused.

"CangSe Sanren lived here for a short time before marrying your father and leaving," She explains.

I make a noise of understanding and glance at the swords again.

"It's unusual for you to be here so early," She comments.

"I needed to tell them a few things," I don't elaborate further.

Madam Yu gives me a look and I can't help but smile gently up at her.

"Jiang Cheng is my brother," I tell her,"You can hate me all you want, but I cannot hate him. He is my brother, not in blood, but," I press my hand against my heart.

"He is my brother," I say.

Madam Yu remains silent but her fingers twist Zidian around.

"And if I forbid you from ever speaking to him again?" She asks.

My smile widens and gets a twinge fonder.

"There's no punishment you can charge me with that won't be worth breaking that order," I tell her,"And if you punish Jiang Cheng for it you'll lose all the respect your son has for you."

Madam Yu stands straighter and her lips thin.

"Do you remember that day on the lake?" She asks, seemingly out of context.

I nod slowly still smiling.

"I do," I answer her," How could I forget?"

How could I forget indeed.

That day, for all the hate you held towards my mother who I am the spitting image of, you still made a choice.

You chose to dive into those waters and pull me out.
You saved me.

Chapter End Notes

Now before you grab the pitchforks, it's not a redemption Arc! Okay? Don't kill me just yet.
As for how old they are now, WWX is turning 11 mid-fall, so 3 or so months from this chapter (in-story), meaning JC is 9 almost turning 10.
The next two chapters (52 and 53) happen around the same time, one to explain what happened, another to continue this conversation.
54 will be ShouShan's wedding (finally, I know)

Madam Yu realized what WWX was trying to hide immediately, and JYL suspects something, and let him run off before JFM made things worse by asking questions.
WWX's true phobia will appear, just when they're a bit older and perhaps on a night-hunt? Or something. I'm not exactly sure. JC will know about it for sure, and JYL too, but no one else.

And those cute boys will finally refer to each other as brothers! And not go 'uh, no, you misheard'.
Drowning

Chapter Summary

The event that led to Madam Yu rescuing Wei Ying.

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder, tomorrow won't be a chapter!
I'll be busy with hospital and caretaker stuff, probably some family drama, and I'll be too off to do anything other than eat and sleep.
Sorry, I'll be back on the 17th!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Dare to reach out your hand into the darkness, to pull another hand into the light." - Norman B. Rice

Chapter 52: Drowning

It was the start of summer and already the air was getting to be unbearably hot and humid.

I scratched at the center of my chest, where my heart was, because I still hadn't grown used to the presence of the Golden Core. It wasn't a 'tangible' thing but because I was very much aware and in sync with my own energy it felt itchy.

When I had filled the container to the top, right there in front of my eyes, the container and liquid energy turned solid and began to rotate, faster and faster until I could hear this ringing whistle echo throughout the void inside of my body.

And then there was light.

All-encompassing light that cut through the void like a falling star.

"Does it feel weird?" Jiang Cheng suddenly asked me.

I looked at him askance and shrugged,"Not really? I'm just not used to it, I guess."

Neither Master Xu or Doctor Wu knew if the sensitivity I was having to the Golden Core was because of my previous cultivation efforts - which were still unknown to them - or because of my young age.

I had just turned ten four months previously when I formed my Golden Core.
Officially the youngest human being to form a Golden Core.

Even Madam Yu couldn't deny that there was a bump in YunmengJiang's influence when that fact went public. Elders from the other Great Sects came to request permission to verify that I had, indeed, formed a Golden Core.

It was an interesting afternoon, that day.

First came LanlingJin, with a golden robed elder that had snobbishly informed me of the greatness of their Sect and had repeatedly asked me for my 'secret' on how I formed a core so quickly - when he finally accepted that I had formed one and that there wasn't a mistake with the scan he had ran - before being escorted out.

Then came Gusu - and I had held some semblance of hope that it would be Lan QiRen that would come - with their mourning clothes and poker-faces. The elder had been a serene looking elder with pure white hair tied in a single long ponytail with silver bangles down its length.

He swept through my energy slowly, and flowing with it instead of against it, until they reached my core and they gently poke at it to see if it's real. When it stays the same (whereas an illusion would break) it withdrew just as slowly and naturally as it had entered my system.

They congratulated me and said they'd welcome such a talented youth in Gusu for studying if my Sect Leader allowed it.

I had thanked them and bowed politely, thinking of sending Lan XiChen and Lan Zhan a letter telling them of this encounter and asking them if they knew who the elder was.

Because I liked them.

He seemed like a cool elder.

The next Sect to arrive had been Qinghe, with a tall and stocky elder that looked very young in comparison to the other two elders that came by, and had quickly verified my core, asked me a few questions and departed just as quickly.

Qinghe was cool too, but the Gusu elder was the coolest.

*Well, well, well! So impressed with Hubby's elders.*

I ended the conversation right there and then, before it degenerated into a pissing match between Ike and I.

We awaited a QishanWen elder but none came.

Instead a different kind of news arrived.

The QishanWen had installed a side branch of the main family in Yiling. More specifically, a branch specializing in medicine and the study of spiritual energy.

Wen Qing and Wen Ning.

The meaning behind this sudden development was obvious. Yiling was as close as you could get to Yunmeng without being in Yunmeng. And it wasn't a secret that the first thing I did with my recently earned freedom was to spend an afternoon saying hi to the people in Yiling.

Sue me, I had missed that town.
Of course, I wasn't really supposed to know any of this.

Jiang FengMian had thought to 'protect me' from this information, but news spread far and wide and I got six or seven small missives, along with three or so long letters explaining everything, asking if I needed help.

I had thanked each and every one of them but begged them not to get involved and to lay low. To not stir up trouble or rumors.

I needed them invisible.

The game was still afoot.

But anyway, after that little tidbit of information I wasn't supposed to know, things continued as they had always been. Except I no longer had lessons with Master Xu - but was invited for tea every now and then because I was his favorite, cough successful cough, student - and dedicated much of my time to improve my skills or to upgrade my creations.

Like the fountain pen.

When the final prototype was finished and I started using it in class there was a whole debacle about whether or not it was acceptable of me to use it, and where I had gotten it from, Jiang Cheng's commentary on how I had been working on that thing for months and had carved more than thirty odd pens before settling on this one helped alleviate the rumors I had stolen it from somewhere.

But the fact remained that no one had ever seen such a creation before.

In the end, after offering to make more for the Sect, they had allowed me to keep it, which was silly because for all that they could've confiscated that one I'd just make more and get better at hiding them.

Bright side is that A-Zhan complimented me on my calligraphy the next letter we exchanged. Jiang Cheng said that I cheated.

He's just mad that his mother warned him not to use it in class, preferring to have him practice his writing the old way.

I just whispered to him that any homework or punishment where he had to write didn't count as being in class.

And then there was my new room, which I suspected had been meant to be my room from the very beginning but Jiang FengMian wanted to keep me under watch 24/7, that Madam Yu insisted on kicking me into now that there were very few lessons Jiang Cheng and I shared and none of them early in the morning.

In my fervor to get better and learn more I'd managed to overtake the class in studies so, in order not to demotivate the other juniors and leave me bored, I would be frequently picked off the class to join the seniors in sparring and swordplay lessons.

Jiang Cheng had been upset for a while at my vast improvements but once I was gone from the picture he was suddenly the best in class and everyone wanted to talk to him or ask him advice.

He'd confided in me one night, when he had dragged me to sleep in his bed 'for old time's sake' - an excuse no one believed - that it made him feel good but at the same time angry. They wanted to be
his friends when I wasn't there but didn't approach him when we were together.

I'd just shrugged and told him there would be people like that throughout his life, and that's why he had to be careful when making friends. Some only took and never gave, some only wanted to bask in the glow of that person, and others stewed in silence and shadow waiting for the chance to dim that glow or take it for themselves.

It was a tough topic to discuss with a nine year old.

"You're not even listening to me are you?" Jiang Cheng grumbles.

I blink, brought back to reality,"Not really, you were saying?"

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes and throws his hands up,"Unbelievable."

Jiang YanLi giggles behind her hands,"A-Xian, A-Cheng was telling you about the sparring match he won against one of your classmates."

I smile at him,"You won? That's so cool!"

Jiang Cheng perks up at the praise and puffs up in pride.

Really, he was so easy to please.

And you love it.

I do.

Where are we going anyway?

I look out at the rest of the lake and scratch at my cheek. "We've come all this way to pick lotus seeds?" I ask.

Jiang Cheng gives me a droll look,"A-Jie told you we were coming to a lotus seed lake, what were you expecting?"

Not this.

"Forgive me for not asking to specify what a lotus seed lake was, it's not like they grow everywhere," I roll my eyes.

Jiang Cheng mutters under his breath and YanLi chuckles as she gets baskets ready to fill up with lotus seed pods.

I look back on the water, deep blue-ish green, covered with beautiful lotus in bloom like a blankets of flowers floating above the water.

I stuck my hand on the water and feel the current the boat is cutting through the still lake.

Something flickers in my senses and I quickly bring my hand out of the water.

"What?" Jiang Cheng frowns at me.

I don't answer him looking between the water at the other boats floating alongside ours.

There's a buzzing in my senses and I slowly move from my position to the other side of the boat,
observing the water and searching for anything out of the ordinary.

But no, there isn't anything that stands out to me. It's just a calm and peaceful lake surface. Nothing that screams 'danger'.

Yet my senses were never wrong and kept me alive in more than one situation, so I trusted them far more than I trusted the lake's surface.

After all, even if the surface was calm and peaceful, it did not mean the underneath of it was the same.

My brain instantly came up with alligators and sharks as the problem, before it connected with the reality of this world and threw that idea out of the proverbial window.

It wasn't sharks or alligators.

I had an inkling to what this was.

"Hey," I waved at the people in the boat next to ours,"Has there been any drownings in this lake recently?"

Jiang Cheng's face twisted in disgust and opens his mouth to question why I'd bring this topic up only to pause and look at me.

*Really* look at me.

One of the people on the other boat look at me startled for a moment before slowly nodding,"There was a couple of drownings last week, a string of boats flipped because of the strong winds when they were trying to return to the port."

I knew it.

I let out a deep sigh through my nose,"Everyone back to shore, and call the Yunmeng Sect or clan responsible for this area!" I order.

"A-Xian?" YanLi frowns before looking at the water as well,"You don't think...?"

I nod,"There's Water Ghouls on the lake," Another deep sigh,"We need to get out of there."

The boat jostles slightly and I grab Jiang Cheng and put him closer to the center of the boat and away from the edges, gesturing for YanLi to do the same, before grabbing the large pole used to guide the boat and start leading us to shore.

Immediately what had been waiting to feast on us start getting agitated and I curse under my breath our bad luck. The older disciples had decided to stay on the port, seeing as we were only going to go around picking seed pods, and they were the ones that had the emergency signals to contact the Sect.

If the people here had been knowledgeable enough to have warned the surrounding areas about the recent drownings then the sects would've come to check it out to make sure nothing malevolent bred underneath the water surface.

Or to at least fish out the bodies.

But no, they *hadn't*. And now I had to worry about the two kids in the boat with me and how to get them to shore.
Goddammit.

The other boats quickly move to shore but are harassed by the water ghouls on their way, the boats jostling on the water and sinking slightly at the ghouls try to cling to the underside of them.

I focus on my senses and vaguely 'see' where the ghouls are lying in wait to drag us underwater, annoyed that of all the resentful-energy fueled beings there were these had to be slightly intelligent. And dangerous if you didn't have the tools to get rid of them.

"A-Xian," YanLi looks at me, worried.

"It's fine, Shijie," I grin at her,"A-Xian can deal with this, just don't get near the edges of the boat."

"I want to help!" Jiang Cheng speaks," I can help."

No you can't.

"Platypus, keep your sister safe," I tell him,"Water Ghouls can get nasty, so the two of you look out for one another and keep an eye on the water for me."

Jiang Cheng wants to argue, I know he does, but he acquiesces to my decision.

I can already see the port and one of the faster boats that has already arrived there and is talking to the disciples there.

I see one of them go into their pocket and pulling out a flare signal.

Well, at least we're not far from Yunmeng to receive aid.

The signal the goes up.

*And* the Water Ghouls get nasty.

The boat in front of us gets flipped by grey skinned and sunken eyes corpses with long stringy black hair, mouth opening and closing soundlessly like a fish, and hands that looked like they'd developed fins connecting their fingers.

All in all, they looked disgusting.

One looked at our boat and I swung the wood pole throwing them back into the water.

"Wow!" Jiang Cheng yelps and then looks at me with a shocked expression.

*Guess he's never seen anyone tossing a problem away like that before.*

Now's not the time for jokes, Ike.

The people on the water were quickly grabbed by the other boats occupants but that only meant that they were heavier now, and the disciples on the shore would struggle with carrying the adults back to shore on their swords.

So they'd have to focus on getting the ghouls.

And for that they needed nets.

I spied the disciples borrowing nets from local fishermen but they needed to prep them before
using them.

I mentally groaned on how easier it would be if everyone just had nets readily prepared in case situations like this occurred.

*Common civilians aren't instructed on how to deal with the supernatural.*

Well they should! Because they're usually the first ones to die!

I stabbed the pole in the water to drive us closer to the port, if nothing else the disciples could come and grab the heirs without too much difficulty, and hit a bump under the water.

"Guess that one didn't look twice before crossing the road," I mutter to myself.

"What?" Jiang Cheng gives me a weird look.

I shrug, not going to explain that little joke.

The boats were rocked once again and I yelled out at the people,"Make it to the port as fast as you can! They'll try to turn your boat or sink it!"

The people panic briefly before starting to help paddle the boat faster.

"A-Xian," YanLi starts,"The water is darkening."

I look at it and, sure enough, the blue-ish green color is now darker.

I curse.

"That's bad, right?" Jiang Cheng gulps.

Damn, the kid was getting scared.

I grin at him,"Well, ain't this an adventure, Platypus? Don't worry, Shijie and I will make sure no one gets hurt."

He still worries and I push the pole again.

Only this time something pulls it.

In order to remain on the boat and not get pulled off I have to let go of it, and watch as it sinks into the darkened depths.

I sigh.

Of course, they wouldn't make it easy for me.

I had one cultivator sword I couldn't pull out without showing my inventory, and no one that could fly it.

I had a Golden Core but didn't know how to operate a sword like that, Shijie was still working on hers and Jiang Cheng was in the beginning stages of cultivation.

Goddammit.

I quickly count how long we've been on the water and how far the Sect is. Depending on who they send it could be three or so minutes until rescue appears.
Three or so minutes doesn't sound like a long time but then you have to take into account that children can drown in less than one and that's without adding the murderous ghouls trying to take control of your body.

I remain standing and eyeing the waters distrustfully, expecting the boat to start dipping, jostling or for the ghouls to try and flip it.

I was not expecting one to launch itself out of the water and try to grab Jiang Cheng.

Time slows down and all I can see are those rotten grey arms and gaping mouth reaching for him.

I don't think twice.

I push him down into his sister, making them topple over the length of the boat, and feel the broken nails dig into my robes.

The last thing I see before going under is Jiang Cheng's scared eyes.

Damn it.

I'm pulled over board and into the darkened waters of the lake.

I feel the webbed fingers try to grasp a hold of my throat but I kick them off me and struggle against their hands. From the inventory I pull out my remaining knife, Xiaohui, and stab at it.

The hawkbill-like knife that I had bought as a final resort wouldn't mean much against such them, especially as I was underwater, but it would buy me time.

I kicked at them and tried to get back to the water surface but the ghouls all diverted their attentions to keep me under.

I had no techniques I could use underwater, because this was something I hadn't planned for - and would be quickly remedied once I got out of here - and no spiritual weapons with me.

Plus, the ghouls kept clawing at me and not giving me a respite to open the store or inventory to check if I had anything I could use in it.

*You're going to run out of oxygen.*

Goddammit.

I channeled energy into my body and swiped at one of the ghouls, it's head disconnecting from the rest of the body, and kicked at another feeling bone cave beneath my feet.

I was going to go all out with these bastards.

My eyes glowed silver.

And I push myself upwards breaking the water surface and taking in a gulp of air before getting dragged back down.

They weren't giving up were they?

The Water Ghouls decided to try another tactic, and dived under whenever I went to strike, as they were faster under water than I was. It irked me.
And then, when I was just figuring out what patterns they moved in one went and threw itself at me, I got ready to dodge and swipe when another latched onto my back.

Sh*t!

I tried to curl up to kick the approaching ghoul away only for the third one to grab onto them.

They planned this.

My eyes widen and the final ghoul grabs onto my neck and pushes me down to the lake bed.

Air escapes my lungs in bubbles and I struggle against them but with my legs restricted and being choked by the monster my options are limited.

The Water Ghoul wrapped around my chest squeezes and I feel my ribs creak.

I reinforce my body with energy to try and withstand the force of the attack but it only minimally works and I feel a rib snap.

Pain.

My mouth opens in a scream I choke, swallowing water, and not being able to cough it out.

My vision darkens.

I sink the knife into the neck of the ghoul and punch it with my off hand.

I was panicking.

Looking back on it, the minute the ghoul grabbed my legs and I couldn't kick it away I started panicking.

I punched it again and again, trying to get it to release my throat, but my vision just kept on darkening.

As they closed and I began to lose consciousness there's this blaze of... something. A glint, maybe?

And then the hands around my throat are gone and something grabs onto the front of my robes and pulls-...

I violently cough out the water in my lungs when my back is hit with a sharp blow.

I cough and splutter and struggle to inhale, tears forming in the corners of my eyes.

It hurts.

Pain.

Ow.

"Reckless child," Madam Yu hisses to no one in particular, and secures me against her body, already flying back to the port.

My mind is a mess, I can't seem to focus, and I swim in and out of consciousness. My ears are ringing and I can't hear a thing.

I vaguely recall Jiang Cheng grabbing my hand and yelling something, eyes red from crying and a
devastated YanLi holding him back, but that's as far as I can remember from when I'm pulled out of the water.

Afterwards, when I'm lying in the infirmary and no ones looking like they expect me to drop dead that very second, I finally get the facts straight about what happened.

I had gone under for little over two minutes, Madam Yu being the first one to arrive and grab her children out of the boat and back onto the port, before going back and diving underwater to find me.

Jiang Cheng and YanLi remained tight-lipped regarding why she went back for me and not just send a disciple, considering the fact that Madam Yu never had hidden her dislike of me, before shrugging it off as not presenting a good image to YunmengJiang.

Still, I had thanked her, once I could bow properly without grimacing and stopped sounding like a decades-old smoker, but Madam Yu had simply ignored me.

I figured that she didn't want that day to be mentioned again.

But I couldn't forget it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, timeline wise this happened before the Storm chapter (he's still ten in this one).
And no, this isn't a redemption chapter for Madam Yu, we're only seeing this from WWX's pov and he was unconscious most of the time during recovery/being rescued.

I might come back and write more on here, I just have no idea what to add right now. Hope you liked the chapter!
Planning

Chapter Summary

Do what you want, Plan for the Future, Get stronger to protect them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan, and not quite enough time." - Leonard Bernstein

Chapter 53: Planning

"You saved me," I say to Madam Yu.

Her eyes flicker with something I can't decipher before they turn back to their usual frosty countenance and she opens her mouth to speak.

"Why are you now referring to my son as your brother?" She asks,"Did you not say you would not interfere with my family?"

I nodded,"I did, and now I cannot stay true to them. I feel... a longing, in my chest, for something I once had. Lines are blurring," I explain to her,"I can't keep pushing them out. I don't want to."

Her violet eyes are vicious and cutting but she remains silent as she observes me.

"What are your plans?" She asks me.

I blink.

Confusion.

"My plans?" I echo.

"You say you will leave to find 'your mountain'," She makes air quotes,"What will you do to find it?"

I frown,"I don't understand the questions, Madam Yu. What will I do to find it?"

She takes a breath,"Will you leave to find your mountain?"

I nod,"Yes."

"Then why care about family when all you'll bring them is heartache by leaving?" She asks.

A faint smile teases the edges of my mouth,"Madam Yu... There is no love without heartache, there
are good and bad moments in life. By leaving I won't be abandoning them, I will still consider them family, it's just that they won't see me every day."

She frowns,"What does a child know of love?"

My smile blossoms gently on my face,"I know enough."

Her hands grip her sleeves tightly and she nearly glares at me.

"Your eyes... That damn smile," She hisses,"So much like hers."

I don't mind her anger, after living her for two years I'd come to understand that what Madam Yu wanted more than anything was an apology. Or maybe it was assurance.

One or the other.

She wanted her love to be reciprocated, had always wanted that to happen, but with the era being what it was and CangSe Sanren leaving that mountain like a bolt from the blue... Expectation does not always meet reality.

She had loved FengMian, and she had gotten him.

But he had not loved her, and even now showed no signs of it.

I felt for her.

As a woman who had been loved, so much, by her husband. Kept being loved by him even after no longer being lovers.

To me, Madam Yu was... Mournful.

"I am not my mother," I tell her.

You shouldn't hate the figures of the past. Though they may still cast long shadows, they are not longer there to be feared, reviled, or hated. They are already gone.

"Are you scared of me? Of my presence here?" I ask her.

Madam Yu scoffs,"What is there to be scared of? As if you could rival me, boy."

I smile,"Scared that I may take Jiang Cheng's place," I clarify.

Madam Yu's lips purse into a thin line and her eyes flicker with anger.

"I do not wish to take anything of his," I assure her,"Jiang Cheng is the heir of YunmengJiang, and I am only a temporary resident. One day I will leave and Jiang Cheng will wow the world as one of the best Sect Leaders the world has seen."

Madam Yu strokes her ring,"You speak as if you already know it to be true."

That's because I do.

My smile turns slightly impish,"Your son is a sponge, Madam Yu, and he absorbs everything you teach him. If you focus on him, give him all the tools he needs to succeed, he might surprise you."

"Do not lecture me how I should raise my son," Madam Yu warns.
"I am not lecturing you," I show her my hands in surrender,"I am merely saying that throwing him
to the wolves and watch him find his footing, instead of teaching him how to control the wolves,
might not be the best approach. He is not you, Madam Yu, and neither is he Sect Leader Jiang."

Zidian sparks once and then twice but Madam Yu remains silent and still.

I wait for her to either dismiss me or to start berating me for my words, but neither happens.

Madam Yu remains stroking her ring, twisting it between her fingers, and watches me with too
knowing eyes.

"Why did you push my children down, that day on the boat?" She asks.

The answer is simple,"To keep them from getting grabbed. The Water Ghoul was reaching for
Jiang Cheng, had I threw him aside another ghoul would've grabbed him from the other side of the
boat. I couldn't pull him so pushing him backwards was the only option."

"To keep them safe..." She mutters.

I wait for her to continue.

"Why do you care?" She asks then.

I tilt my head slightly to the side, confused once again.

"Why do I care? About them? Well, they're my family, of course," I answer.

Madam Yu frowns,"You are not blood."

I laugh,"Family isn't blood, Ma'am. Family are bonds."

Her eyes flicker again and she looks back at the swords on top of the altar.

"I will not accept you as their brother," She tells me,"Do not expect me to ever do. But do what
you children want and do not come crying to me when it all becomes meaningless."

Love is never meaningless, I want to tell her.

But I remain silent.

Instead I bow and head back to my room to get ready for the day.

Yunru nuzzles my cheek as I leave the Hall and I carefully pet her head, feeling the soft fur on my
skin, and smile.

"Don't worry," I tell her,"I am fine. Look, Yunru," I point at the clearing blue sky,"Isn't this world
beautiful?"

Yunru squeaks from where she's perked on my shoulder.

"This world is a gift, Yunru," I tell her,"A gift that we should always cherish. The people who
meet, the family we make for ourselves, the home we create... They are all blessings. And no
matter the price, we should strive to keep them safe," I poke her nose gently.

You're getting too philosophical for me in the morning.
I chuckle.

I'm sorry, am I boring you?

_Not necessarily boring me, it's just unlike you to be so introspective._

I hummed.

How much time do we still have left?

_For the war? Give or take six years._

I took a deep breath.

What needs to be done?

_What?_

I'm working on communication, Yan MingXia, ShouShan, and Mao PeiZhi have the rest underway. What else needs to be done?

_Depends. What do you want to do?_

I look around me as I walk back to the residential wing.

Damage control.

_I'm listening._

I need you to do me a favor, go back to the novel, all the information we have on the attack.

_What are you looking for?_

They came from water and air, burnt the town and Sect... I want to know who they got so close unnoticed.

_An early warning system?_

Yes and no. I have an idea.

_You don't look reassured by it._

I don't like playing on such low odds, I hate the fact that I may have to let this place burn.

_Change what you know you have the power to change, don't take on too much and tire yourself out._

I won't.

I stroked Yunru's fur and sighed.

Focus.

Think.

It's not yet time for rest.

The real storm is coming.
You mustn't stop yet.

Keep going. Keep moving.

Protect them.

Safe. Safe. Safe.

Keep them safe.

I look up at the sky again and close my eyes and just breathe.

There's still time.

And I will make the most of it.

For them.

I walked into the library and headed for my little niche after picking up my current book and settled down.

Jiang Cheng was having lessons with the rest of the class and I had nothing to do until the afternoon so I told him I'd be here. I brought out a few blank sheets of paper and my fountain pen and started putting thoughts to paper whenever they occurred.

I was using a simple pigpen cipher, which would confuse just about anyone as they didn't even know latin letters to decipher it with.

The thought of teaching the letters to either the Jiang siblings or my own growing numbers of correspondents had crossed my mind but I decided against it.

If my creation worked as it should then I wouldn't need to worry about letters being intersected and read between the different groups working with Yan MingXia.

And there was not yet a need for secret communication between the Jiangs and I. If there ever were then I'd think about something then.

More immediate concerns were what I was preoccupied about.

I drew a very basic outline of the Jiang Sect Compound and the various wings and halls. I knew from the information Ike had dug up that the Wens would use a signal to launch the attack and that Wen Zhuliu would kill the people holding a defensive array up.

I needed to find that array and study it.

I looked up at the books surroundings me.

Arrays hadn't been something I had yet studied. Now that Talisman-Making was mastered I guessed it was the next step to go, and I was curious about how different they were from talismans.

Back on the paper I scribbled little details I knew about the area and where the attacks would most likely come from.

Thoughts, ideas and plans swirled in my head and I put many of them on paper, writing and scratching away at the paper until the pages were nearly bleeding ink.
I rested the pen on the floor and took a deep breath, pressing the bridge of my nose with ink stained fingers.

Guessed the fountain pen needed yet another update.

*Later.*

Yes, later.

*Focus on important matters.*

I was brought back to my plans and coded ramblings and picked all of the written paper, bundled it up together and sent it to my inventory, before picking up a blank sheet of paper and started to list what I needed to change. Events, people, incidents and potential victims.

I wrote ideas on how I could potentially avoid them but most were just surrounded with question marks.

I did not have enough information to make a final judgement about them.

...

*What have you thought up this time?*

Information.

*Huh? Not having enough information?*

Yan MingXia's circuit was already walking about the nation, they shouldn't care about a few tag-alongs, right?

*What are you thinking?*

How about we get people to join the caravans, as help, only to go around the towns getting information out of people?

*You think people will talk to strangers?*

I think people like to gossip, and drink, and there's also pillow talk.

...*You know this won't help Mao PeiZhi and ShouShan to stop thinking you're not planning on taking over the world.*

I have no interest in taking over the world. I have interested in keeping my family safe and then I'm moving to my mountain and the world can figure out what to do with itself for a few years without my interference.

*You know that's probably not gonna happen, right?*

That people will let me disappear for a couple of years and not bother me? I'm still holding out hope.

I scribbled more ideas on paper and started branching out to more long-lasting options and solutions.

*Oh? That one holds merit.*
I reread what I have written down and shrug.

History is there for you to learn from, and I know a lot about history.

_Remember than enormous book collection Walter got you when you turned forty? The one with the near identical covers and detailed illustrations._

The memory made me smile.

I do.

_Let's try not to replicate those books._

My smile quickly turned into a smirk.

I make no promises.

All's fair in love and war.

I underlined the idea and moved on.

So much to do, so little time.

Jiang YanLi knocked on her mother's door with slight apprehension, no matter how many times she had practiced what she planned on saying to herself in her room, now that she was actually here knocking on the door she felt... scared?

She clenched her hands into fists and took a deep breath, doing her best to remain calm and logical. Her mother would never listen to her if she did otherwise.

After a few seconds of silence the door was opened by JinZhu, who looked surprised to see her.

It was easy to see how, there were no lessons planned with Mother and she was usually practicing her work in her room or in the kitchens around this time.

YanLi felt slightly guilty to not come over and try to spend more time with her mother, now that A-Xian was here, and could be trusted not to run too wild with A-Cheng in tow, there was no need for her to spend most of her time making sure her brother wasn't feeling lonely. She figured she should come by more often to have tea with her mother.

A-Xian...

JinZhu stepped aside to let her in and YanLi bowed slightly and smiled at her mother's maid.

JinZhu and YinZhu had come with her mother from Meishan and had been constant presences in hers and A-Cheng's early childhoods. In fact, YanLi could vaguely remember a time where a little A-Cheng had clung to YinZhu and called her 'Auntie' but that had quickly stopped once A-Cheng was moved from the nursery and into a proper room.

"A-Li," Her mother put down her cup of tea,"We don't have lessons today."

YanLi bowed to her mother,"I know, Mother, but I..." She hesitated.

Yu ZiYuan's eyes narrowed,"But you?"
It was now or never, YanLi told herself, I need to tell her! Just as I practiced in front of the mirror, I just need to say it.

But doubt and anxiety roiled her stomach and left her feeling lost.

Was this the right thing to do?

Did she even have what it takes to do this?

Was she strong enough?

Then the memory of how little A-Xian pushed her and her brother down and away from danger, while endangering himself, without hesitation and was dragged underwater by grey decomposed hands of Water Ghouls, surfaced in her mind.

The image of her mother carrying him drenched and limp and broken in her hold haunted her dreams for nights afterwards, and she felt too guilty to come visit him in the infirmary until he was driving the doctor and nurses up the walls with his repeated escape attempts.

A-Xian... Always so strong and reckless, constantly smiling and joking, needling her brother with teases and games, so smart and creative. But he was also very sad and tired.

YanLi knew that he did his best not to show it, but sometimes YanLi caught him looking at the town beyond the river with a near longing look in his eyes. He always hid his true feelings behind a mask, however the longer he lived here in Yunmeng, the easier it was to see behind that mask.

He lowered it when he felt comfortable, and he was comfortable here despite his near constant reminders that he's not really family and only staying here temporarily.

At times YanLi thought that he was simply scared of getting attached, which she could understand given that he had lost his parents when he was little, but then he tried his best to always be there to teach A-Cheng or just keep him company effectively preventing himself from being able to keep an aloof personality.

He wanted a family but was too scared to try and have one, that's the feeling YanLi got from him.

The image of him laying unconscious in bed floats in her mind again.

But not scared enough to consider the possibility of getting hurt trying to protect others.

"Mother, I have a request," YanLi finally manages to say.

Doubts and worries still plague her, roil her stomach and carve away at her confident posture. Even so she stood tall in front of her mother, in the perfect posture Mistress Zhu had taught her (and an amused A-Xian) and held her head high, she had come her with a decision already set and she wouldn't back down from it.

For her two little brothers, she would do her best.

She would do better.

"A request, A-Li?" Her mother asked.

"Yes, Mother," She nods,"I have something to ask of you."

Interested, Madam Yu crosses her legs and turns to face her daughter fully," What is it?"
YanLi takes a deep breath to calm the last of her nerves.

"I want you to teach me," She says,"I want you to teach me how to be as strong as you, as the Violet Spider."

Her mother's eyes widen, definitely not having expected those words to come out of her daughter's mouth."Why are you asking this now? You know that when you marry Jin ZiXuan there will be no need to be a strong cultivator. And you're already at the age where your Golden Core will only get stronger with strenuous training."

YanLi nods,"I know it will take hard work, I know that Jin ZiXuan is not looking for a strong cultivation partner but, Mother, I am doing this for myself."

She looks her mother in the eye,"I want to be stronger. Strong enough to protect my little brothers-brother, and my family if needs be. I don't want want to have to need someone to protect me, I want to protect myself."

Her mother uncrosses her legs and sits back in her chair, deep in her thoughts.

Jiang YanLi waits, this was it, whether her mother allowed her to become stronger or she'd have, for the first time, contemplate going against her mother's direct orders and beg her father for tutors.

It would mean a rift between her mother and herself, something she did not want as she loved her mother dearly and knew she meant no harm in treating her as fragile porcelain and A-Cheng as just another disciple flagging in his studies.

Which wasn't true, both her little brothers were constantly training on studying something, constantly improving their abilities and leaving her behind. The only time she sees them relaxing is when A-Cheng is practicing his painting and A-Xian is either playing his dizi or singing odd songs with a ethereal glow to him, like he's reaching beyond time and space for words that do not seem to come from this world.

Perhaps from the same world of myth and legends that he loves to enthrall A-Cheng with when they're supposed to be sleeping.

More than once A-Cheng had crawled into bed with her, frighten out of his wits, followed by a snickering A-Xian after the amused boy had told the other a scary story.

Regardless of the warnings he got for making his stories too scary and for scaring A-Cheng when he has lessons the next morning, A-Xian would only laugh and hug A-Cheng telling him funny stories to make up for the scare.

Really, her two boys were so much trouble.

And they'd only get into more trouble as they got older.

A-Xian was only ten, A-Cheng was nine. Her father would have to start taking A-Xian on night-hunts now that he had his own golden core and teach him more advanced forms of the YunmengJiang Sect fighting style, even though he was still so little.

Nevertheless, rumors had spread of the prodigious son of CangSe Sanren having a Golden Core and now it was time he made a comeback into the Cultivation World. Her father could try all he wanted to keep him benched until he was thirteen, as was the general age when disciples were taken on their first night-hunts, the world was watching for the boy who broke convention.
She'd feel concerned for A-Cheng being jealous if she didn't know that whatever A-Xian learnt he'd teach A-Cheng immediately after.

Really those two...

"A-Li," Her mother speaks,"Why now?"

Why not when you were younger? Why not when I first asked you all those years ago? What changed?

"That day on the lake," YanLi began,"I couldn't do anything."

She had just sat there, holding back A-Cheng from diving in after A-Xian, and then sitting still on the boat watching the perfectly still lake surface and begging every deity out there for A-Xian to break the water's surface.

All she could do was sit there and wait.

She still couldn't forget A-Cheng's screams when her mother landed with an near-unconscious A-Xian in her arms.

'Wei Ying! Wei Ying! Brother! BROTHER!'

She couldn't do a thing then.

And it had felt like her chest was full of broken sharks of porcelain cutting deep into her heart, she had felt like she was going to collapse from the pain, the regret of not being able to do anything for either of them.

They were running headlong into danger.

Her two precious little brothers.

And she couldn't do a thing.

Not again. Never again.

She was going to grow stronger. The next time her brothers were in danger she would stand beside them.

She would not be weak.

She might have her father's gentle nature, everyone knew she did, but she was as much of her mother as she was of her father.

And it was time she proved that.

Chapter End Notes

Finally done with the Madam Yu and WWX segment, next chapter is the wedding! (Which made me break my rule about 3k words, don't expect it to become a regular thing, we are nearly on Arc IV)

Or well, the first part of the wedding, it's also two chapters. Oops.
Who was surprised at YanLi’s decision to ask her mom for training? ’Weak’ Golden Core aside, she's still relatively young (13) and her mom kicks ass. Don't be surprised if YanLi gets a bump in reputation by being someone you don't want to mess with.

Before anyone asks how the surgery went, it didn't. Waited two hours for the doctor to see us in ten minutes and say 'oh, well, it's crooked but they can still breathe fine, just go home'.
Waste of a day.
Chapter Summary

The first part of ShouShan's Wedding!
The journey to the Bai, a very warm welcome, sibling rivalry, and a name!
Also, "ShouShan... don't needle the nine year old."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction." - Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Chapter 54: Nice Meetings

We were perhaps fours hours away from the Bai Clan Residence when Jiang FengMian decides to stop and make camp, I very nearly protested - we were pretty close to the Clan Residence after all - but shut my mouth and nodded.

The sun was still high in the sky but it would be evening in about two or so hours, meaning we'd only have reached the Bai after sundown. I understood Jiang FengMian's reasoning for making camp, I did, but I was somewhat upset we'd only get there tomorrow.

I had things to discuss with ShouShan.

And it was his wedding on top of everything...

You're the one rushing to get things done, you know.

I'm not rushing, I am making preparations. It will take years for everything to be in place and up and running.

In time for the war?

I grimaced and kicked the brown mare I was riding with A-Cheng into a canter after Jiang FengMian's stallion.

I don't know.

Jiang Cheng grabbed my shoulders tightly, he had been loving every second of this journey - also, traveling on horse for the first time - and was excited to make camp and explore.

It was adorable.

I honestly didn't know why he hadn't started horse riding lessons alongside me, but figured it had been another of FengMian's weird decisions.
Like only being allowed to accompany elder disciples on night-hunts and 'shadow' after them for experience, but not actually permitted to participate in said night-hunt. Which was because I didn't have a cultivator sword - Liling didn't count for some stupid reason - and FengMian refused to back down from his stance of 'cultivator swords only at age thirteen'.

Ugh.

We settled camp in this open field with a forest on one side. We were using tents styled after my old one, and I had nonchalantly provided sketches for bigger ones, with A-Cheng taking the initiative and getting right down to business.

The older disciples followed his example and I stayed back to observe him.

It would be his job one day to lead these people (hopefully these people) and he needed to earn their respect and obedience. Yeah, he was only nine but he wouldn't stay this little forever, and I'd rather have him prepared and moody over too many lessons than carefree and caught unaware by the Wens.

I felt a headache form behind my eyes.

Turning around I started going through my pack for one of my bows and a quiver full of arrows.

Once the tents were set up I'd take him foraging and hunting. This terrain and area was different than what he was used to, so it'd pose a bit of a challenge to him.

We'd see if he had been paying attention to his improvised lessons.

I subconsciously searched my belt and relaxed marginally at feeling Xiaodan's weight at my waist - given back to me after the lake incident - and suppressed the urge to pull it out and test it.

It felt so good to have my dagger back.

I watched as A-Cheng finished setting up his tent and the other disciples following suit before I raised the quiver and shook it meaningfully.

I saw his dark eyes light up and he quickly ran up to me, placed the quiver on his back correctly and took the bow from my hands.

Jiang FengMian opened his mouth before hesitating and letting us wander off into the forest.

We'd already done this before on the journey and he knew just as well as the disciples did that I could look after him for a few hours.

I improvised an exercise to have him spot, name and explain the uses for every forageable plant he came across, all while tracking down game. This went on for a few hours before we caught enough meat to feed everyone back at camp and started heading back.

Jiang Cheng had a skip in his step and I gently teased him for it.

It was an improvement that, instead of growing prickly or angry, pushing me away as he used to, he'd now tease me right back.

I was so proud.

Stop sounding so bloody emotional, he's not a baby.
He's totally a baby, look at him! Walking like a proud duckling! A strutting platypus!

*He's nine, going on ten... He's not a baby.*

He'll always be my baby brother though! My littlest brother!

*Is Wen Ning older than him?*

I think so, wasn't Wen Ning born in April? Or was it May?

*I'll check later.*

Thank you, Ike! Love you!

*You only love me when you need me.*

Not true, I love you all the time! You just frequently make me wish to strangle you.

*Wow, I am feeling so much love already.*

Stop being such a drama queen.

*Says the shameless person who sang "Mother Knows Best" in front of twenty people, at a volume Lan Zhan would consider a damn rock concert.*

Lan Zhan would consider a particularly loud sneeze to be the invocation of the anti-christ.

...

Loud rambunctious laughter echoed within the confines of my mind and I suppressed a twitch of surprise.

It was a conundrum, my mind, how it could be a cavernous expanse you easily lost your way in and a cluttered mess full of information, plans and random facts that bubbled to the surface of my thoughts with no rhyme or reason.

Yet, Ike still found a way to make it feel empty enough that only his presence was felt.

It was odd.

It hadn't always been like that. There was a time, not too long ago, where Ike struggled to be heard inside my head and would be overworked in keeping my thoughts coherent.

Now it was just quiet.

It was eerie.

*Nothing wrong with a little peace and quiet.*

Unless it leaves you constantly on edge wondering when the other shoe is going to drop.

*Have you thought that maybe there isn't another shoe to drop?*

Doubt.

"What are you always daydreaming about?" He asks me out of nowhere, while he's putting away the bow and arrows back in my pack.
"Hm? Daydreaming?" I blink, "Aah~ I'm just thinking about things."

_Vague answers be too vague for your darling boy._

As Ike said, A-Cheng frowned, "What things?"

I smiled and sat down inside the tent, watching the older disciples and FengMian coordinate stuff - such as preparing food - with slight disinterest, "Many things. How are things back at Lotus Pier, what is A-Jie doing, my training with you... How is ShouShan, my Lan friends, memories of passing through here," I explain to him.

Jiang Cheng finishes packing and sits down beside me, "Why think about all that?"

I knock my shoulder against his with a snort, "You know me, Platypus, I'm always thinking. Woe is me if I'm not thinking something up!"

"You're worrying," He give me a look, "I know your worried face when I see it, XianXian."

I'm terrified, A-Cheng, not worried.

I'm scared that I'm not doing enough. Scared that I'm muddling up so many things and screwing up so badly that you'll all **die** because of me.

I'm scared I won't be able to save you.

Instead of saying any of those truths I laugh, grinning, and put my arm around his shoulders bringing him closer to me, "Don't mind me, don't mind me! You know how I am, didi, a big worrywart!"

Jiang Cheng scoffs but doesn't contradict me, leaning on my with how own introspective look in his eyes.

I turn back to the rest of the camp and memorize the faces - if not the names - of these disciples.

I'd draw a sketch of them later.

Over time I had re-done YanLi's and Madam Yu's - with an adorable A-Cheng - portraits, which were now hanging on the hallway of the main pavilion, positioned just so guests would see them and comment on them, and had proceeded to teach Jiang Cheng how to draw smaller portraits by himself. He was getting the importance of dimensions and perspective beaten into him, unless he wanted to draw surrealism. Or abstract.

All the while I was getting the traditional chinese art style beaten into me.

The drawings looked so weird.

_But you must paint like them, dear one._

Ugh.

Jiang Cheng was actually a pretty good artist, he had an eye for detail - if a bit too much of a perfectionist - so it was interesting to work with him.

That eye of his would help him in more than just painting, and I wondered about ways to improve his hand-to-eye coordination.
Maybe get a practice whip for when he got Zidian?

I shook the stray thought away.

I had asked YanLi is she wanted to join us on the painting lessons, even if not to the extremes A-Cheng was going for, just simple sketches or doodles, but she had declined. Saying she was too busy with lessons with Madam Yu to spend time with us.

To be fair, she had been surprisingly absent from the Sect, or well, impossible to find within the Sect Compound.

And she was more tired that usual. Bruises and eye-bags sometimes could be seen before she quickly hid them or applied make-up over them.

I was sure that nothing horrible was happening, because woe to the one who dare try that with my Shijie, and she had assured me she was fine, only training and lessons. But I really couldn't help but worry.

In the end, all I could do was keep an eye out for any red-flags and be there if she needed me.

I could do less for YanLi than I could do for A-Cheng, and that was saying a lot considering she had inadvertently died trying to save Wei WuXian and Jiang Cheng hated my guts for it.

Things will be different this time, that won't come to pass.

Fingers crossed.

This time things would be better.

A better future. A better life. A better home.

Be better. Be better. Be better.

We were besieged with warm welcomes and smiles the minute we stepped foot in the village nearest to the Bai Clan. I was well-received with peculiar enthusiasm and excitement.

Jiang Cheng had given me an odd look the first time it had happened, but after the fifth or eight he just glared.

Maybe I should've explained why I was so well-know around here?

Probably should've, but too late now. I'll just enjoy the show.

I sighed inwardly and smiled back at the people.

Jiang FengMian and the older disciples were a mix of curious, bemused, and hesitant.

Your Sect Leader doesn't look too happy either.

I spied FengMian looking indecipherable at the people before pushing us the last stretch of the journey to the gates of the Bai Clan Residence.

I immediately noticed that it had undergone some renovations, looking newer and more respectable than it had before.
There were already excited clan members awaiting us at the entrance.

"Welcome, Sect Leader Jiang," They bowed,"The Bai Clan is honored to receive his excellency into their humble holdings."

\textit{Humble for now, XianLiang surely had plans to revamp the whole building.}

Hush.

"We are grateful for the invitation," FengMian smiles politely.

\textit{Not that you were invited, just so you know.}

Hush!

The Bai Clan members took out horses to the stable and quickly bowed and smiled at me - with quick 'Welcome back, Wei-gongzi' - before hurrying away.

"Sect Leader Jiang," XianLiang walked out of the main building,"I hope you had no difficulties with your journey, welcome, welcome!"

Jiang Cheng did a quick double take at seeing such a big bearded man smile jovially at his father, all while his father smiled good-naturedly back at his big bearded man.

"Is that ShouShan?" He asks me in a whisper.

I stifled a snort,"No, that's ShouShan's father, the Bai Clan Leader," I answered.

Jiang Cheng goggled before he processed my words.

"Your friend is the clan heir?!" He yelps. Loudly.

Everyone turns to look at us, FengMian with surprise and XianLiang with way too much amusement.

"A-Ying," XianLiang speaks,"You didn't tell them who we were?" He asks with mock hurt.

I sigh,"I may have forgotten to mention your titles in the Bai Clan," I fidgeted slightly.

XianLiang laughed,"ShouShan will be hurt that you're embarrassed to be his friends!"

I pouted at him,"Not embarrassed, it just never came up in a conversation."

\textit{Like how you know both Jades of Lan and trade monthly letters.}

Shhh!

"Really, A-Ying? And here I thought I was an excellent conversation starter," ShouShan smirks at me as he comes around the corner of the building.

I wave at him,"Sure, whatever you think, ShouShan."

Jiang Cheng gapes at me.

I blink, confused,"What?"

ShouShan laughs,"Rudeness, A-Ying! He's probably thinking you have no manners to address me
"You did it from the very first day we met," ShouShan reminds me.

"Years ago!"

Before the conversation continues any further, FengMian intervenes, smiling sharply, "Hello, you are the 'Bai ShouShan' our A-Ying replies to, I'm guessing?"

ShouShan bows politely at the Sect Leader and comes to stand a single foot behind his father, "Yes, Sect Leader Jiang, that would be me."

"And just how did the Bai Clan come to meet A-Ying?" He asks.

I unsuccessfully try to hide behind Jiang Cheng.

ShouShan's smile widens, "Oh he helped us with a snake problem."

I put a palm to my face and sigh, A-Cheng giving me another look, demanding the full story.

"Oh?" FengMian made a sound of curiosity, "A snake problem?"

"Yes, Sect Leader Jiang," XianLiang nodded, "Would you like to know more over tea?"

"You're so dead."

Ike, not now...

Hah! FengMian is never letting you out of his sight again!

I sigh.

"Certainly," FengMian agrees.

XianLiang leads FengMian away and ShouShan stays behind, grinning down at us.

"Aren't you happy to be back here, little brother? So much to see!" ShouShan laughs.

Immediately after saying those words Jiang Cheng puts himself in front of me.

"He's my brother, not yours!" He hisses like a scalded cat, puffed tail and all.

ShouShan's grin widens.

I just know that these two meeting is going to be one of my major regrets in life.

Well, you already knew what to expect. They'd either get along or be at each other's throats.

I expected ShouShan to be mature in this situation, he is getting married.

ShouShan? Mature?

He can be!

Very rarely or when conducting business. You were hoping for a miracle.
"Will you stop that, Platypus?" I bonked Jiang Cheng lightly on the head when he started glaring at an unrepentant ShouShan who smirked smugly down at him,"And would you stop antagonizing him?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," ShouShan grins.

"Are you being a nuisance, A-Shan?" A young woman wearing a warm robe comes into the room we were sitting in accompanied by a younger boy. A very familiar younger boy.

"Qin Ru!" I beam,"I was wondering where you were!"

The boy, much taller than when I first met him when I was five, grins at me and places the tray of tea and snacks down on the low table,"I was helping prepare for your arrival, Wei-gongzi."

I pout at him,"Not you too..."

He laughs,"Well, it's thanks to you that I am here learning after all."

"I dislike formality," I tell him.

"He does," Jiang Cheng comments,"With a passion, he's always butchering his way through etiquette class and giving his teacher grey hairs."

My lips tremble, trying to contain my wide smirk from showing.

ShouShan laughs,"Of course he is."

Qin Ru ruefully sighs at me and gets up, bowing politely,"I have more chores to do, Wei-gongzi, but we can try to meet and talk before you leave?"

I smile,"Sure! It was nice seeing you again, you've gotten taller!"

He huffs,"Of course, I have..."

He quickly bows again and leaves.

The woman quickly starts dividing the snacks and serving us tea.

"A-Xi, aren't you happy? A-Ying is back!" ShouShan smiles at his bride.

She turns to me and smiles,"Welcome back, Wei-gongzi, A-Shan was very upset you left him behind, pouting and everything."

Jiang Cheng snorts into his tea and I smirk widely at ShouShan, who is definitely pouting at his wife,"Well, it's not like the two of us trade frequent letters or anything. Miss QiuXi, how have you been?"

Zhong QiuXi was the daughter of a store seller, and - according to ShouShan - the most beautiful woman in town, and we had spoken briefly when I had been staying here. She found me adorable and ShouShan's gushing over hadn't made matters any better.

She sits down next to ShouShan and chuckles,"Wei-gongzi doesn't need to be so formal with me," She tells me.
"The Miss QiuXi should treat me less formally too," I smile.

She nods,"Then can I call you A-Ying, as A-Shan is so fond of doing?"

I chuckle,"Sure, and I'll call Miss QiuXi, Sister Xi!"

ShouShan perks up,"And you'll call me Brother?"

Jiang Cheng turns sour like he bit into a lemon. I pay him on the head.

"ShouShan... don't needle the nine year old," I gave him an admonishing look.

Sister Xi laughs and pokes ShouShan's cheek,"Jealous of a child, my my A-Shan!"

ShouShan goes slightly red around the edges and looks away with a pout,"Everyone's making fun of me."

Jiang Cheng puffs up, smug, and Sister Xi and I share knowing looks and leave them to it.

"Are you excited for your wedding?" I ask her.

Sister Xi visibly vibrates in her seat, clearly happy,"Oh, yes! My family is coming tomorrow for the ceremony and we'll have a banquet and party, aah--"

Jiang Cheng elbows me,"Do they know about your wifely lessons?" He smirks.

I roll my eyes.

"Wifely lessons?" ShouShan asks.

I retell him the story and the minute I reveal what the lessons are he falls over laughing, clutching at his stomach.

Sister Xi is more polite and tries to keep a straight face, even managing to talk to me a bit about the different lessons I'd already had, but even she couldn't contain her mirth for long.

"You all laugh but they're quite informative," I shrug.

Jiang Cheng mock shudders,"What have you learned in those lessons that you can apply to your everyday?"

I start ticking my fingers,"I know the full basics of management of a noble household - as that is what A-Jie is learning - and the inner workings of a household, how information is passed - to whom it is passed - in between servants and their hierarchy; then I'm being taught the traditional songs and dances, either folk or specific to Yunmeng, and also the notable works published in Yunmeng; we also had an interesting class about what's expected of a woman after marriage," Jiang Cheng makes a disgusted face,"Yeah, I got kicked out of that one once Mistress Zhu realized I was present," I laughed.

ShouShan was laughing so hard he was completely red in the face.

Sister Xi had some red in her cheeks once I told her that and tapped lightly on my head,"Not funny, A-Ying."

I grin,"Sister Xi, A-Ying is telling the truth! I really was kicked out of the lesson!"
Not that that's what she was embarrassed about.

_You're the progenitor of discord in this world._

Heh, well... I will be considered the Devil in human shape in a few years so, you're kind of right. Not that I found anything inherently creepy about digging up corpses and reanimating them, then again...

_You still want a fierce corpse._

I want my own fierce corpse so bad.

_You can't have one._

Correction! I can't have one _yet._

_You goal is to create an undead army?_

No, my goal is to have a very cozy, very terrifying mountain surrounded by an undead army. And life the rest of my life in peace and quiet.

_That's never gonna happen._

I will have my mountain and the fierce corpse!

_Not that, Jesus woman, the 'peace and quiet' part, you think these guys will leave you alone?_

I get the distinct feeling Ike is pointing at Jiang Cheng and ShouShan.

One can hope?

_Not worth wasting prayers over a lost cause._

You're no fun, Ike.

_You aren't either, especially when you still have to find a way to explain to ShouShan how his gift works and have him check it to see if it does work._

I almost forgot that.

Damn, I needed to find time to sneak out of A-Cheng and FengMian's sight to talk to him in private.

I inconspicuously signaled ShouShan and saw him wink in response, covering it up by teasing his bride.

Jiang Cheng chokes on his tea as Sister Xi teases him right back.

Seriously, these two were made for each other.

_Imagine how their kids will be like._

My lips twitch.

Fun, I bet.

"Ah! We almost forgot!" Sister Xi suddenly sits straighter and looks at me with a beaming
smile, "A-Shan has something to ask you!"

"I do?" ShouShan feigns confusion and is elbowed by his petit - in comparison to him - bride.

A-Cheng and I cough in unison, pretending not to laugh at him.

ShouShan gives us an amused look.

"Anyway," He looks at his bride, "A-Ying I have a request to ask of you."

I sit straighter in my seat, "Oh? What is it?"

Please nothing Yan MingXia related, please let it be nothing to do with our business together.

"A-Xi and I want you to give your firstborn their courtesy name," He requests.

Or something to do with Mao Pei-

Uh?

I blink, "Uh?"

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes, "They asked you to think of a courtesy name."

Courtesy name.


A better tomorrow.

Save them. Save them. Save them.

"A-Ying?" ShouShan frowns.

I shake myself out of that downward spiral to nightmares, "Sorry, ShouShan, you caught me by surprise."

I drink some tea, "Why ask me, though? Shouldn't your father get to pick? Or suggest a name?"

Sister Xi serves me more tea, "Clan Leader was the one that suggested asking you," She smiles secretly at me.

Of course he did.

I withheld a sigh and pondered on names.

A name that would mean something, that bore weight, a prayer for this future child and the life it would lead, just like Wei WuXian did when he thought of RuLan for Jin Ling.

Lan for hopefully growing up to be dignified and righteous.

This child...

Hope.

A better tomorrow.
A new era.

"YingLai," I settle on,"To usher prosperity."

"Bai YingLai," ShouShan repeats the full name and looks at Sister Xi.

His bride smiles.

ShouShan grins and looks back at me, plopping his big hand on my head and messing up my hair,"A good name! Our child will be lucky to have been named by the Great Wei WuXian!"

Chapter End Notes

And here we have the first part of the Bai Clan reunion, hope it reached your standards of cuteness and fluff because I had a lot of fun writing it. I really, really did. It should be a crime at how much fun I'm having writing this.

Jiang FengMian and Jiang Cheng being possessive over who got rights to WWX, they're both going 'He's mine! *hiss*' And ShouShan wastes no time in remind him that 'hey, I was here first, he was my brother before being yours, so...'

Sister Xi is a heaven-sent angel and probably ShouShan's soulmate, seriously these two were made for each other. Thei favorite way to pass the time (that is PG13) is discuss WWX's letters and coo at how utterly adorable he can be at times.

YingLai, I fudged the name. I got the idea from YingTai (Eminent Flower) but my crappy handwriting in the notebook made it look like an L instead of a T. So I went and tried to see if it was an actual name (no idea) but Google Translate showed the word Usher (person who takes others to their seats?) and I decided to say "well, they're going to usher over a new generation!" and called it quits.

And no, this won't be the last time WWX is suddenly put on the spot to name future newborns, he's totally getting named godfather of an entire new generation of little ducklings that may or may not go to study over at YilingWei.

...No, that's not foreshadowing, what are you talking about?
Wedding

Chapter Summary

Second part of the Bai Clan wedding.
Where there's a business discussion, fluff, more fluff, wedding fluff and a bad idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The best and most beautiful things in this world cannot be seen or even heard, but must be felt with the heart." - Helen Keller

Chapter 55: Wedding

I waited until everyone was asleep to get up and leave the room on silent feet, taking a last look to make sure Jiang Cheng remained asleep and that none of the other disciples sharing the room had woken up. Jiang FengMian had a room for himself but I had faith that he wouldn't notice me gone before I got back.

I started making my way towards ShouShan's room, carrying the carved wooden box - a copy of which would be the actual wedding gift - in my arms.

As I walked down the dimly lit hallways I occasionally passed by a Bai Clan member who immediately bowed, and to who I silently waved and smiled.

These people and their inexplicable adoration of me.

Yes, it's not like you're giving them so much money and development opportunities or shoehorned their heir into taking part in a scheme that, if it works, will catapult their little no-name rural Clan into a regional Sect.

Okay, when you put it like that, Ike, I can see that I might be too nice for my own good.

Damn right you are, and now this!

This is a necessity.

And an obvious sign that you are not normal and preparing for something big.

I am practical to a fault and slightly insane, there was never nothing normal about me to begin with.

...Sorry.

I sighed and paused for a second before straightening my spine and continuing on.

Let's just drop the conversation here, Ike, there's work to be done.
I reached ShouShan's room and knocked. The door was quickly opened and I walked in.

XianLiang was also in the room, sitting down at the low table with an unopened bottle of liquor and cups, and I blink at it before turning to ShouShan.

"Celebrating your last day as a free man?" I jokingly asked him.

XianLiang chortles while ShouShan looks surprised at me,"A-Ying! I never thought!"

"Clearly," I smirk at him.

XianLiang coughs after choking on his spit. It takes about two seconds for ShouShan to get it and he gives me an amused 'I am disappointed in you' look.

"But less jokes and more work talk," I sit down at the table,"I have something here for you."

ShouShan sits down in front of his father so I am boxed in between them at the table.

"What have you got?" He asks.

I place the box on the table and open it, there are two talismans attached to the underside of the lid, in two different colors - one black and one red.

"This is a prototype," I stress out the word," Short distance they worked fine, now comes the real test," I begin.

ShouShan looks at the talismans."Short distance?"

"These," I tap the box," Allow you to communicate with me - the one who has the connected talismans - without the need for letters."

Both men's eyes snap towards me, astounded.

"No letters?" XianLiang breathes out the words.

I nod,"You activate this one," I point to the red talisman,"And talk. It records your voice and sends it directly to its twin, which is back in Lotus Pier. Now its twin doesn't record voice but it allows you to play back the message it received as many times as you wish, until it is replaced of course," I point to the black talisman," That's the twin of my recording talisman."

"So we both have an original and a twin," ShouShan thinks out loud,"Each with a recording and receiver talisman," He muses.

I nod.

XianLiang stares at the talismans for a long time, disbelieving.

ShouShan does the same, alternating between the talismans and me, before sighing,"What made you come up with these?" He asks me.

"What makes you think I needed anything to happen for me to invent these?" I tilt my head.

ShouShan gives me a look,"I like to think I know you pretty well, A-Ying, and regardless of how I may look to outsiders you and I both know I am no fool, and neither is Father."

XianLiang's eyes lay heavily on my own.
I take a deep breath and contemplate an answer.

"I... I have this idea," I start, "And it's going to sound crazy, I know, but bear with me. What if information was received in real time? What if everyone could be kept informed of what's been happening in the world? Stock rates, market prices, births and deaths, night-hunt locations. Anything and everything, just... information readily available."

ShouShan leans back in his seat and stares at his empty cup, deciding whether or not this is a conversation to be having sober. His father takes the decision out of his hands by opening the bottle and filling their cups. Downing it in one go.

"What made you think of this? Why 'information readily available'?

My eyes grow distant as I remember,"I nearly drowned two months ago," I reveal to them and see the two adults quickly turn to me in shock,"My siblings and I went to this lake to pick lotus pods, but with the recent weather a bunch of boats had capsized and people drowned. Water Ghouls. The citizens didn't think to inform us of that tidbit of information."

"A-Ying..." ShouShan sighs.

"My parents almost died once, when I was four, in the winter," I tap my fingers on the table,"There was a night-hunt and someone did not inform the next group of a strong prey that had called it its territory. No one knew and walked inside unaware," I scoffed,"They nearly died because of it."

XianLiang nods slowly,"You want that to stop."

"I want people to be safe, informed and educated on what they can do to prevent more 'incidents'," I tell them.

"So you want to use this," ShouShan taps the box,"As a means to do that. If it works you make a couple dozen more, spread them out over the nation, connect them all to each other and make a closed circuit of information being passed around. All clandestine because who knows what the Great Sects would do to the people involved."

"I'm sorry, ShouShan," I shift in my seat,"To ask this of you."

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose,"Why do you care? About all these people? About whether or not they're safe or educated? For free even! You're doing this and you don't expect nothing in return!" He asks me.

I look up and him confused,"Why shouldn't I care? You did, when you met me, you didn't know who I was, how I was like. You brought me here because you worried I was making a wrong decision and endangering myself. You cared," I smile.

"And others did too, Yan MingXia who put up with me for weeks in the freezing winter, Mao PeiZhi who very nearly tossed me over his shoulder and carried me to his home because I caught a small cold, BaoZhai who always halved the price of my supplies whenever I ran into him," I laugh,"You cared and you asked for nothing in return too. How many did I pass by who sneered at me or kicked me away, yet you welcomed me with open arms?"

I give him a fond look,"I care because I can and I choose to care because it is the right thing to do."

ShouShan hides his eyes behind his hand and sighs heavily.

XianLiang then breaks the uneasy silence.
"What are you trying to keep the people safe from?"

The question weighs over us and I clear my throat.

I have an idea.

I open my mouth and repeat Ike's words:

"What would you do, Clan Leader Bai, if, whenever you closed your eyes, you saw a world on fire?"

XianLiang's hands curl on the table,"War?"

I nod,"A storm is coming, and I want to keep as many safe from it as I can."

"Swear that my words do not leave this room," I make a decision, looking them in the eyes,"No one breathes a word of this to anyone."

Both men pause but swear their agreement without question.

A plan is born.

And not a single word is uttered about it for nearly twelve years.

Si vis pacem, para bellum.

Indeed.

The entire residence was a buzz of activity with preparations for the wedding, and I was entirely too amused at having to spend a whole hour getting ready with Jiang Cheng in YunnengJiang purple robes that just screamed 'wealth'.

Then Jiang Cheng had the brilliant idea for me to do another elaborate hairstyle and I spend another half an hour brushing and braiding his hair before turning my usual mess of a mop of long hair into a decently styled half-braid half-ponytail, complete with a red ribbon and silver pin I waved off the appearance of.

According to tradition we were supposed to wait until the groom started the procession but when I asked for Sister Xi's location no one tried to tell me to stay put, and no one sent me away when I showed up at her family's doorstep either.

Sister Xi was actually pretty happy to see me and poked fun at how I looked like a little prince in my sect ceremonial robes.

"No worries, Sister Xi," I grin,"No one will be as pretty as you in your wedding!"

The bride flushes a deep red and her mother cracks along with her younger sister's giggles.

Safe to say I got a lot of treats fed to me while I chatted with the bride before I got 'kicked out' so she could change into her wedding outfit.

I decided to go see how ShouShan was doing - after I passed Jiang Cheng half of the treats I had been given - and was unsurprised to find the groom quietly freaking out.

"You planned your marriage two years ago," I tease him,"What are you worrying about now?"
"What if she decides she doesn't want to marry me?" He asks with horror.

I roll my eyes, "ShouShan, my silly big brother, Sister Xi is eagerly anticipating your arrival at her house and if you break her heart for cancelling everything I will show you how my training has paid off in the years we haven't seen each other."

ShouShan blinks, blinks again, and then jumps to his feet with a cheer, "You called me big brother!"

He literally bear hugs me off my seat, I hit him on the back.

"Let me go, you crazy groom! You're going to mess up your robes!"

"My little brother finally acknowledges our bond!" He fake cries.

His friends - and fellow clan members - share sympathetic looks with me but their grins and gleaming eyes betray their amusement at my situation.

I groan.

"By the way, I have something to ask you," ShouShan finally lets me go and continues getting ready.

"What is it?" I ask with hesitation.

"Can you lead the procession? You can bring the ankle-biter with you too," He shrugs.

"Platypus?" I sigh, "Sure, he'll like to flaunt his way through the village."

I recalled the sudden wedding lessons Mistress Zhu had heaped on my when she found out about the invite - and I wouldn't be surprised if it had been Madam Yu who had informed her - and there was something there about a child leading the procession.

To wish luck for future children for the couple, or something.

"Great!" ShouShan said, "Just make sure that his father doesn't kill me, your Sect Leader is scary."

I chuckle and wave him off, "Sure he is, and you haven't even met his wife."

ShouShan understandably pales, everyone knew of the Violet Spider and her reputation.

"And suddenly it makes so much sense that you're growing up to be just as terrifying," He grumbles.

I smile sweetly at him.

So chinese weddings here were... loud.

Immediately after Jiang Cheng and I started the march fireworks and loud music started - gongs and stuff - clan members carried lanterns and banners with auspicious saying written on them, people of the village stopped and cheered as we walked back.

I was correct in assuming Jiang Cheng would love the attention.

Even if we stood out by being two of the only people wearing vivid purple instead of the mess of
red and gold everyone else seemed to have dumped on the place.

Seriously, there was so much red it hurt the eyes.

*Well, red is their 'lucky' color, just as white is used in western weddings.*

True, this was the first wedding I had attended where the bride wasn't going to be wearing a white puffy dress.

*How many weddings did we attend?*

Huh... A lot, nine for the children alone in the immediate family, then there were relatives and family friends and so forth.

*We had a big family.*

That we did.

We stopped at the bride's house and ShouShan had dragged A-Cheng and I inside so we could join in on his embarrassment of having to go through the 'door games'. Jiang Cheng had a blast at seeing ShouShan recite poem after poem before Sister Xi's younger sisters let him inside.

I gently whisper in his ear, "You're going to go through this when you get married too, I hope you realize that."

He gets a sour look on his face, "So do you!"

*Except you'll be the bride, so no.*


ShouShan is let in and they do the 'bowing to the bride's parents' before we start the trip back to ShouShan's house. Sister Xi had a beautiful red and gold embroidered veil over her face and her wedding gown was perfect, ShouShan couldn't take his eyes off of her.

I told Jiang Cheng so and we led the procession snickering over his dazed state.

A red carpet is laid out on the ground before the bride and a low simmering brazier is placed before the entrance to the residence.

Sister Xi elegantly jumps over the brazier and is led by ShouShan to their family's ancestral plates where ShouShan's father was already waiting for them, so they could kneel three times.

This was done privately, as it wasn't an influential wedding, and everyone else gathered in the big hall where the tea ceremony and the banquet would happen.

The 'marriage ceremony' was surprisingly quick, considering how long the banquet would go on for, but made sense when the marriage itself was running two years behind schedule (oops) and the bride and groom were more than ready to tie the knot.

So after they arrived and started the tea ceremony I expected that I'd only give my wedding present to them after it was over and not when ShouShan unexpectedly appeared before me and offered me a sip of the tea with the two red dates in it.

I froze for a second before Mistress Zhu's lessons kicked in, I took the tea, sipped it and handed Sister Xi my present. As I had planned the box of red wood had intricate carvings on the sides and
lid, and I had carefully painted flowers with gold leaf (I abused the Store for materials, sue me).

It went against tradition because you were supposed to hand red packets of money, but ShouShan merely grinned at me bemused and Sister Xi awed over the box.

Then the couple moved on to the next family member and I was left with a confused Jiang Cheng, awkward senior disciples and a somewhat sour Jiang FengMian. It didn't hit me that ShouShan had made a very passive and very brief power move by handing me the tea.

He was declaring me family.

I'll be honest, that tickled the tiny mushy piece of me that went 'awww' at everything slightly cute.

The banquet started.

And my god there was good food at this wedding.

Not Qinghe or YanLi levels of good food but we it was good food nonetheless.

So we ate and we talked and after a couple of hours I found myself looking at the married couple sitting at the front of the hall, holding hands and smiling at each other.

Sister Xi looked very happy, her veil pushed back now, and ShouShan was completely lost in her eyes.

They were truly made for one another. Good for them, to being happy together.

_I have a question._

What is it, Ike?

_On your wedding day, are you getting the veil?_

Ike, we are not discussing this now, it's not happening. Ever.

_You getting married?_

With the person you're insinuating? Yes, it's never happening.

_But look at how happy she looks!_

I sighed quietly, observing their happiness. I hoped they'd stay this happy for the rest of their wedded lives, just like Walter and I had been like before we decided to act stupid.

_You can still be that happy, it's a new life we're talking about here._

Ike... There's so much stuff we still have to go through without adding romance on top of everything.

_You're thinking short term, I mean for the long run. After the war, what are you planning on doing then?_

After the war I need to make sure my family stays safe and alive, I also have other inventions and plans to put in motion.

_More plans? My darling, you're already scheming on creating a whole new trade market, an_
information network that spans the length of the nation, and that foolhardy project of yours that will make the history books if it's successful.

Go big or go home, am I right?

Dear, there's insanity and then there's godly levels of impossible. If this gets found...

It won't be.

How do you know? There's nothing that tells you that people won't betray your trust in them, and I am not talking about ShouShan here, I'm talking about the dozens of people you're going to have to hire to get you this information.

Do you know what people like more than money?

More money?


I'm not offering these people just a job, I'm offering them the opportunity to be more. A courtesan has a child, and is spurned away by the father, what does that child have to strive for?

Nothing.

But we can give them something.

You're devious.

I am human and so I know of human desires.

This could still fail.

I look back on the happy couple and the merriment happening in this room.

Then let us work hard, Ike, so that it does not.

For better future where people can walk together and prosper regardless of their station of birth.

Where children go to school and learn and are safe.

Where no one has to go hungry and sick, invisible in their suffering on the streets.

Where the shadows of war are eclipsed by a bright new dawn.

Where wounds heal into scars and fade over time.

A future, Ike, where I stand on my mountain and can safely say to myself, to my parents, I did it.

I did it.

I kept my promise.

And I was great.

(Are you looking over me wherever you are? Can you hear me? Did I accomplish anything? Hey... Are you proud of me?)
I yawned as we rode back to Yunmeng. The days we had spent with the Bai had been exciting and fun but they also tired me out, I could only deal with the Bai characteristic energy and the whole 'omg, Wei-gongzi is back!' the clan members had going on before I needed a break.

And XianLiang was started to get all 'future grandfather' and getting soppy over his oldest son getting married - and ignoring the fact that ShouShan was his only son - and 'leaving' the clan.

He hadn't, not in a million years, but the couple had temporarily moved to a section of the clan residence furthest away from the main building for the duration of their honeymoon.

Jiang Cheng had asked why but between knowing smirks and my crackling no one had answered him.

I could excuse my 'informed knowledge' coming from Mistress Zhu's lessons and not by having been a married woman myself.

Not that I would be able to escape the 'bird and the bees' talk once I was 'of age'.

Honestly I didn't know if I should dread it or anticipate it, because whatever they tell me is bound to be hilarious.

*And awkward.*

Yes, and painfully awkward.

"You're daydreaming again," Jiang Cheng grumbles.

I chuckle,"I am more than half-asleep, my mind wanders," I reason.

Jiang Cheng rests his head against my shoulder, also tired, and mumbles something.

"What?" I ask him.

"I asked, if all marriages are like this," He speaks up.

I hum,"The Bai were relatively low-key."I inform him,"Great Sect weddings are less festive and more ceremonial, if that makes sense. So you don't have to have firework displays and loud cheering if you don't want to, Platypus."

"What about you?" He asks.

"Me? What about me?" I look at him over my shoulder.

"You're getting married to, aren't you?" He frowns.

*Ah!*

Don't start.

I shrug,"I don't know. I'll be busy for a while and I don't have any rush in getting married, unlike you who'll need an heir, so I haven't really thought about it," I answer him.

Jiang Cheng grumbles,"Will you leave?"

"Leave Yunmeng? Eventually, didi, I've told you from the start that I was only staying temporarily," I calmly replied.
"But you'll come back?" He asks me.

"For a visit? Sure," I smile," For your wedding? Of course, someone has to commiserate with the bride and tell her all of your hilarious childhood stories."

Jiang Cheng punches me in the side and the horse rears her head, startling him.

I laugh and pat the mare's neck,"Don't be frightened, A-Cheng, horses are sensitive to our energy."

Jiang Cheng grumbles under his breath and I chuckle.

"I'll come visit too," He tells me,"When you have your mountain. And I'll stand in the way of your bride so you'll be sorry then."

*Stand in the way of your husband, more like.*

Ike. Don't.

"Aw, Platypus," I coo,"Are you striving to forever be my cute little brother?"

"Your bride you laugh at you, XianXian, just you wait," He scowls.

Jiang FengMian turns to look back at us with a fond smile.

I'm saddened to say that smile made me instantly feel apprehensive, especially when it was pointed at me, FengMian's 'good intentions' didn't always come across that way.

"You call each-others brothers, why don't you make it official?" He asks.

If you plan on asking to adopt me, sorry dude, but I'll pass.

"Official?" Jiang Cheng asks, interested.

*This might be a bad topic for conversation.*

No kidding, what a minefield.

"Yes," FengMian nods,"Like..."

I dread his answer and my mind bounces between possibilities like a pachinko machine goes through metal balls.

"Sworn brothers," The Sect Leader says.

I blink.

*Uh?*

"Oh!" A-Cheng makes a noise of wonderment.

It might not be a bad idea?

*Madam Yu.*

Damn.
Did I have fun writing JC and WWX talking about future marriages and being adorable, yes I did. Did WWX just start the process to create mass media, why yes I think he has.
And we are around 2 chapters (that I still have to write, I'm sleep-deprived and I really want to end this Arc before napping for a week) from the Arc End.
Yay!

Si vis pacem, para bellum. - If you want peace, prepare for war.
Fitting, right?

Before everyone gets too excited, the actual sworn brothers thing happens off-screen and is only referenced when he goes to talk Madam Yu about something. Or when someone is being rude (servant's son, get out of here) and one of the Jiang Siblings goes 'oh, hell no, you don't talk to my brother like that!'

I don't know what else to write other than, I hope you liked the chapter, thanks you for all the comments, support and kudos (and bookmarks) and I hope you continue enjoying this story.
Tinkering

Chapter Summary

A brief interlude chapter before we get to the last stretch of Arc III. Where there's newbies, plans, tinkering, and arguments. Oh, and Mad Scientist Wei WuXian is apparently a thing. Oops.

Chapter Notes

Funny story, turns out that my internet device decided to die on us this morning, so I've been waiting since 9am this morning for some guy to come to our house to fix it. Hence the late update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Invention requires both disciplines, strict common sense and wild imagination." - Vanna Bonta

Chapter: Tinkering

I was sitting on top of a roof - as I was prone to do nowadays when I wanted to get work done outdoors and not get mobbed by an over enthusiastic junior seeking advice - working on some ideas I was cooking up, when the notification comes.

"Checkpoint Finished"

I look up at the words and open the Story Arc Page to check the timeline.

There were several little red line depicting various shenanigans Jiang Cheng and I had gotten up to over the years but my eyes traveled to the newest one.

It was a burning building.

I frowned and tried to picture what that scene could be, there was nothing on fire currently.

Yunping.

Heh?

I know what that building is and so do you.

I do? Ike, my lifelong-friend, if I did I wouldn't be debating whether or not I know what the building is.
You passed it before coming to Yunmeng.

When I was seven? Are you being purposely obstructive? Ike, you know just as well as I do, that I can't remember every single thing that crosses my path unless I'm specifically worrying about it.

My memory is good, but not good to the point where it's photographic.

It's Meng Yao's brothel.

...

Oh.

Meng Yao burnt down the brothel he grew up in - with all the workers inside - after the death of his mother.

Damn.

He supposedly did it in his youth, maybe you delayed it?

I don't know, eleven is still pretty young to me.

I tapped my pen on the corner of the paper I was writing on, eyes wondering up and down the timeline and checking canon!WeiWuXian's memories to see if there was anything pointing to Meng Yao's actions.

There wasn't.

Before becoming LianFang-Zun there's no information on him, guy was effectively a ghost before he decided to stop being invisible.

And even after that only a handful of people knew what he was like.

The majority of which either died or got themselves killed.

Or sacrificed themselves to bring Wei WuXian back to life.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose.

So? What does this mean?

What does what mean?

What does this mean for me? Will Meng Yao still try to off me from the board because daddy dearest tells him to? Go through my research?

Probably, you'll never know until the time comes. You can plan ahead all you want but somethings cannot be planned without enemy input.

And it was still too early for said input to happen.

So the wait and see approach?

There's nothing more you can do really, other than place plants checking in on him and potentially get called out.

Damn.
I sighed again and closed the page to focus back on my writings.

First off, no one would get their hands on my Yin Energy theories, those I kept with me at all time in the Inventory and were strictly written using an mix-mash of various latin letter languages, from french to english and a smattering of german. Let it be known that I hated having any of my personal writings read without permission and I went to great lengths to discourage nosy peekers.

I would choose to write it in code if it wasn't time consuming to have to pause and quickly decode my writings whenever I wanted to read them. It was faster and easier this way, even if I had to be careful about whoever saw me accidentally scribble something in latin letters.

I honestly couldn't wait to have complete privacy to work on my projects and not have someone goggling at my work every few minutes.

Already I had strictly kept my studies on arrays to the library and it was chaffing at how much I had to keep hidden because people would lose their minds on the sheer potential they gave me.

 Turns out that Arrays were somewhat different than Talismans, and there was actually a subclass of Arrays that proved to be interesting.

So, short explanation would be that Arrays, unlike Talismans, could be carved or drawn using various mediums - whilst Talismans were strictly ink (or blood) on paper - anything that could be applied on other materials, such as cloth, wood, stone, or metal, were considered Arrays.

Now these were interesting because whereas Talismans would dissolve (or combust) once its effect had passed, Arrays would keep working so long as the person or material it was on had Chi in it.

So say I wrote a simple matrix on my skin, the Array would stay active for as long as I kept providing sufficient energy for it to work. Which is also how Wen Zhuliu got the YunmengJiang Protective Array to fall, by killing enough disciples there wasn't enough energy for it to operate.

I planned on tweaking it if I got the chance, still hadn't found the matrix of it and it wasn't something I could outright ask to study.

*And the possibility of arranging a fake attack on Lotus Pier to see in in action was ludicrous.*

...Well...

*No. It is a terrible, no good, stupid idea.*

So those were the major differences between Arrays and Talismans, but now there was that sneaky little subclass I wouldn't be aware of if it weren't for Mo XuanYu and the Store.

Rituals.

See, these little buggers worked just as Arrays did, they required you to draw a matrix and activate it using Chi but, and this is where it got interesting, they required sacrifices.

Now, they didn't all require blood of virgins or goats to be slaughtered (although I could probably find one if I really wanted to) usually incense and food - because why the hell not, food is food - and are activated, some of the time, via chants.

Because they worked by calling for spiritual beings to work with or for the caster.

I was going to have fun.
I was really, really going to have fun with this.

How come I didn't start studying this sooner?

*Because you were busy with talismans?*

Ugh, but these are so cool.

"Wei WuXian!" Someone shouted.

What did I do now?

I pack up my work and look over the edge of the room.

I immediately see an unimpressed Madam Yu and a pair of timid junior disciples.

I don't recognize those two.

*Me neither, how odd.*

Both of our memories failing?

*Or they're new disciples and Madam Yu is about to make you responsible for them.*

...

Why though?

*Because you're slotted to become the Head Disciple of your generation?*

Yeah, when I am fifteen or fourteen if I remember FengMian's speech correctly, not when I'm twelve going on thirteen.

*Early practice?*

I mentally shrug and drop of of the roof to see what Madam Yu wanted.

"Yes, Madam Yu?" I bowed politely and give the kids a passing glance.

They're either six or seven, two little wide-eyed munchkins that look up at me with apprehension, clutching at their brand new sect robes.

"These are two of the newer shidi of the Sect," Madam Yu stated the obvious,"You'll give them a tour of the areas available to the disciples and then guide them to the Master responsible for the newest juniors at midday."

I look up at the sky, there were still a couple of hours before midday.

"May I ask why am I the one giving them the tour?" I politely ask.

Madam Yu gives me a look.

I nod,"Very well, Ma'am, this disciple will now take these juniors under his care," And bow.

*You're learning.*

I am, Mistress Zhu was *very* impressed with me.
Madam Yu sneers and walks away.

The two kids look scared and I wink at them and grin.

Their eyes grow wider with amazement.

I crouch so I'm eye-level with them,"So? Who are you two cute turtle doves?" I ask them with a light airy tone.

"I'm Zie Cao, this is Gao Hou," The kid standing to my left replies, he has a small mole near his forehead.

The one standing to my right reddens and clutches at the edge of his new purple robes, his ears are slightly protruding.

I smile at them,"My name is Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian, you can call me Wei-xiong, I won't mind!"

"You're the Wei WuXian that has a golden core?" The mole-boy asks with an excited voice.

My smile turns into an impish grin,"The one and only! Aren't you lucky to be my new precious shidi?" I the stand up and ruffled their hair.

They yelp, surprised, and I laugh.

"Now, let's get on with the tour, or the Madam will come yell at us - or me, more specifically - and that's not good for her blood pressure," I joke,"So c'mon, this way turtle doves, lots to see!"

They follow after me like two little ducklings and out of sheer indulgence I pass by Jiang Cheng's lesson and wave cheerfully at him, watching him get confused at the two little kids following me around.

You're definitely paying for this later.

Aah~ But it'll amuse me until then, besides he'll spend the rest of his lesson trying to figure out who they were and why I had them with me.

The library was empty save for me and my mountain of paper I was writing on. There were books scattered around me and every so often I'd dig through them to find a piece of relevant information.

I was midway through my studies in Array-making and already the possibilities of its uses were starting to pile up.

But I couldn't continuously worry about the arrays, I also had several talismans to work on, namely the talismans for the communication boxes - which I had started to affectionately nickname Parrots - and their upgrades.

The ones I had showed ShouShan worked long-distances but only sent short messages and could only record/repeat one message at a time, so the next upgrade I had done was to try to get around those two little problems.

I had halfway worked around them, you had thirty seconds to record a message and they now help up to ten messages before starting to override the oldest one.

You're not giving yourself enough credit, you basically created an antique radio and are the first
ever person to consider the benefits of long-distance instant communication.

I guess.

I'd sent ShouShan more sets of 'Parrots' to divide with the rest of the people in on the project, since I wouldn't be able to keep a dozen or so boxes inconspicuous in my bedroom, and they didn't work if I kept the receiver in my Inventory.

Officially, ShouShan was the one responsible for all communications, while Mao PeiZhi was the on-sight Officer moderating the merchant routes and sniffing out trouble, maneuvering the groups around so that everyone stayed under the radar.

The news of what I planned on building had went around the crew and I'd gotten a few group letters telling me that I was crazy but they loved me for it.

_They know you._

And they have too much fun with it, too.

Mao PeiZhi in particular asked, while I going through the trouble of taking over the nation, if he could be declared provincial leader of Qishan since his home was there.

I wrote to him and told him I wasn't taking over anything.

His reply basically came down to 'Oh, yes, pssh, sure. You tell yourself that, kiddo.'

_Like I said, they know you._

I am not taking over the nation!

_Not intentionally you mean._

I took a deep breath and focused back on my studies.

The Rituals and the beings they called for assistance fascinated me. In records, no one had ever tried to find out what they were, to the author of the accounts they were simply 'higher beings', minor deities, or even legit _Gods_.

I wasn't as easily pacified by those answers, in particular because the Array recipes I got from the Store described the beings as Spirits or Elementals.

Elements.

Alignments.

I saw a connection.

And, as always, I ran with it to its possible conclusion.

Spiritual Energy was a whole, a Void where everything and nothing coexisted and meant the same thing in weird timely loops that made my head hurt.

So the Elementals came from the Void, the whole of Spiritual Energy, and were sentient.

Alive.
Well, it made sense since Spiritual Energy was life, flowing in and out of the world and 'feeding' everything in existence.

But it also made me so curious, interested and piqued my passion for research.

If Spirit Elementals came from Spiritual Energy, were formed from that whole, then did that mean Spiritual Energy in itself was sentient?

Was Resentful Energy the same?

The System blocked all of my attempts of studying Yin Energy, continuously notifying me that I couldn't learn Yin Energy cultivation just yet, but it didn't stop me from dissecting Spiritual Energy.

And if you knew one the balanced half, you better understood the other unbalanced half.

In my mind I figured that if I mastered Spiritual Energy and could mold it to my design, it would make figuring out Yin Energy that much easier.

However, studying it was like opening a can of worms, I had so many more questions than I had when I first started.

Who were the Elementals? Could they communicate? Where they always sentient or did they require Rituals to awaken? Did they live amongst us, invisible to the naked eye?

Or did they have their own world?

A layer of supernatural that one could not access?


Excitement.

More than once Jiang Cheng or Madam Yu or even YanLi had come across me in one of my researching spurts and had stared at me as I maniacally scribbled random thoughts and ideas jumping from book to book, paper to paper, and rambled to myself about a thousand things at once.

They found the shift from goofy and carefree disciple to mad scientist levels of focused and entranced human being to be... unnerving.

I tried to dial back my enthusiasm after the first few times but it was a doomed attempt, I lost myself in my research to the point that there were times I literally couldn't be roused back to awareness until I got all of the ideas and connections out of my head.

Or I ran out of paper.

Whichever came first.

I tried to make light of it and often joked that my fingers hurt and so I couldn't do this or that chore and if only my Platypus in shining armor was here to help me~

Nevertheless, it still hanged over us, my drive to learn and get to the bottom of something they considered... moot.

'We already know how to cultivate, we know Yang Energy comes from the Earth around us, why do you want to know more?'
If you know all the rules you learn all of the loopholes.

Learn to cheat effectively.

Be the exception to the rules.

Break the cycle.

You're taking on too much work, you need to rest.

I'm not.

You are.

I am not.

You are! Look at your work! Look! See your plans!

I look down at the sheets of paper bleeding ink, the incoherent ramblings with footnotes and sketches drawn here and there.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and notice that my hand is shaking. I take a deep breath and settle against the wall of the library to meditate for a bit and calm my heart and mind.

Focus.

Go by steps. Little steps. Small goals in the direction of your prize.

Focus.

What do you finish first?

The network.

I need a reliable information source.

It might not be put in motion until the war, but if I can have the Live-Houses and the archives working by the time I get to Gusu it will be a major improvement.

If not, then by the time Lotus Pier is attacked.

Even if it's only a ten minute warning before the attack comes I can still try to get as many people out as possible.

Out how?

Focus.

Secret passageways, the records I found on how Lotus Pier was built mention tunnels.

Where?

I do not know.

Focus.

Another goal. Find them.
Yes.
Focus.

*What else?*

The defense array. I need to check it, if I can improve it. A second array to be added.

*Another?*

Once activated a temporary shield is erected around the casters, it won't last long but hopefully enough time will be bought to chase away Wen Zhuliu.

*Good. Next?*

Next...
Focus.

Safe Houses.

* Aren't they already being set by the combined efforts of your people? *

They aren't completely safe yet. Once they are 'set up' ShouShan will tell me their location and I can apply the relevant arrays and talismans to the area.

*You think they will be needed?*

I do not know. Better safe then sorry. If nothing else, they'll serve as temporary housing for my eventual looting of Wen encampments.

*Take everything not nailed down?*

My lips quirk up.

Exactly.

Still... You're overworked.

I grumble under my breath.

So what should I do?

*Why don't you think of something else? Something not related to the war?*

Like what?

*Like... What are you building on your mountain?*

What do you mean?

*I mean, it's a corpse mountain. Where are you sleeping? In a dank cave? How are you farming? How are you building on it?*

I hum.

*Distract yourself for a bit.*
There's still so mu-

You'll burn yourself out.

I sigh and open my eyes again.

The sight of paper everywhere and books scattered around gives credence to Ike's warnings.

I need a break.

I collect all the paper and put the books away, leaving the library as organized as it was before hurricane!me set shop in it, and went in search of Yunru. The little noodle-cloud would sure be up to an improvised trip to town.

I needed to walk.

And think.

Take a break.

And eat snacks.

I'd figure something to entertain myself that was minimally interesting and restful out there.

I sat on a high wall overlooking the market place and busiest part of Yunmeng town and kicked my feet back and forth.

I'd bought a few buns and was sharing them with Yunru, who was lazily draping herself over my shoulders like a fluffy black scarf.

The weather was nice, cold but not awful, and the sky was beautiful. The cloudless blue expanse above my head seemed endless and as the wind blew across my face and ruffled a few strands of hair that had escape the ribbon holding my hair back, I felt a sense of yearning to rush at the sky.

To fly.

When you have your sword that can easily be arranged.

Still another year until that happens.

Not a full year.

Too much waiting, I want to fly now.

But I'm not about to start in yet another project that could take me potentially months to work something out that allows me to fly.

A couple of birds suddenly twitter on a branch and I look at them amused.

Birds were so simple. It made me somewhat envious of them, of how they could just soar across the sky and go anywhere they wanted.

And poop on people.

I laughed suddenly and Yunru squeaked in question.
Sometimes I forgot that no one else could hear Ike, much less know he existed.

I petted her head and chuckled as her whiskers tickled my cheek.

I remember one of the kids, Martha or maybe it was Landen, got a book from their parents and brought it to me so I could show them how they were build. It was a really big book with old airplane models, from Da Vinci’s time to the most modern ones.

They had cut-outs you could take off the book and put together as a model.

We spend a whole afternoon tossing paper airplanes up in the air of my studio, which had the most empty space to run around in, and seeing how they flew.

Paper airplanes...

An idea took bud in my mind.

Wasn't there something Wei WuXian had done in the novel similar to paper airplanes?

There was?

When they were in Lanling, I think?

...The paperman?

Spark.

Paperman!

I have a bad idea about this, remember the dangers he mentioned?

I waved him off, it shouldn't be too hard to get around those, I have time. And you told me to go do something fun for once!

I didn't mean you should try to possess a slip of paper and go annoy people.

Then maybe you should've given me clearer instructions, honestly Ike, haven't you learnt anything from our years together?

Apparently not. So that's what you're focused on creating now?

I have other ideas, but those will take time and effort to put in motion, not to mention that they won't hinge on me alone.

Like what?

Greenhouses for farming, especially in the Burial Mounds, seals and arrays to control the temperature; house appliances to make life easier and save time; the printer, get education easily available so that schools might be an actual thing in the future, for everyone and not just the rich. Then I want to do something about that.

That?

I point at an elderly woman tending a stall, her back is entirely crooked and her legs tremble from holding her weight up. She can barely walk but still comes tend that stall everyday.
From the gossiping I picked up she had a granddaughter who was pregnant and was very weak.

Why such an innocent piece of information was a gossip?

Well, the granddaughter was unmarried, and rumor had it the father was one of the Magistrate's sons, who were all married with children of their own.

Oh, and the granddaughter was fourteen.

It made my blood boil. I remembered my nieces at fourteen and there was no way you couldn't look at them and not see that they were still little girls.

So what do you plan on doing?

Elderly care for one, if they have to work to support their family I'm not standing in their way, just helping them. A walker to ease their steps, better mattresses, wheelchairs, for example.

Wheelchairs?

Yes, they shouldn't be too hard to build, just a chair and two wheels.

Wooden wheels?

I hummed.

Rubber shouldn't be too hard to produce, in small quantities, all I'll need is an ungodly amount of dandelions and learn how to process that. I'm sure the System will help me figure that last point out.

...Dandelions?

Yes, unless you want to go around searching for rubber trees, dandelions are the best way to go. Think about it, we could have the Burial Mounds overflowing with dandelions!

That would surely be a sight.

Actually... I wouldn't mind getting the Burial Mounds covered in flowers. Make it a completely different place than the known 'corpse-dumping' ground.

So you plan on spending a couple of months planting flowers on a mountain full of resentful energy?

Pretty much, yeah.

You're crazy.

Says the voice inside my head.

Chapter End Notes

Paperman WWX! Cheers!

As a sidenote, I actually had that book with the old plane paper models (my brother got it and I as the little sibling shamelessly took advantage of it) and I swear if I could
find it again, I'd get it. Because it was sooooolllllllcool. My brother doesn't remember getting it, and I have no idea how old I was exactly, so it's a passing childhood memory. But damn... It was a good kids book.

Me: *finding out rubber can be made from dandelions* Soooo... We can make the Burial Mounds a legit flower garden. Imagines AGF!WWX in a frilly apron with those big ass watering cans just going around like a housewife tending the flowers.

... We're totally doing this.

System trying to keep WWX from destroying canon to smithereens, all while WWX wants to break the laws of this world so he can have his Fierce Corpse cuddly-bug earlier. Ike is just done with everything by this point.
Chapter Summary

Trip to Lanling, Jins being Jins, and a reunion.
Also, please someone stop Wei Ying from pulling crazy stunts.
(How exactly do you expect us to do that?!)  

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Reunion reveals friendship potential that haven't yet been emerged in the past." - Toba Beta

Chapter 57: Den of Beasts

"Tell me why we are doing this again?" I ask Jiang Cheng as I finish tying my pack to the horse's saddle.

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes at me,"Because it's a Discussion Conference and Father thought it was a good opportunity for us to go and observe the proceedings. Why are you complaining anyway, you can technically participate in the events open of cultivators," He grumbles the last part.

I give him a wry grin. I was thirteen as of last week and would soon get my own sword and leave to go on night-hunts, while poor old platypus had to wait another year before he could join me.

Since the discussion conference activities, such as the archery contest, were open to all cultivators under the age of twenty and I was, officially, a cultivator I was free to participate.

And you can bet I was going to have fun in the archery competition.

I reach over and ruffle Jiang Cheng's hair, messing up his bun, and dodging out of his retaliation and running around the horses with him chasing after me.

"Boys," YanLi sighs and puts her hands on her waist,"What are you doing?"

"He started it!" Jiang Cheng immediately points at me.

I give him a look of betrayal and clutch at my heart,"Didi! How could you? A-Jie, didi is being cruel to me!" I fake sob and throw myself at her.

I was starting to catch up to her height, and it wouldn't be long before I overtook her, so it was an odd grip I got on her but it worked.

Jiang Cheng made a scandalized noise and YanLi started laughing.

I fake cried louder,"Wah! My siblings so cruel to laugh at my misfortune! Wah!"
"A-Xian!" YanLi pulled me back to give me a fake scolding look, "How old are you?"

I grin widely at her, completely shameless, "XianXian is three!"

Jiang Cheng scoffed, "Obviously, with those attitudes you couldn't be much older, is that what your poor teacher has to deal with every other day?"

He was talking about Mistress Zhu.

With how YanLi had started to take less and less lessons with the Mistress, and there was no real reason to keep her in the Sect if YanLi did not need her anymore, Madam Yu had simply shrugged and increased my lessons with her to add other subjects I don't think I was supposed to find as interesting as I did.

Like sewing entire outfits.

I had entered the room and seen the mannequins and the rows and rows of cloth and I swear my eyes must've lit up because Mistress Zhu suddenly had a long-suffering air to her.

Jiang Cheng had laughed himself silly when I came out of the lesson and told him what I had spend my morning doing.

He didn't laugh as much when I presented him with a perfectly wearable and embroidered robe he could wear for swordplay practice as it was both practical, with a wide range of motion, and reinforced with leather to prevent injuries.

Madam Yu's astonished expression (because, yes, I was petty enough to present the robe to Jiang Cheng at dinnertime) was the cherry on top of the ice-cream sundae.

_The one who laughs last, laughs the longest._

And I totally got the last laugh.

"Mistress Zhu and I have an agreement that I won't act up in lessons in return for getting to learn more advanced techniques," I inform him.

"Advanced techniques of what?" Jiang Cheng asked.

I gave him a secretive smirk, "Aah~ It's a secret between Mistress Zhu's students."

YanLi giggled helplessly in response to that.

Jiang Cheng pouted at me, "Not fair."

"Totally fair, or do you want to join me in lessons, Platypus?" I asked him.

Jiang Cheng jumped away from me and made a disgusted face, "Hell no!" Really, all that missed from that scene was the sign of the cross and him holding a crucifix at me.

"Are you ready to depart?" FengMian asks us as he walks out of the main hall and blinks at our current state.

I finally let go of YanLi, stand at attention, and bow politely, "All the horses are tacked and the bags are firmly secured, Sect Leader Jiang."

Jiang Cheng quickly follows after my example and YanLi giggles again.
I like to think it was part of my charm to be able to flip-flop between comic-relief Wei Ying and dead-serious Wei WuXian. I did know that I had to behave a certain way around people who did not know me and I was slotted to become my generations Head Disciple sooner because of my achievements, but I disliked formality with a passion and would only restrict myself to it when I had to.

Or I was messing with someone, one or the other.

FengMian smiled,"Then let us depart, we wish to reach LanlingJin before the week is over."

Being inside of the Carp Tower, when I knew about what would happen here in a semi-possible or inevitable future was... awkward.

My senses were predisposed to suspect anyone moving near me of underhanded intentions and I was sensibly sticking close to Jiang Cheng, not out of need to have an alibi but I found myself unjustly wary of letting the kid out of my sight around these people.

Mother-hen.

Yes, well sue me, I'm worried for Platypus.

_No one here is crazy enough to mess with the YunmengJiang Sect Leader's son, and heir, right under the man's nose._

Accidents can happen.

_Nothing is going to happen._

Doubt.

"What are you thinking about now?" Jiang Cheng sighs and looks me over,"Or worrying about?"

I crack a grin, kid was getting better at catching my moods or I was getting worse at maintaining my mask,"I wonder if A-Jie is lonely without us back at home, should we get her a souvenir from town before going back?"

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes at me,"You're absolutely impossible."

My grin widens,"Oh, Platypus, but you love me!"

"I wonder why, XianXian, you're more trouble than you're worth," he snipes back.

I chuckle and put my arm around him,"Don't be so mean, didi, my poor heart can't take it," I clutch at my chest.

Jiang Cheng groans and bears my weight with surprising ease,"You're such a drama queen."

I chuckle again.

"I must say, the prize disciple of YunmengJiang is... something else," a snobbish voice comes from behind us and I let go of Jiang Cheng to turn around.

There's a small contingency of yellow robed disciples staring at us with an air of self-importance and disdain.
The one who talked, a fair skinned boy near the same age as me, has a vermilion dot on his forehead and a carefully blank expression.

But his eyes tell me all I need to know.

I grin, "Well, I'm certainly an original," I joke, "And you, young master, are?"

The boy stands up straighter, indignant, and speaks with perfect diction, "I am Jin ZiXuan, the son of the Sect Leader Jin GuangShan, and heir to the LanlingJin Sect."

I bow politely to him, "Greetings, Jin-gongzi, I am Wei WuXian, the son of CangSe Sanren and follower in the Great BaoShan Sanren's teachings, also a disciple of the YunmengJiang Sect," I smile.

*What a mouthful.*

Hush you.

"We meet again, Jin-gongzi," Jiang Cheng bows beside me.

Jin ZiXuan bows back, just the bare minimum in terms of respect, and looks down at us from his nose, "Yes, well met, Jiang-gongzi. My mother has asked that the heirs join the Sect Leaders in the Discussion room."

Jiang Cheng nods but then pauses and turns to look at me.

I chuckle, "I'll go with you and stand by the door until you get out," I playfully pull at his ear, "Don't worry about me so much, didi."

One of the yellow-robed disciples squawks.

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes at me and flicks my cheek, "Who'd worry about you, idiot? Just don't go causing trouble," He tells me.


He gives me the most deadpan look of all times, "Try saying that without grinning like a fool."

I shrug with an airy expression.

"If you are quite done," Jin ZiXuan's eyebrow twitches in frustration, "We could go now to the Discussion Hall."

I want to mess with him more but I realize that time is of the essence, "Sure, we'll follow after you, Jin-gongzi."

He turns around on his heel and starts strutting back to where he came from, most likely the Discussion Hall, followed by his equally strutting cronies and Jiang Cheng and I tag along.

The route to the Discussion Hall doesn't take long and we are greeted at the doors by yellow-robed guards who allow the two heirs to pass. Jiang Cheng gives me one last look but I wave him onward, and settle back against the opposing wall.

As I'd told him I'd stay here until he got out, effectively keeping myself out of trouble and not risking YunmengJiang’s reputation over anything.
"Are you seriously waiting here?" One of the yellow-robed disciples asks.

I nod, "I told Jiang Cheng I would, it saves him from worrying and means less trouble for me later on," I shrug.

"Like a well behaved dog," One of the vermilion dotted disciples sneers.

He looks faintly familiar.

"So you say," I give him a crooked grin, "But are any of you Jin disciples in any position to speak to me in such a way? From where I'm standing I am not only a guest in your Sect but your senior in terms of cultivation. I wonder what your Madam would say if she heard about such blatant disrespect!"

The disciples get a shade or two paler and fidget.

The one who badmouthed me grows red, "You're a servant's son, you don't get to threaten us!"

I blink at him, "I'm not threatening you, am I? I'm merely stating the obvious? Or do you think Madam Jiang won't ask us how the trip to Lanling went? Are you telling me to lie, to my own Sect?" I put on a shocked expression.

He gets redder and grits his teeth.

"We're sorry," Another disciple quickly apologizes, "Jin-gongzi hasn't been feeling well lately, he's rather short-tempered today."

Blatant lies but kudos for his quick thinking, there's still hope for that one yet.

I nod, "Oh, I see, well then, let us forget such encounter and proceed on as if nothing happened shall we?" I smile, "Are any of you participating in any of the events?"

The yellow disciples shake their heads, "We are not allowed to yet," They answer, "Is... Is Wei-gongzi participating?"

My smile widen, "Yup! The Archery competition! I can barely wait."

The red faced disciple scoffs, "LanlingJin senior disciples are also participating and they aren't soft targets like you YunmengJiang disciples are used to."

I perhaps show too many teeth in my next smile, "Oh, really? Well, then... All the more fun to show them real archery!"

The Jin disciples shuffle awkwardly in place and watch as the red-faced Jin steams in anger.

We're blowing the competition out of the water?

Oh, yes, Ike. We are going to show them who's the best sharpshooter around here.

Aren't we glad you brought that new reinforced bow?

My grin turns downright maniacal.

Oh, yes.

This is going to be fun.
There was a single miscalculation on my part for waiting by the doors until the Discussion ended. It was that the Sect Leaders would leave through the same door.

"Hey, Platypus!" I wave at Jiang Cheng, "Bored to tears?" I tease him.

He punches my shoulder and scowls, "Not funny, why do I have to endure it and you don't?"

"Because I am neither a Sect Leader nor an Heir?" I grin, "Oh, woe is me, Platypus!"

He punches me again, harder this time.

"I see that time has done nothing about your manners," A droll voice comments.

I pause my goofing around and turn to look at the speaker.

_Oh my God._

Oh no.

Spotless white robes lined with blue embroidered clouds and an unblemished look overall greet my eyes.

_I know who this is!_

Oh _no._

And a very easily identifiable goatee.

Lan QiRen looks down at me with a generally distasteful expression.

I gather my wits remarkably fast,"Hello," I bow politely,"Have we met before?"

Jiang Cheng hisses,"That is Lan QiRen!"

And _everybody_ knew who Lan QiRen was.

I widen my eyes and bow again, lower this time,"Many apologies, Mister Lan, this disciple did not recognize you."

He nods,"Yes, I see," He speaks,"We met before when you were with your parents but you were perhaps too young to remember that encounter."

_No, we remember it._

Shut up, Ike.

_Oh, boy, do we remember it._

Shut up!

"Apologies, Mister Lan," I shook my head,"It seems so, I only remember a little of my time with my parents."

Which was a lie but it was far more likely than revealing I can conjure back up memories since the time I first arrived in this world.
Besides, in general, I tried to keep the memories of my parents on the down low. I'd say I remember them vaguely and I'd have more or less of a sense of what the person expected me to say, but the rule was that, when asked about them or my travels, I'd go 'What? How am I supposed to remember that, I was four!'

Or well, I could do it with my old travels, the ones I got up to the age of six and a half or seven were harder to 'forget'.

Then again, I was thirteen now so I would make sense if I forgot about them?

Nah, wouldn't work. Not with the frequent letters and my already incredible repertoire of spiritual creature encounters.

"Yes, they passed by Gusu when you were barely the height of your father's knee," Lan QiRen then paused and stared intently at the scar in my face,"Do you remember that?" He asks.

Another frequent question.

I shake my head,"No, I feel as if it has always been there, like one day it just appeared," I shrug.

He lets out a minuscule sigh,"I'd have hoped your parents would know better than to endanger their child as they did, but knowing them as I did figures something like this would happen."

Careful, bud. You're toeing a fine line there.

*You're not going to hit him are you?*

Of course not, but I might pull a Wei ChangZe and get a goat in his bedroom like he did. I'm sure I can get help.

*From who? Your platypus?*

We'll see.

"Your parents studied in Gusu, did you know that?" Lan QiRen asks me.

I nod,"Yes, along with Sect Leader Jiang I'm told."

"And myself," His lips thin,"When I met your parents years ago, we discussed the possibility of you studying in Gusu like they had."

"The Lan Elder who visited YunmengJiang said something similar," I inform him,"But whether or not I am allowed to study in Gusu depends on my Sect Leader, Mister Lan."

Lan QiRen nods,"I will talk to Jiang FengMian then, there are people who'd be glad you studied there even if only for a season."

I blink and outwardly show no other emotion other than mild surprise.

Internally I'm screaming.

He's going to say it! Oh my God! No! Nononononononono!

_Ahahahaha! I've been waiting for this!_

_Ike! No! It's supposed to be a secret! Oh my God! No!_
"Who?" Jiang Cheng frowns, "His Lan friends? The ones he writes to all the time?"

Don't you say it!

Lan QiRen replies, "Wei Wuxian met several GusuLan disciples over the years and has interested the Clan into seeing him reach his full potential. Forming a Golden Core so young means that his education cannot fall behind of his cultivation. And given his parentage I find that a stricter discipline wouldn't go amiss."

*He totally remembers getting called 'Old Goat' by you.*

I was four!

*And now you've discovered Lan QiRen can hold grudges for the most petty of things!*

Urgh.

Jiang Cheng makes a face but doesn't speak against it, something I feel wronged about, Platypus, you're supposed to defend my honor here!

*No, it's your Lan Zhan's duty to defend your honor, it's Jiang Cheng's role to make fun of you while you're trying to deny it.*

Ike!

*What? Don't look at me like that, deary, even Uncle Lan seems okay with you coming to his Sect and mingle around his perfect nephews!*

You're walking on thin ice, mister!

"So this is the kid?" A gruff sounding voice asks, I look around Lan QiRen and have to strain my neck up to look the person in the eye.

Damn, he's gotten tall.

Nie MingJue looks ten times more terrifying than he did when I met him as a child, which is saying something as the child! him scared me witless for a good while.

*Well, he did think you'd stolen his little brother's toy.*

Don't remind me.

"So you're the crazy kid that had everyone up in arms about, huh?" He gives me a look, "You don't look like much."

I struggle not to smile but my amusement must've shown because there's a hint of approval in his eyes, "You participating in anything?"

"Archery Competition, Sect Leader Nie," I reply.

Jiang Cheng looks like he's about to lose his mind about me casually talking with a Sect Leader.

*Imagine when he find out you do the same, with much more familiarity, with the Lan Heir and his brother.*

It's going to be beautiful.

"I'll tell my disciples to keep an eye out then," Nie MingJue gives me a wicked grin,"Your Sect Leader has talked about your talent before, I wish to see it for myself."

I have a bad idea.

Don't do it then.

But I might actually like it.

Then it's a terrible idea and you really shouldn't do it.

I open my mouth anyways,"Then how about we do a competition between the two of us? Wouldn't it be better to see my so-talent for yourself instead of second-hand opinions?"

Jiang Cheng turns to me with shocked eyes, expression telling me 'omg, shut up now!'.

Nie MingJue laughs.

Loudly.

"You've got guts kid, I like that, unfortunately I don't just compete against everyone who asks," He gives me the same wicked grin,"Impress my disciples and I might consider it."

That's a challenge if I ever heard one.

You are crazy.

Yes, I thought that was past and well-established already, Ike.

You are utterly crazy.

Nothing new there.

I grin genially up at the Sect Leader,"Well, it seems that I must, I hope Sect Leader will be impressed with the results of tomorrow's archery competition then."

Jiang Cheng looks like he's two seconds from hyperventilation, save the kid, woman.

I turn to see my little brother paling by the second and decide that Ike was right.

"Apologies, Sect Leaders, we must retire for today and meet with the rest of the YunmengJiang disciples, I bid you a good day," I bow politely and signal Jiang Cheng to do the same.

It's plainly obvious what we're doing but neither man calls us out on it and let us go with no reprimand or comment.

I grab Jiang Cheng and lead him back out of the halls.

"What's the matter, Platypus? You look as if you've seen a hanged ghost!" I grin at him.

Jiang Cheng bonks me over the head,"Are you crazy?! Did you just challenge THE Sect Leader of QingheNie?!"

I laugh brightly,"I think I did, isn't your big brother awesome?"
Jiang Cheng lets out a small scream of frustration and pulls at my ponytail.

"Ah! Ow ow ow! Jiang Cheng! Platypus! Didi! Don't pull! Don't pull!" I tell him,"It hurts! It hurts!" I laugh.

"You're irreprehensible, XianXian! And Mother will know of this!" He hisses at me.

"If I get to really challenge the Sect Leader Nie, then hell yes, we're telling your mother!" I fist pump.

"You're not challenging him!" He yells.

_You're challenging him, aren't you?_

Oh, yes I am. I have to show those Jin kids who's boss anyway.

_They're kids._

For now, they're my age so they should know better. Besides...

..._You want to have fun._

I am going to have so much fun tomorrow.

Squee! I can't wait!

Jiang Cheng was asleep, snoring softly, and I got up from bed to come sit by the window sill. We were sharing a room, which wasn't atypical during Discussion Conferences, and the Jin's tendency to display how much money they had grated on my more sensible nerves. The sheer amount of high quality materials they had as 'spares' in every little cupboard or dresser niggled that little part of me that screamed 'take it, no one will notice it's gone'.

Alas, I was supposed to set a good example and refrained from indulging in untraceable kleptomania.

The rooms were very opulent and full of unnecessary clutter to symbolize their wealth but I found it very hard to sleep in a room so cluttered when I'd spend the last few years with an airy and simple room. They're mattresses were soft and comfortable but, again, after years of sleeping on harsher mats whenever I started to doze off it suddenly felt as if the bed was going to swallow me whole.

And Freddy Krueger references aside - and how YanLi had nearly whopped my butt for telling that story to Jiang Cheng - I found it discomfiting.

So I instead got up to sit by the window and tire myself mentally enough to fall in bed and get some REM sleep.

_What do you want to talk about?_

No idea, anything. Within reason, don't push your luck, Ike.

_So no, Lan Zhan._

Definitely no Lan Zhan.
And no Lan Huan?
Are you taking this seriously?

Okay, okay... I was worth the try.

I sigh.

Sister Xi will be giving birth soon, isn’t she?

She still has a few months to go.

She and ShouShan wasted no time, huh?

I stifle my snort.

It's been almost two years, give them a break.

They're not getting breaks now, not with a small child they're not!

We should send them a gift, when the baby is born.

What are you planning on sending them?

A quilt? With their name? Aah, but I only have the courtesy name.

Why not send it with that?

I don't think kids are supposed to know theirs until they're of age.

Break tradition.

Or just ask ShouShan.

Or that.

Fantastic.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise, surprise, I somehow managed to increase the number of pre-planned chapters once again. *sigh*

Due to recent events I'm actually writing in order to update, so no stored chapters, and just in case I hit a bump in the road and don't update someday is probably because there was no chapter to update.

Sorry, I've been off this past week, and had to work on Saturday.

For recently asked questions, I finally had an idea to present WWX's claustrophobia! Hooray! (There's hope for my brain still!)

Next chapter will hopefully have the archery competition, might add some more Jin ZiXuan is only to call him Peacock (keyword:might), and then good old Nie MingJue.

Then it's back to Yunmeng to get Suibian, ShouShan's firstborn, feelz and other
unmentionable spoilers.
Followed by puberty and Jiang Cheng's freedom on Night-Hunts! Yay!

Depending on how fast I can write it (and how much I write, I might need to add more chapters) we may reach Arc III ending next week.
Again, don't quote me on this, life happens.
Competition

Chapter Summary

Where kids are kids for a morning, Wei WuXian is too excited for this, and legends are told about the absolutely crazy stunts that happen on this day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

+A Game for the Fool+

"A good archer is known not by his arrows but by his aim." - Thomas Fuller

Chapter 58: Competition

The next morning dawned bright and early and I took great pleasure in jumping onto Jiang Cheng with a cry:"Constant Vigilance!"

Jiang Cheng shouted, startled, and it looked like his hair stood on end for a second there. Then he sees exactly what woke him up and he let's out a cry of rage,"Wei WuXian!"

"Here! I'm here!" I laugh and jump away,"Good morning, didi! Isn't this a great way to start the day, you're wide awake in an instant!"

Jiang Cheng very nearly foams at the mouth and throws back his blanket to pursue me.

Morning workout?

Like I said, best way to start my morning.

Try not to die.

Sure, it'll just be a few round trips around the bedroom followed by a passive aggressive breakfast and bath.

He'll trip you down the stairs.

He wouldn't!

You sure about that?

I duck under one of Jiang Cheng's lunges and pull my lower eyelid in taunt.

Jiang Cheng visibly reddens in anger.

Yeah he might low-key try to murder me.

Then why are you still taunting him?
Because it's fun, duh.

"Stay still!" Jiang Cheng growls.

I laugh,"That's not how tag works, Platypus, you gotta catch it yourself!"

"Mother is hearing about this!" He yells.

"About how you couldn't catch little old me? Are you sure you want to do that, didi?" Two could play that 'I'll tell Mom' game.

He growls and continues to chase me around the bedroom, jumping over the beds diving under tables and generally bouncing around like a monkey until the door opens.

A bedraggled senior disciple peeks in the room and gives us a tired glare,"It's five in the morning, young masters, why are you making so much noise?"

Immediately after he says those words.

"He started it!" Me.

"It's all his fault!" Jiang Cheng.

The disciple looks heaven-ward and closes the door again, probably going back to bed, and Jiang Cheng and I proceed to degenerate into a toddlers wrestling match on one of the beds.

"You woke me up!" Jiang Cheng hisses.

"I was doing you the favor of getting you up bright and early!" I excused myself.

No you weren't.

No I wasn't.

"Liar!" Jiang Cheng pulls on my ear.

I laugh,"How cruel!" And pinch his cheeks.

After another five minutes of this the door opens again.

We stop and turn to face it, Jiang FengMian's blank expression trembles and he does his best not to laugh at our positions, with Jiang Cheng sitting on my legs and trying to strangle me (I'm holding back his arms), before inquiring,"What are you two doing?"

"Morning exercises!" I answer with a bright smile.

Jiang Cheng gives me the classical 'are you stupid' look.

"Aah, I see..." FengMian, to his credit, manages to reply with an even tone,"The other contingencies are still asleep however, so perhaps you should continue your morning exercises outside. Or back at home when you return." He smiles.

That's as much of a warning as you're gonna get.

Yeah, I got that.

"Of course, Sect Leader, we will take your advice into consideration."
"Of course, Father."

FengMian nods once again and leaves.

There's a beat of silence.

And then Jiang Cheng suddenly headbutts me.

"Ow! Platypus! What did I ever do to you?" I yelp.

"You're crazy! Do you want to get us in trouble? Do you even know what Father might do to us if we wake up the other contingencies? What Mother will do if she finds out?" He hisses at me.

"Hang us from a pagoda?" I suggest with a laugh and push Jiang Cheng off of me before he can try for another headbutt,"And chill out, A-Cheng, we'd only have to worry about the Nie contingency, the Lan are already awake because of their weird sleep schedule."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes,"Yes, brother, only worry about the one contingency who is known for their fighting prowess!"

I chuckle,"They wouldn't hurt you, Platypus, don't be so worried!"

"But they'd skewer you!" He points at me,"Think about your own safety, idiot!"

I smile fondly at him,"Baby brother worries too much, that's supposed to be my shtick, Platypus," I flick him on the forehead,"But I'll be more careful, alright?"

He pinkens slightly and looks away with an incoherent grumble under his breath.

Seriously, he's so adorable.

*Like one of those yappy terriers or something.*

Pfft!

I get up off the bed and head towards the adjoining bathroom to start getting ready.

Honestly it isn't because I'd break drown laughing if I looked at Jiang Cheng's face with Ike's words floating inside my head.

Really, it wasn't.

Absolutely not.

Nope.

No way.

The small stray thought of a yorkshire terrier Jiang Cheng pops up.

And I hastily cover my mouth to muffle my guffaws.

---

Jin GuangShan stood on top of some sort of podium and gave a speech about the honor it was to be here today, how he hoped we'd all show sportsmanship with our fellow cultivators and form lasting bonds.
Then he went on to explain the rules of the competition, something that was pretty basic and straightforward. So much so that I dwindled back on my attention to his words and opened the Player Menu.

I wanted to check out my Stats and make sure everything was in order.

[ Name: Wei Ying, WuXian Age: 13
  Title: None Level: 71
  Class: Archer Fatigue: 3

  Stats: 0 Points Available;
  Intelligence: 170 Stealth: 173
  Strength: 175 Charisma: 171
  Agility: 181 Senses: 180
  Stamina: 190 Luck: 170

  Skills:
  +Martial
  +Social
  +Scholar
  +Arts
  +Mundane

  Equipment:
  Lightweight Robes
  YunmengJiang Boots
  Leather arm-guard(left)
  Leather arm-guard(right)

  Weapon:
  Dagger [Xiaodan]
  Bamboo Bow (50) ]

I'd have preferred to be using my own robes and not the ones issued for the competition but I could at the very least wear my own boots and arm-guards. I couldn't have any talismans on me and I'd gotten weird looks for keeping Xiaodan at my waist but all FengMian had said was an amused 'Try not to stab anyone', using more polite wording of course, and that was that.

I checked to see my Stats and popped over to my Talents but everything seemed to be working in order.

I could barely wait.

It would be the first time in a while that I really let loose all my energy and skills into something. While night-hunting with the senior disciples I always had to force myself to stay still and follow their example - most of the time giving them extra information or tips about things that only come from experience - but here it would be different.

There weren't teams per say and one could just take off as one pleases - and all the seniors agreed to let me run wild for this one - so it wasn't unusual.

I closed the menu and looked around.

There was a single group of five Wen disciples, accompanied by one elder if the gossip was
correct, and they looked... Well, as I would expect a Wen disciple to be like, if I was being honest.

Arrogant, sure of his own power, and just begging to be thrown off their high-horses.

Really, Wen Ning was truly a rare bird among his people.

Then there were the Nie disciples, who'd grinned at me bemusedly when they noticed me staring (and to whom I gleefully waved back), and the Gusu disciples in their pristine white robes.

I'd gotten a few curious looks but none had approached me, which was probably for the best especially if Jiang Cheng remembered to ask who my 'Lan friends' were exactly.

True, I wasn't supposed to know they were heirs - and we hadn't discussed it in any of our letters - but with how our sect education went we'd learnt the names, if nor the faces, of all the heirs of the Great Sects. Furthermore, they were already being spoken as 'The Two Jades of Lan' in awed murmurs, it wouldn't take a genius to put Lan Huan and Lan Zhan to their obvious connection on the Heraldry lessons I'd endured.

But, again, I had made no mention of it and never breathed a word about their names.

Well... A-Zhan was still called A-Zhan, so at the very least I won't be the only one called obtuse when this finally comes out.

_Aah~ I can't wait!_

Maybe they won't find it to be much of a deal?

I can feel Ike's unimpressed stare weighing down on me.

I scratch at my cheek and look away, back to the podium where Jin GuangShan was still talking.

Honestly, I couldn't see how any woman fell for that schmuck's advances, he was definitely not the 'pretty boy' type - like his son would turn out to be (must be the mother's genes alone, lucky boy) in the future - and it wasn't the age that destroyed his charm.

No, he was... Hmm, I couldn't put my finger on it. I just found him unpleasant, I guess.

_With good reason._

Yes, not that that reason was valid yet, it would be, of that I was certain, but not yet.

Seeing him also reminded me of my father's words all those years ago, how one couldn't walk to any town in Lanling territory and not run into one of his bastards.

Disgusting.

The novel also mentioned he kept visiting Mo XuanYu's mother up until the boy was around six or so, how the hell does one man look down at a child, know that it _is_ their child, and not care?

Hell, how does anyone look down on a child in need and turn their backs?

But haven't I done the same?

The insidious thought reminds me of all those times I let struggling street kids fend for themselves.

_Stop that, you couldn't have done anything to save them, not as you were._
I close my eyes and take a deep breath. He was correct, of course, Ike usually was.

Give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you'll feed him for a lifetime.

Children are similar yet very different at the same time.

With children you must earn trust, children are physically weak and emotionally unbalanced, easily get too attached and cry when things don't work out. If one has time - and plenty of patience - sure, you could teach them how to fend for themselves.

However, whilst I had patience, I did not have time.

Even now, when I am around four years away from war, I am still running out of time to get preparations complete.

With my new found freedom to go night-hunting I would be able to finally start getting the safe-houses prepared. Once I was back in Yunmeng I would dedicate precious time trying to find any sort of emergency access tunnels there might be, or a simple escape route if no tunnels exist. Then it was back to scouring the library and night strolling the grounds of the Sect searching for the protection array.

It would be a slow work but so beneficial in the long run.

"And now, we'll start the Archery Competition!" Jin GuangShan gestured grandly.

If I could, I'd have rolled my eyes, but I had to maintain a good image so I settled for rolling my shoulders and counting my arrows. The new bow I got was made of bamboo and was quite sturdy. Whenever I upped my strength past a certain point I had to be careful not to grip something too hard or it'd splinter.

And I often got so into shooting targets that I forgot about that little detail.

Come to think of it, the only bow I still had that I hadn't broke was the one my father had carved for me. I'd eventually bought a new one and stored my old one away and never thought to get rid of it.

It was nothing more than a silly toy bow now, especially with how tiny I was back then, even so I couldn't imagine throwing it away or selling it.

A family relic?

I guess it would be considered so, like CangSe's desk and handwritten journals or the personal items kept inside their bags.

I hadn't taken them out in years.

Wasn't sure I wanted to, to be honest, the sight of the bags and the brand new robes they had bought that day haunted me, in a way.

One day you'll have to let go.

One day, sure, but today is not that day.

I stood in front of the gate, waiting for the competition to start, and closed my eyes. Diving through my subconscious to take a deep breath inside the void and hold the warm ball of energy that kept
the void alight.

I had a Golden Core now but I preferred to use my old method of enhancing my body - especially
given the fact that it allowed me to be hyper aware of everything around me and made it easier to
lock on targets - which I kept secret to pretty much everyone.

Oh, sure, there were people who'd seen my eyes glow when I strained too much energy from the
orb but nothing ever came of it.

I let the warm liquid energy trickle down my fingers and pondered again on the true nature of
energy.

The void trembled and I came back to consciousness.

Not a moment too late as there was a loud crack of a firework and the disciples took off running
into the competition area.

I grinned and bow my bow ready.

It was time to roll.

*Have fun.*

Oh, I will.

My grin turned slightly feral and my seniors slowly edged away from me.

Time to hunt.

I jumped over a fallen tree and streaked past a group of panting Jin disciples and took aim.

One. Two. Three.

I counted in my head.

*Hawk's Precision*

I released the arrow.

A yellowish paper phantom - the targets for this competition - flew from behind a tree and was
immediately shot by my arrow.

A disciple behind me let out a confused noise and I looked over my shoulder to grin at him,"Best
of luck, boys~!"

And then dived through an underbrush to track down the next phantom niggling in the back of my
senses.

*This could be considered cheating.*

No, this is my utilizing every resource I have available.

*Which they don't.*

Oh, woe is them. This world! Truly so unfair!
You're having too much fun.

Too much fun? Oh, my dear, dear Ike, I haven't even started!

There were three GusuLan disciples running through the woods, they'd lost track of the paper phantom they'd been following after and I was going to take shamefully advantage of that.

See, paper phantoms were surprisingly easy to make - depending on how sturdy, persistent, faster and cleverer you wanted them to be - and even easier to work around.

The concept behind them was simple, you made this phantom out of something, usually paper, and made your array. Then you'd feed that array with energy and watch it fly off. Phantoms were usually released inside a containment field, else they'd really just fly off until they ran out of power - after two or three days depending on how much energy you pumped into them, for those wondering - and they could either be deactivated by tacking the thing out of the air and disrupting it's energy, or by the simplest of methods.

Destroying it.

Once activated, phantoms would fly away from the creator or the one who activated them for one simple reason, the array worked to keep the phantom away from other energy sources. Whenever a cultivator got near it the phantom would fly off.

But they weren't usually very smart. Kind of like goldfish, they stared at you for a few seconds and then 'remembered' they were supposed to be fleeing from you. And since these weren't very fast either, it made it seem as if you spooked them, then stared at you and then leisurely flew off at a sedate pace.

In short, they were stupid.

Anyway, the three little lambs running slightly below me - I was standing on a mound, would startle the phantom out of its hiding spot and I'd shoot it.

Mean of me, I guess, but they really shouldn't have lost track of their prey.

And I was nothing if not opportunistic.

"Gah!" One of the disciples jumps as my arrow flies right in front of his head and hits a fluttery paper ghost dead center, pining it to a tree.

The disciple quickly turns to catch the one who released that arrow.

But the only thing he sees are two silver eyes shining like twin stars for a second before blinking.

When he looks again there's nothing there.

I was rather ambivalent regarding the Wens. I didn't like them but I wouldn't go out of my way to antagonize them, furthermore, knowing what I knew, I pitied them.

I was unsure how deep Wen RuoHan's ideals ran or how agreeable the disciples in general found them to be. Wen Ning and Wen Qing, plus the remnants, proved that there were those who did not agree with his orders.

But how many did?
It was what made me wary of trying to get Mao PeiZhi to bring more Qishan peers into the fold. I had a few, and he had a few, but there wasn't enough for what I had in mind.

I needed a complete network and as it was now, there were 'patches' I'd like to fill in correctly.

Why they had to be Qishan and not some other random rogue cultivator?

Because I needed the people to trust that what they spoke, when the time came, was the truth.

And people would much easily trust a known friendly face than a stranger that showed up a few years ago, no matter how friendly that stranger had been up till then, and especially not in a war.

That said, the people running the circuit under Mao's watchful eye weren't exactly in the know. They received orders from Mao and knew that some orders came from higher up - ShouShan, who in turn received orders from me - but they never interacted with the Talisman Factory or with my budding information network.

I hoped they wouldn't be needed, not to the level of capacity I had ordered it made for, but it never hurt to be overly prepared.

Sighing, I shook my thoughts away and focused on running. The group of Wen disciples had decided to follow me, and probably steal my prey given that I was the youngest cultivator in the competition, and I felt sorry for them.

I'd lead them on a merry chase, knock that phantom out of the sky and lose them before moving on to the next target.

But really, after all those stories going out about me, you'd think they'd be smart enough to realize I wasn't that easily trifled with?

Guess some people never learnt?

Guess so.

I nocked an arrow and pushed my legs farther, when the next fallen tree came I jumped on it with one leg and used it to spring myself up, rotating so that my back was to the ground, and shot the arrow to what had been behind the Wen group.

I hit the ground with a roll and as the Wens were distracted cut through the undergrowth and back into the deep forest.

I rolled one of my shoulders with a wince.

I just knew it was going to bruise and hoped none of the tree bark, rough underbrush or rocks had split skin. They'd heal quickly enough but I didn't want A-Cheng or FengMian to get on my case for a couple of scratches.

Totally not because you want to look cool in front of your little brother.

I cracked a humored grin, totally not, Ike, who do you take me for?

An idiot.

Touché, my old friend.
The final firework went up and we got called back to the gathering area. I met up with the Yunmeng Seniors and walked back with them, red-eyed and looking as if I'd rolled around in mud.

They all gave me unimpressed looks and sighed, clearly expecting this to happen.

I grinned up at them and upped my boyish charm, "Did you guys have fun?"

"Yes, Wei-gongzi, we did," One of the seniors replies, "And you?"

I grinned a tad too widely, "Oh, just a tiny bit."

"I'm telling you, man! The kid came out of nowhere, jumped over this huge rock and shot my prey without even looking!" A disciple in yellow was gesturing angrily at what was most likely his senior.

My seniors turned to give me looks but I just whistled and stared up at the tree-tops with my arms crossed behind my head.

"Sect Leader will have words with you," One of them sighs.

"And Madam Yu will secretly approve of my tactics!" I airily responded.

"You're probably the only one who gets berated by her at every single encounter and still needles her for more," Another senior groans.

"I don't needle her!" I grumble.

"You made her a sash," One of the gives me a deadpan look.

"I was showing her the fruits of my labor! She is the one who got me lessons with Mistress Zhu!" I defend myself.

"You gave her a bright pink sash with embroidered flowers," He continues.

Aah, I liked that sash. I worked hard on it too.

"It was a pretty sash!" I defended myself again, my lips barely twitching and voice remarkably even.

"Point is, you gave it to Madam Yu," He shake his head with an air of despair.

"It goes well with her eyes," I tell him with a straight face.

The seniors sigh in unison.

My lips stretch into a smile.

I liked these guys.

"You're crazy," Jiang Cheng gaped at the result panel.

"Eh? What's that, didi? Aren't you proud of your big brother? Next year want to compete with me?" I bounce around him, laughing.

I got first place. Another of the Yunmeng seniors got third place and the second and third place belonged to the GusuLan. Fourth place was a Nie disciple and fifth was a Jin disciple.
The Wens didn't even come close to the overall scores.

"You did good, A-Xian," FengMian congratulates me,"And you as well, A-She."

The senior disciple beamed in pride and I grinned at him.

"You're in the lead by fifty points," Jiang Cheng points,"How?"

I shrug,"I'm just that good, A-Cheng."

"No one's that good!" He grumbles.

I laugh before I see someone in the corner of my eye and cup my hands around my mouth.

"Sect Leader Nie! How's that for you?" I call out.

Jiang Cheng turns to stare at me like I've just lost my mind.

Chapter End Notes

JC is going to have grey hairs by the time WWX finally decides to settle down and be a respectable adult (wait? That's actually happening?!?) and he needs emotional support.

We should get him a terrier.

Now, I've never had one, but my cousins do. And that dog (called Doll btw) would start barking if you so much as shifted in your seat. Now not so much because they're old and sickly, but back in its youth?

My poor ears, especially since I can't stay still in my seat for hours on end. Lying down, sure, but not sitting.

I imagine FengMian said something like: "Do not stick them with the point end, okay?" While JC and the seniors watched on with mildly exasperated expressions.

And do you think WWX wouldn't make something for Madam Yu just because? Well, he would. He totally would.

It was worth the round of extra suicide runs he got for pulling it and no one can tell him otherwise.

And if that sash was inconspicuously stored with the rest of Madam Yu's sashes then who's going to know? It's not like someone will go through her drawers.
Chapter Summary

The Challenge, a banquet, and thoughts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Treat people the way you want to be treated. Talk to people the way you want to be talked to. Respect is earned, not given." - Hussein Nishah

Chapter 59: Respect

Noise kind of dies down and everyone turns to stare at me in varying degrees of disbelief. I hear Jiang Cheng slap a hand over his face and groan, despondent, while the seniors turn hopeful eyes on their Sect Leader - he'd stop this madness right? - only to silently despair when FengMian merely smiles bemusedly down at me.

On the other side of the clearing the Sect Leader Nie stops walking and, surrounded by shocked Nie disciples, turns to face me with a blank expression.

I cheerfully wave at him,"Was that impressive or no? You promised me a challenge!" I call out.

Jiang Cheng grips my shoulder and shakes me,"Shut up! Just stop talking! Oh, GuanYin's Mercy, just shut up!"

I laugh.

Nie MingJue turns fully to me and starts walking in my direction.

Now, this was a man that was built like a beast, 191cm tall and a powerhouse. One swing of his sword Baxia and heads would roll, most likely along with body parts that had tried to protect said heads, and people knew that. They knew that if there was someone you didn't want to offend it was Nie MingJue.

So, for a shrimp like me - in comparison to the beast stalking towards me - to call this man out, in broad daylight, and in front of witnesses was inconceivable.

But, then again, I loved to do the impossible. Even before I joined a Sect where the motto was exactly that: "Attempt the Impossible".

I straightened my back as Nie MingJue approached but still kept my pose relaxed and loose, I would be able to dodge an attack if the man tried to do so - which he wouldn't - regardless of Sect Leader Jiang being right at my back.
"You are a mouthy little thing," The Sect Leader Nie stops a foot or so from me,"You think you
can beat me in anything?"

"In archery?" I grin,"Who knows? That's why it's called a challenge, aren't you curious to see the
results?"

"Manners!" Jiang Cheng hisses.

Nie MingJue laughs,"You have spunk! There aren't a lot of people in this world that would dare to
speak to me like that," He smirks down at me.

My grin widens,"There's no one else in this world quite like me, I guess."

Figuratively and literally.

*Your platypus looks like he's about to ascend to the heavens through sheer emotional shock.*

I fleetingly look over my shoulder and have to suppress my mirth at seeing a wide-eyed and pale
Jiang Cheng gaping at me.

"I'll believe that," Nie MingJue laughs,"I'll entertain you, pick up your bow and arrow, let's ask for
a target to be set up for this little arrangement."

I lit up like a tree on christmas and quickly pick up my bow and extra arrows to follow after the
Sect Leader Nie with a skip in my steps.

The Nie disciples stare at me for a moment before turning to look at my seniors, who morosely
trudge after us along with an incredulous Jiang Cheng and a smiling FengMian.

"Yes, he's always like this," The head disciple of our group answers the unspoken question.

The Nie disciple return to give me aghast looks.

The Wen and Gusu contingencies watch us from a distance - and I don't miss it when Lan QiRen
sighs deeply when talking with a tall disciple in pristine robes - as well as the Jin contingency who
turn to their Sect Leader for a cue on how to react.

Jin GuangShan looks awkwardly lost on how to respond and merely waves a disciple to get a
shooting range area ready.

In a cynical bubble of thought I found such an action to resemble Jin GuangYao's during the
archery competition that happens the first few weeks after the war.

I quite disliked that comparison.

The shooting range was quite simple, there were wooden targets at the end of the range with straw
bails behind them forming a small stacked wall, with the ground being beaten dirt instead of stone
or gravel. It was quite open and the sun illuminated the the area well enough to not require any
assisting torches.

It was a good shooting range and I was memorizing this layout for when I inevitably decided I
wanted my own.

As it was, I had a few ideas on how to improve such a sight.
"The challenge will be simple," Nie MingJue started,"Each one has three arrows, whoever shoots the best wins."

"Easy enough," I nod,"Are we going at the same time or are we one-upping each other?" I ask him.

There's a sharp intake of air from the crowd.

Nie MingJue laughs,'I'll shoot first, pipsqueak, and we'll see how you can 'one-up' that."

Oh, Nie MingJue, you just jinxed yourself.

My grin was definitely not child-friendly and all it missed was the devil's horns and tails.

"Acceptable," I shrug with a relaxed pose and lean back on the wall, waiting for him to shoot.

If Jiang Cheng was anywhere near me, and not with the rest of the crowd, or - heaven forbid - Madam Yu I'd be shaken like a ragdoll until my soul escaped my body, but they weren't so I contended myself to gloat.

I wouldn't be so sure of my win if the man had decided to challenge on anything other than archery - although perhaps talisman-making was a sure win on my side too - but he hadn't, and everyone who knew me knew I was a sharpshooter at heart.

*Having maxed out the skill, high Stats to pull the bow back without snapping anything or tiring yourself out, and Talent's that would make a God jealous doesn't hurt either.*

No, no it doesn't.

Nie MingJue takes his position and raises his bow, a long bow made of dark wood that's a beauty, and nooks his first arrow. I can see his back and arm muscles tense and excitement rises.

This was bound to me promising.

He shoots with such speed and strength that the arrows sink into the target halfway through, leaving only half of the shaft and the fletching visible.

The crowd woos and politely claps.

He takes position again and shoots, the arrow sails through the air and sinks in a different target, again dead center with only half shaft and fletching remaining.

I trembled in place, blood starting to pump, and I knew exactly what I was doing next.

When he took his last arrow from the quiver and shot, getting the same exact result in a third target, he turned to me and gave me a smug smirk.

I responded in kind and got up, took my bow and the three arrows from my quiver.

I heard the crowd murmur and blocked their voices out.

I took my position calmly, relaxed like a panther lazily stalking its prey, and took a deep breath.

*Hawk's Precision*

Would target each individual target.
*Pelting Hail Style*

Would allow me to easily release several arrows at once.

*Pin the Fan*

Would narrow my target further, to the exact point where Nie MingJue's arrows hit.

I pull the string back with an impressive show of strength and hold it for a second before releasing all three arrows at once.

*Thunk* *Thunk* *Thunk*

In quick succession my arrows sank straight through Nie MingJue's to hit the wooden targets, splitting the arrows in two.

Personally, I'd have preferred mine to sink straight through the target too but there was a limit to how much I was comfortable showing off in front of so many unknowns.

I turned back to Nie MingJue with the smuggest expression I could pull together and smirked.

The crowd was silent, staring at the targets in utter disbelief, before jumping in fright when Nie MingJue started laughing madly.

He put one hand to his chest and laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

When he stopped he looked me dead in the eyes and grinned,"I think I quite like you, punk."

I smirk back in kind,"I am honored, Sect Leader Nie."

He barks another laugh and turns to Jiang FengMian,"Next Conference in Qinghe let me borrow the kid to teach my juniors some things, Sect Leader Jiang, perhaps my fool of a brother might take an interest then!"

Doubt.

Ike, don't be mean!

*Head-Shaker Nie? Taking an interest in archery?*

...Yeah, I know. But it's no reason to be mean about it.

*He'll probably be more interested in your painting or sewing skills.*

I could show him how to incapacitate someone using a knitting needle.

...*That's a cursed image if I ever imagined of one.*

No, that's a brilliant idea I'll have to implement whenever we do happen to meet.

*God saves us all.*

"You are crazy," Jiang Cheng throws an arm around my shoulders and pulls me close,"What were you thinking!"

"That I was totally winning this thing?" I chuckle.
He wastes no time ranting and raging at me for my behavior, chewing me out for such reckless actions, and I turn pleading eyes to my seniors.

They give me wide unsympathetic grins in return.

*My kind of people.*

They're lucky I like them so much.

*You wouldn't do a thing to them even if you didn't like them.*

I could 'accidentally' dump a load of paprika in their dinner like last time.

*They're calling you a spice freak after you ate the rest of the meal with a straight face.*

Worth it, and it wasn't even that spice, we've eaten spicier food. Remember that traditional thai restaurant we went to once?

*Oh, my god, don't remind me. The burn. The pain. The flavor.*

It was delicious.

*It was horror.*

No, it was utterly delicious.

*Walter nearly died.*

He did not.

*He had to go to the ER with the amount of food he ate.*

...He did?

*He did, you were there with him and showed absolutely no compassion for the poor man.*

Uh, can't remember that.

*Granted, his sisters and brother also didn't show much concern and kept bringing it up at random meetings over the years.*

*I miss them, we had fun.*

We did.

*But we still prefer sugar over spice.*

Hell yeah we do, bring in the chocolate and the cookie dough!

*Imagine this, this kids have never had a single homemade chocolate chip cookie.*

...

Ike?
What?

Where can we get chocolate, outside of the store, so that I can do this world some good?

*It's origin is in the Amazon so you'd need to be the first to plant it to avoid suspicion. Same with coffee actually.*

Damn.

*Maybe it's for the best, I wouldn't want to deal with kids on a chocolate hype.*

...

*No, we are not 'discovering' chocolate.*

But the potential!

*For chaos and mayhem? We already have you and your future budding corpse army.*

...Fierce Corpse girl scouts.

*The hell?! How does your mind come up with these things?*

I don't know! But imagine them in a cute frilly uniform selling cookies!

*You have issues.*

I... can't exactly disagree with you on that one.

"Are you even listening to a word I'm saying?" Jiang Cheng growls.

I laugh brightly at him, "Not a single word, Platypus!"

I totally did not deserve that noogie.

Totally.

It was entirely unwarranted.

Really, why is everyone staring at me like that? It's true!

There was a large banquet at the end of the Discussion Conference.

Every Sect and disciples met in the large hall and ate together. Or well, they were supposed to dine together but every Sect clustered together with their own and only infrequently interacted with the others.

GusuLan, of course, had the rule of 'No talking over meals' so there wouldn't be anyone conversing with them.

QingheNie were boisterous but their overly brash manners clashed with the rest of the clans.

LanlingJin were - using the most polite word I could find - snobbish and tended to be off-putting, especially when they started talking about how wealthy they were.

YunmengJiang, thanks to yours truly, was being talked about by everyone and desperately desiring
to be back home so they could have some peace and quiet.

And the QishanWen contingency was isolated by all fronts by their own doing.

I couldn't help but think they looked lonely, but I shook those thoughts away considering their attitudes.

If Wen Ning was here, damn the consequences, I would find a way to bundle that kid up in my pack and take him with me back to Yunmeng.

I pushed around the food in my plate and tried to find something to entertain myself with, I found it the form of the Sect Leaders.

They were sat on a higher stage separate from the disciples and conversed quietly among themselves, with the exception of the Wen Elder who dutifully ignored them - including Jin GuangShan's transparent methods of brown-nosing - and the sight of them made me recall a single event that happened years ago.

Nie MingJue had been about fourteen when his father died, grievously injured during a night-hunt, and rose to be the Head of his Clan and Sect Leader soon afterward.

His little brother, Nie HuaiSang, was only about six or seven when it happened and they had no other living family who could temporarily take over until Nie MingJue was of proper age.

So he had to step up as leader when he was barely out of childhood himself.

Everyone had pitied the young Sect Leader and offered condolences for the unfortunate accident that led to his father's death but, as very few knew, it hadn't been an accident.

Months before his father's death, Wen RuoHan had received a rare saber and asked guest cultivators about their opinion of his new prize. Due to how unpredictable Wen RuoHan could be, laughing one moment and then punishing someone harshly in the next, everyone complimented his new saber as he liked.

Everyone except one.

This person, either because they wanted to be different or because they held grievances with the previous Sect Leader Nie, remarked that, while impressive, there was someone who wouldn't find this rare saber to be interesting.

Wen RuoHan wasn't pleased anymore and called the Sect Leader Nie to his Sect to 'inspect' which saber was the most remarkable.

The Sect Leader slapped the saber a few times before giving it back, "yes, it really is a good saber," he said.

Unfortunately, mere days later, the saber shattered into pieces during a night-hunt and the Sect Leader took ill, due to his anger and resentment festering about the event his wounds never healed, and he passed away.

As such Nie MingJue has a very justifiable, but very dangerous, hatred towards Wens.

I wondered how he would see me, in the future, when my plans came to light - for they would inevitably be found out - and if he'd find me just as despicable as the man who killed his father.
You are nothing like Wen RuoHan, nor will you ever be, as if I'd let you become like that.

Hatred is irrational.

"What are you looking at?" A-She, the head disciple at the table asks me.

"The Sect Leaders," I answer," Nie MingJue looks very young sitting there with them."

And he did, even if you ignored the Wen Elder, all the men at the table were over thirty and into their mid-forties, two of which were married with children the same age as his younger brother.

It made me realize how dire the war would be when the oldest person at the Discussion Conference in five or six years from now would be Jin GuangShan, followed by Nie MingJue, Lan XiChen and finally Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng especially would take over his father at age sixteen.

My heart grieved for the loss of innocence I couldn't prevent.

You're doing the best you can, helping him so much, when the war happens you'll have to realize that at least, you did your best.

I know that. It just hurts.

"Yeah, I guess he does," A-She replies,"He's twenty, I think?"

"Hmm," I mentally turn numbers over in my head,"Sounds about right."

"How come you only befriend people older than you?" Jiang Cheng frowns at me.

I blink,"You're my best friend and you're younger than me, Platypus," I point out.

He rolls his eyes,"I mean, you're friends with Bai ShouShan, those Lan guys, now Nie MingJue. And there's all those other people who send you letters and randomly show up at night-hunts to greet you!"

I scratched at my cheek,"Hmm... Well, the easy answer would be that I befriended them when I was a rogue cultivator and there weren't any other child cultivators walking about so it was the best I was going to get."

Jiang Cheng poked at his dinner,"You still do it today, you just goof off enough around the kids to not make it obvious."

Aah... As much as I like to encourage his perceptiveness, see it being turned against me isn't something I find favorable. To me and my secrets especially.

"Sorry?" I shrug,"It's not meant to offend anyone, I guess I just default to old habits."

A-She waves me off,"No one really minds who you hang out with or befriend, most of those cultivators are quite friendly and answer questions we have and impart tricks like you often do."

Of course they would, and I bet they were tricks I taught them in the first place.

"You're a good sharpshooter," Someone speaks from the side.

I turn to see it was Jin ZiXuan who spoke, lips pursed in slight distaste,"If you weren't so...
eccentric, you'd become a prime role model for future cultivators."

I grin,"Thank you, Jin-gongzi, although I personally believe that everyone should act true to
themselves. And speaking of good sharpshooters," I point at Jiang Cheng,"My brother, given a
year or two, will be just as good as me."

"You're not brothers, though, are you?" Another Jin disciple frowns,"His father is Jiang FengMian
and yours is Wei ChangZe, unless the rumors are true."

He says the last sentence with an ugly gleam in his eyes and Jiang Cheng bristles. I open my mouth
to intervene, especially if the Platypus starts a scene, when he takes a deep breath and regains his
composure.

"Wei WuXian and I have formed an oath of brotherhood, he is my brother and I am his, regardless
of not sharing a single drop of blood between the two of us," He replies with a calm and even
voice, dark eyes sharp and piercing.

Before my eyes there's a trick of the light where I can imagine an older Jiang Cheng speaking in his
place, a tongue as sharp as his mother's and a calm temper rivaling his fathers, the perfect mix of
both.

A warm feeling pools in my chest.

It's like watching the little hatchling you've been nurturing for ages finally step out of the nest in a
confident bundle of bright new possibilities.

Pride.

The Jin disciple's eyes widen and he lowers his head in respect, I don't fault him for that, nor for
the fine sheen of sweat that built in his forehead.

I'd been under Madam Yu's glares long enough that they didn't affect me much, however, despite
their different eye-color, Jiang Cheng shared Madam Yu's eyes. And you didn't want to be under
Madam Yu's glare, it often meant that you were about to be very, very uncomfortable.

Frequently by running suicides.

Or by being used as a sparring dummy.

Or by cleaning all the decks of the Sect.

Or by by organizing the Sect Archives.

That last one was mildly interesting.

True, but you wouldn't see me willingly waddling through fifteen shelves shock-full of paperwork
again unless you offered me a reasonable reward.

Jin ZiXuan raised his head slightly, feigning superiority, and spoke,"Perhaps a meet between our
Sects would be reasonable, Jiang-gongzi, for training purposes."

Jiang Cheng returned the look of superiority with a distinct air of bemused indulgence,"I will
confer with my Father before giving you a final answer, Jin-gongzi, as I'm sure you'd understand."

Jin ZiXuan nodded,"Of course, Jiang-gongzi, I await your reply then," And bows out of the
conversation and returns to his meal.
Jiang Cheng turns back to his plate and lets out a shaky breath.

I poke at his cheek and smile fondly at him, "You did great, didi, I'm proud of you."

He reddens and scoffs, hastily putting some food in his mouth to avoid replying.

The senior disciples offer kind smiles and pretend they do not see his cherry-red cheeks.

I sit back in my seat and balance my head on one hand.

That air of bemused indulgence was something I had seen before and it made me both happy and sad.

It was the same attitude I responded to insults and flowery-layered insinuations over the years.

Jiang Cheng was actively using me as an example on how to deal with conflicts.

It made me so happy.

But I couldn't help think of how a son would look to his father or mother for help in these situations.

I'd hoped that over the years my firm stance on treating Jiang Cheng as an equal and including him in almost everything I did would clue Jiang FengMian in that he should take a more active role in his son's life.

It hadn't.

It made me sad.

Jiang Cheng deserved better.

_He has you._

I hide a fond smile in my hand and go back to poking at my food.

Yeah... He has me.

For how long, though?

After the war I will have to leave, no doubt about it, I'll have things to do that very few people will agree with.

Before that even, the matter of the Yin Energy would put a strain on my ability to be there for my family, and the Burning of Lotus Pier could prove to be disastrous to my siblings.

I was doing the best I could to ensure the safety of as many people as I could, with a secondary goal of possibly withstanding the attack, but there were two deaths I feared were inevitable.

I would need to do some quick thinking to perhaps prevent them.

But nothing was certain.

_Things will work out, you'll see._

I hope they will.
For their above all others, I hope that they'll have a brighter future.

YanLi marries Jin ZiXuan, Wei WuXian leaves for the Burial Mounds and dies.

Jiang Cheng remained alone in Lotus Pier.

I did not want my brother to suffer the same fate. The same loneliness of standing in an empty house and waiting for a family that will never return, haunted by ghosts of the past and better memories.

To look at a seemingly normal object and think,'This used to be theirs.'

And feel as if something is driving red-hot knives into their chest.

I did not want him to grieve.

Chapter End Notes

And next chapter it's back to Yunmeng! Hooray!

Everyone's talking about the sheer crazy that is WWX in this chapter, 'did you even see him shoot those arrows? How?!', and the senior disciples would like to drink a stiff drink of they could. But they can't so they'll take the second best option and go to sleep in their beds back home.

Platypus following WWX's example/imitating him when dealing with certain situations is logical, but it makes my heart hurt. So of course I have to impart that same hurt into this story.

WWX is so stressed and worried I wouldn't be surprised if he spent those three months MIA sleeping it off or having fun with corpses.
And he's totally make them wear frilly uniforms and sell cookies door to door.
JC questions his sanity.

NMJ's hatred of Wens is justified but to pass that dislike to every single person carrying the name Wen is scary. Children, elderly, and normal civilians that had absolutely nothing to do with that event are suddenly tarred with the same brush. All 'Wen-dogs' so they effectively can't ask anyone for help.

Except WWX doesn't care about any of that and is already making plans on top of back-up plans regarding the upcoming situation.
Really, he has plans up to FUBAR levels and he will employ them if it comes down to it.
(He won't like it, but he will do it)
Chapter Summary

Back home and back to causing trouble.
Also, Murphy's Law to the fullest.
(And you've been asking for this, so...)

Chapter Notes

The title of today's chapter is a reference to the Daylight (1996) movie, which in my country as titled as today's/tonight's chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Dark, dark! The horror of darkness, like a shroud, wraps me and bears me on through mist and cloud." - Sophocles

Chapter 60: Panic in the Tunnel

Back home in Yunmeng it was as if nothing has changed. Maybe it hadn't.

News of the Discussion Conference, the results and of my challenge with the Nie MingJue had made rounds everywhere, rumors and gossip flourished everywhere not two days after the challenge happened and the different Sects started to return home.

They weren't malicious rumors or anything that could prove dangerous in the future, the usual 'Wei WuXian isn't normal, can you believe he did this?!' mixed with 'Genius... Pure genius, is this the legacy of Great BaoShan Sanren?' that rocked the boat just enough to keep people interested but not enough that they hound after me for more.

For now, they were content to observe from the sidelines what I planned to do next.

It wouldn't always be like this.

Time was running out.

Once I arrived at Yunmeng I got front-row seats to the ground-breaking argument between Madam Yu and FengMian, - and no I didn't call it ground-breaking because Zidian literally cracked the ground between the two of them, it's just your imagination, Ike - that was settled when FengMian retreated to lick his wounds, figuratively speaking, and I got sent to scrub the piers.

That said, the dinner served that night had about three of my favorite dishes and my plates had slightly larger portions than usual.
But who noticed stuff like that, right?

Psh, I was probably just seeing things.

Yunru had a blast indulging herself on the fruits of my hard labor, I swear I had no idea how she didn't get fat from all the food she conned out of people. Whenever I saw her she'd either be eating or napping off her meals.

Same with Donkey, if he didn't get exercise soon he'd grow too used to the sweet life of a barn animal.

Well, I would have my sword soon enough and be free to explore again, so there was that.

Although everyone will expect you to either ride a horse or fly with your sword.

Mhmm, I hummed in thought, True. I'll have to figure out something with Donkey.

Today I was finishing the quilt for the Bai infant, because they were a rural clan and did not have an official color or uniform - even though they would wear green often enough to show their preference - I was being creative and stitching a fairly decent forest scene with various animals along the border of the quilt.

And if one of those animals happened to be a one-eyed measuring snake, well, if they could make fun of the incident so could I.

XianLiang hadn't told FengMian the truth, or specifically the whole truth, he'd insinuated enough that FengMian had given me a lengthy lesson about the dangers of jumping into a situation without all the facts.

And that taking on a Measuring Snake with a flimsy dagger and my wooden bow and arrow was idiotic, that I should be thankful my talisman worked and that the Bai were out of line in allowing me to join their night-hunt at all.

Of course, he didn't say none of this outright, much less to the face of the Bai Clan Leader, so I found it more amusing than belittling.

I had grumbled about it later, though, to ShouShan who'd grinned and shrugged 'what can you do, neh?', and Sister Xi had merely laughed at me when I pouted.

It was unfortunate that I wouldn't be able to visit ShouShan and the newborn straight away, I had very important matters to attend to right now, but I'd be able to visit somewhat frequently once I was in Gusu.

The baby will be what then?

A year and a half? Around that. I'll miss the cute pudgy little bean moments but will get the giggly chubby baby ones instead.

What are you doing next, after you finish the quilt?

I've already scoured the library for old prints of the Sect residence, apart from new buildings being added, renovations done and some expansion there was nothing that could indicate secret access tunnels or emergency escapes.

So, is this a dead end?
No, I just need to see the problem from a different perspective.

And how are you doing that?

I finished the last stitch and cut the thread, raising the quilt up to see the complete work, I nod and carefully fold it before placing it on the trunk by my bed.

I'm asking for a second opinion, of course!

That sounds... Surprisingly reasonable, who are you asking?

Someone who's been here for a while and would have no reason to lie to me.

Not FengMian?

No, Imma try my luck with Madam Yu first, then I'll try YanLi. If neither know anything I'll ask Jiang Cheng before doing my rounds through the servants and senior disciples.

Where are you going to find Madam Yu at this hour?

I look outside my window and see that it's about mid-afternoon.

I hum for a moment before jumping out of my window.

Let's go ask!

“Miss YinZhu!” I call out and wave,”Good afternoon!”

The usually silent handmaid of Madam Yu turns to me with a guarded but neutral expression, she bows politely at me and I do the same.

"I was wondering if you knew where Madam Yu or Shijie could be at this moment? I have a question, but they're not in their usual spots," I scratch at my head,"Now that I think about it, Shijie has been tough to find these past few months."

YinZhu's guard goes up slightly but she answers my query,"The Madam and Miss YanLi are in the covered piers in the back of the Compound, what question do you have that you cannot find the answer yourself?" She asks me.

"I went through the entire library and I still couldn't find it," I pouted at her,"I was wondering if the Sect had any old tunnels or routes that are no longer used by servants or disciples alike. Jiang Cheng mentioned that the Jins had an entire maze-work of tunnels and access corridors throughout their Sect. I was curious if YunmengJiang also had them."

YinZhu looks thoughtful,"I do not know but the Madam might," She concedes to my point.

I grin,"Yup, Madam Yu probably does, she's very knowledgeable about the Sect after all."

The maid gives me a look, trying to decipher if my words were honest or had any double meaning behind them, but I was being completely truthful and genuine when I said them.

Despite our rocky relationship I thought Madam Yu was pretty cool, and we could at least stand each other, even if normal conversations beyond polite small-talk were still out of our reach. Either one of us started to insinuate something or there were borderline insults thrown back and forth with flowery words mixed in.
Madam Yu had a sharp tongue, but I knew which buttons of hers to push.

Granted, it usually ended with me doing suicide runs or sparring until I dropped but she'd never outright endangered me.

I vaguely recalled a time where I was fighting with a senior and decided to do an all-out attack that would, in the best case scenario, twist my ankle to get the disciple to lower their guard. Madam Yu intervened the moment I took position to initiate that attack and then chewed me out in front of the seniors.

She cared about me, somewhere in her pitch black heart, not that she'd ever admit it.

"Madam Yu is knowledgeable in many things," YinZhu finally replied,"Do you wish me to accompany you to her?" She asks.

I bow,"If it does not impose on Miss YinZhu, this disciple would be grateful," I reply.

She gives a near silent snort and indicates me to follow after her.

I could nearly picture her comments of how I was only polite when it was convenient for me and how this was why Madam Yu always grumbled about my manners.

She leads me around the Compound and to a pier where Madam Yu and a composed YanLi sat drinking tea beneath a waterproof purple canvas. JinZhu, who had been standing slightly behind Madam Yu, looked up at our approach and her eyes settled on my form and must've made some sort of warning sound to her Madam because the conversation going on stopped dead in its tracks.

Madam Yu's violet eyes locked onto mine and narrowed.

YanLi gave me a confused look but smiled as I approached.

I grinned brightly at them both and bowed politely,"My ladies, this disciple apologizes for interrupting your afternoon."

YinZhu joins JinZhu and I see the woman struggle not to roll her eyes at my words.

Yanli chuckles primly,"A-Xian, what have you done now?"

*Smart of her to assume you're here to grovel at their feet before your impressive streak of chaos comes to bite you in the ass.*

"I haven't done anything, Shijie!" I pout at her,"I've come to ask a question I'm having trouble finding an answer to."

Madam Yu raises a brow at me,"Oh? Something the great Wei WuXian cannot figure out? And here I thought you had already turned our Sect library upside down. Should I send you to the archives again then?"

I pale slightly,"No! No, Madam Yu, the archives and the library truly have such a wide range of information and knowledge, this disciple still has much to learn! But this particular question might not be registered in any book, I'm afraid."

Madam Yu turns fully to me and frowns.

"A-Xian," YanLi looks worried,"What are you working on now? I thought you'd stopped that 'root of spiritual energy' research?"
Also give her credit for thinking you are looking for trouble with your crazy research sprees.

I sigh, "I'm not working on that right now." I then add, "But I haven't stopped either!"

Madam Yu scoffs, "Ask your question then," She waves her hand at me.

I stand a bit straighter, "Does the YunmengJiang possess any tunnel system or different access routes? LanlingJin do, Jiang Cheng talked to me about them, I wondered if there was something similar here."

Both women blink and then stop to think on my words.

YanLi answers first, "I don't know, A-Xian, YunmengJiang has never needed any secret tunnels or servant corridors, we are fairly open and not densely populated, after all."

I nod slowly, "Not even in case of an accident? Like, say, a large fire? The buildings are made of wood, some stone, and more wood with cloth and furniture. What if something catches on fire?" I ask.

YanLi claps her hands, "Ah! If there is a large fire all the non-working servants and young disciples are to gather in the Ancestral Hall. It's been like that for generations."

I think about the position of the Ancestral Hall, the fact that it houses many ancestors ashes and altars, and then how old the building was compared to the rest of the Sect.

The archives had showed me the rebuilding and improvements done in general, but the Ancestral Hall - save for a few repairs here and there - remains pretty much the same as when it was first built.

If there was anything like emergency escape tunnels then they'd have to spawn there or near it.

"The Sect Leader would know this," Madam Yu says, "Why come here to ask this?"

The unspoken 'if you had asked FengMian he'd already have disciples scouring for information' was heard loud and clear, YanLi shifted in her seat somewhat uneasy.

I bow my head to the Madam, "Correct, but I did not believe this matter was important enough to concern Sect Leader Jiang."

Or, I don't like his favoritism and he'll just bother me until I tell him what I'm working on.

"So you come to us?" Madam Yu sneers, "Is our time less valuable than our esteemed Sect Leader?"

I shake my head, "Oh no, Madam Yu, it's just mere fact that of all the people in the Sect, the most knowledgeable about its buildings and constructions is you."

And it was true, there was a difference to people who arrived at some place and wanted to know more about it, and people who'd been raised here all their lives and thought it interesting to found out more.

Whereas the former would constantly question and research about it, the latter would be content in their knowledge that, if there was something hidden, than in all the years they'd lived here they'd have found it by now.

Like when one of the juniors asked why we had to remove the cover off of piers before storms
came and another replied 'we just do it because we're told to'. I'd interjected on their conversation and explained to the boy why we actually did it.

Both had been surprised to find out that it was so that the storm didn't damage both the cover and the pier, one because he was from further in-land where the only piers were fishing spots and had no covers, and the other because he'd just never questioned why they did the things they did.

They were just following orders given by their superiors - who they'd been taught early on not to question - so why would they think twice before doing it?

While FengMian was born and raised here, Madam Yu married in and had quickly taken over as overseer of all disciples and their training. She had learnt about and studied the construct of the Compound over the years, making her the obvious person to ask these things from.

*Although you might've wanted to bring a peace offering before you approached her, like a box of confections or something.*

I wouldn't put it past her to think I'd poison them. Or make me do extra training rounds because I obviously have time to go buy confections at the town.

Madam Yu frowns at me but doesn't say anything else, and I bow once again before leaving as quickly as I arrived.

I had a potential clue to explore, and I was sure Platypus would enjoy an adventure.

"Why are we doing this?" Jiang Cheng groaned for the nth time,"I could be practicing my swordplay right now instead of crawling through the floor searching for imaginary things."

I sigh,"A-Cheng, dearest didi, you can go if you want, I'm not keeping you prisoner here."

"But you don't want me to go, do you?" He turns to me.

I shrug,"Again, if you want to go I can't stop you. I don't particularly envy doing this alone, no, but I'm sure I could con a few disciples to help me for a bit."

Jiang Cheng pouts,"So you'd replace me."

I turn around and give him a disproving look,"You know how much I hate when you say that, no, Jiang Cheng, I would not replace you."

He shuffles a bit, embarrassed,"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

I sigh again,"I know, it just bugs me when you say it. I'm sorry too, for being curt in response."

"What are you hoping to find here anyway," He gestures to the rest of the Ancestral Hall.

I sit back on the floor and tap the ground,"There must be some kind of trap door or false wall that leads to a tunnel or something. Old Sects must have them somewhere, in case of an emergency or evacuation."

Jiang Cheng makes a face,"Why would there need to be an evacuation?"

Lotus Pier was unprepared for the attack. They just stood there in confusion or ran around in a panic. It was utter slaughter.
Not this time. Not if I could help it.

"Things were different back then, I think," I tell him. "Figured it was worth a shot, if we don't find anything then the only thing we've lost is time. But if there is something, won't it be cool to be the one to discover it?"

Play into his sense of adventure and mystery, keep him entertained and focused on the task, work and play in sync.

"Then shouldn't we start in the older parts of the Ancestral Hall?" He points all the way to the back.

I ponder on it and concede to his point,"Probably should've started there, you're right."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes,"You're an idiot, XianXian."

I grin,"And you love me, Platypus!"

He groans at the nickname.

We spend another hour and a half searching the back of the Ancestral Hall and checking every nook and cranny in there before we come across what we were looking for.

By accident.

I'd jabbed Jiang Cheng in the side when he made one quip too many about how we were wasting our time and should just give up, and in retaliation he had pushed me against the large table where offerings were placed. It rattled badly when I fell against it and pushed it to the side.

I groaned and touched the back of my head - which had banged against the corner of the table, ouch - and gave Jiang Cheng the stink eye before I got up.

And then paused.

"A-Cheng, is that stone darker than the others or am I seeing things?" I point to the corner piece of a stone that had been hiding under the table.

"It's darker," He confirms,"Maybe because it's been under the table?"

"Maybe," I nod,"Or..."

I push the table again, away from the ancestral altar, until the rest of the stone in uncovered.

There's a small little nook where one can grip the stone slab up and I quickly do so, not wanting Jiang Cheng to try and run the risk of it being 'too heavy' to lift by ourselves, and reveal a stone staircase going down into a completely dark tunnel.

I turn to Jiang Cheng with a smug grin.

"Don't you dare say it," He glares.

"I told you so~!" I cheer and make jazz hands.

He slaps me hard on the shoulder and crouches near the stairs,"Where do you think this leads?"
I crouch down beside him and hum, "No clue, it could be a short distance tunnel, like just enough to quickly get people out on carriages by a road or boats by a river; or it could go for miles still, we won't know until we go through it."

"You want to go down there?" Jiang Cheng stares at me like I'm crazy, "It's pitch black!"

I shrug, "Then let's go get supplies, maybe tell someone we're going spelunking into the mysterious depths of the Sect's newfound tunnel - which might be a very good idea - and have fun," I give him a winning smile, getting up and brushing dirt off of my pants.

Jiang Cheng looks up at me, down at the tunnel, and back at me before sighing. A deep, deep, tired sigh that just makes my grin widen.

Poor kid was so done with my craziness that he literally couldn't see an end to his suffering, but he also couldn't bear to let me endanger myself on purpose alone so he could do little more than tag-along and attempt to curb my impulsiveness.

We left the Ancestral Hall to quickly grab a qiankun bag of supplies, and I ignored his 'why did you have one readily prepared?' and left a message with a senior about where we were going just in case we didn't make it back in time for dinner, and descended down the stone steps.

I lit a torch and watched the flame for a moment before turning to Jiang Cheng, "Impromptu lesson, never light a fire if you are in a trapped area with no air."

"Why?" Jiang Cheng frowns.

"Uh..." I scratch at my cheek, "Well, air has oxygen and fire needs oxygen to keep burning - and fuel - but so do we. So, if you're trapped somewhere and there's no air flowing you'll need as much air as you can spare, fire eats at it leaving you with less and less the longer it stays burning. Plus smoke, you can't breath in smoke."

He gives me a weirded out look, "How do you know this?"

I shrug, "I read it. Somewhere. Or maybe it was a random old person who told me. I forget."

His face tells me just how much he believes my statement.

I start walking not wanting to discuss my advanced knowledge about chemistry, physics and other 'otherworldly' knowledge that people couldn't even begin to understand. Like modern medicine.

I had looked through medicine books in the library, and had pestered the Sect doctor for information, and really didn't want to be that one person that goes 'I'm opening dead bodies to see what's inside' in order to start the ball rolling on medicine.

Maybe I could just point it out to Wen Qing and hope she doesn't stab me with a needle?

_You want a fierce corpse but you don't want to open dead bodies?_

I don't mind opening dead bodies, I just don't want to open dead bodies and go 'For science!' as an explanation as for why I am opening dead bodies.

_Why explain it at all?_

Because it's rude to open dead bodies? Without permission.

_Ask Lan Zhan to play Inquiry and ask the person for permission._
Yes, I can see how well that conversation would go between the two of us, Ike.

*Enchant him with your spicy dancing first, it'll go much smoother after that.*

Why do I even bother talking to you?

*Oh, c'mon, it was a funny joke!*

It's so not happening.

*Just you wait!*

"Are you spacing out?" Jiang Cheng grumbles.

"No," I tell him,"Why? Want to do small talk, Platypus? Wow, the weather looks great today!"

He shoves me to the side,"Asshole," He grumbles without any heat.

I chuckle and follow after him,"Don't go too far from me, A-Cheng, I'm the one with the light."

He turns on his foot and makes the grabby hands motion. I laugh at him and hand the torch over, watching as he starts walking again.

It isn't hard catching up to him and I throw my arm around his shoulders, still chuckling, and then start singing the initial lyrics from "Heigh-Ho" with complementary whistling skills until Jiang Cheng's patience snaps and he shoves me to the side.

Unfortunately, thanks to what I'll put down as my horrible luck and Murphy's Law, I forgot one crucial detail about tunnels, especially ones built in ancient warring eras, they came with traps.

My back hits the stone wall just right to loosen it and I fall through to a crudely carved out stone room, obviously dug from the wall, and barely have enough time to look back at a stunned Jiang Cheng before the wall suddenly starts closing.

There's a brief 'oh shit' moment where I reach out to grab the wall and Jiang Cheng does the same but the moment I touch the rock a vermilion array shines on my side of the wall and burns my hands.

I flinch back and Jiang Cheng's twelve year old strength can't keep the wall from closing.

"Get help!" I yell at him just before the wall closes.

And then I am left alone in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the late update, I've been sick as a dog and feel completely horrible. I'll spare you the gritty details but writing as been the last thing on my mind between miserably curling up in bed or being miserable out of bed. And I have caretaker duties on the 29th, so there's another day where there won't be any chapter, sorry in advance.

This chapter has been fighting me tooth and nail, not sure how well I did compared to
my healthier counterpart, so I apologize for the ditzy writing. I'm having trouble focusing.
But I love you guys and suddenly stop posting without warning made me feel like the cruelest villain.

Also, WWX is starting to subconsciously 'smooth talk' to the fairer sex and it's so funny.
In darkness

Chapter Summary

Lots of fear and angst. Don't leave your Wei Ying trapped somewhere, it requires constant attention and pampering.

Chapter Notes

Still not feeling 100% (probably something I ate, to be honest) and a reminder that tomorrow there's no chapter since I have to go to the hospital!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." - Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter 61: In darkness

Jiang Cheng ran as fast as he could, dropped the qiankun bag on the ground beside the wall and then he took off running back towards the entrance. He didn't know what made him move faster, knowing his brother was trapped behind a wall with no way of getting out, or the stricken look he had in his eyes when he told him to go get help.

Jiang Cheng had never seen his brother looking like that before.

No... He had, hadn't he? Once before?

The day of the storm, his brother had looked scared.

But that look, that wasn't just scared.

That was terrified.

Jiang Cheng never thought he'd see his brother with such a look in his eyes.

His brother was... different. Bold and strong and reckless. Fearless...

"Everyone is afraid of something, Platypus."

His brother had told him that. He had told him that it was okay to be afraid of something, but only so long as you never let it overwhelm you. You had to fight your fear, face it, but never letting it rule you.
Jiang Cheng thought that that was the reason his brother was so much stronger than he was.

His brother was brave, braver than anyone else he had met, he thought, to know his fears and still diving head-straight into danger.

He's in danger now.

*He needs help.*

I need to find help.

*I need to help my brother.*

Jiang Cheng ran faster out of the tunnel and up the stone steps, dropping the torch by the entrance and taking off out of the Ancestral Hall.

Where to get help?

Father!

He took a single step in the direction of the main hall before he was hit with the sense of inequity and the recollection of dismissive eyes and gestures, the 'Father is too busy right now', 'Go to your sister', 'A-Cheng, Father can't play with you', and many other sentences that all said the same thing: I can't be bothered right now.

If he went to his father right now, he'd be told to go away even before he managed to say a single word. Although his father would surely be interested if it was Wei Ying who talked to him.

There was a prickle of jealousy in his heart but Jiang Cheng immediately ripped it apart.

His brother hated whenever someone compared the two of them.

His brother was always helping him, keeping him company and teaching him.

No matter what everyone said about his brother behind his back, and Jiang Cheng knew his brother was aware of what was said, he'd still smile at him and wave off the insults.

But Jiang Cheng could see that the words sometimes hurt him, he'd twitch and go to take a step towards them before he stopped himself and kept walking.

"*No one can ever replace you! Promise me!*" His brother had shouted at him.

Jiang Cheng could remember the look on his eyes that day, when those boys had dared to suggest his father had broke his marital vows with his mother to bed Wei Ying's mother.

Jiang Cheng hadn't thought much of it at the time, they were both young and the words didn't really make sense then, but he now understood what they had meant.

It hurt to consider it, but in the deep recesses of his heart, Jiang Cheng could see how it could be true. His father had loved Wei Ying's mother.

But his brother was adamant his mother hadn't loved Jiang Cheng's father, that she had never once considered it and thought of FengMian as a close friend, nothing more.

If Jiang Cheng was someone who wanted to be petty, that thought made him feel better. His father, who ignored him and disliked his mother, was unloved by the woman he sought after.
But he also realized that he and his brother deserved better than to be dragged into old arguments and meaningless speculation. Wei Ying was his brother, blood or not, and he'd stand by his brother.

*Because his brother always stood by him.*

Always. Never asking anything in return, never pondering about reasons to help him, he just did...

And his brother needed help now.

He needed his help.

Jiang Cheng took off in the direction of his mother's quarters.

He remembered that day on the lake, years ago, when his sister was holding him down on the boat, the terror and panic at the thought of his brother underneath those still waters not resurfacing for air.

He'd tried to get his sister to let go of him, he had to help his brother!, when his mother arrived. She'd grabbed the two of them and got them to the pier making sure they were alright.

"*Brother!*" He had yelled, "*Brother is still out there! Mother, please you've got to help him! He pushed me out of the way!*

He had clutched at his mother's sleeve and begged her to go help his brother.

And she had.

She'd returned with Wei Ying limp and soaked wet in her hold but still alive.

Jiang Cheng hoped she wouldn't refuse to help him this time either.

In the back of his mind he knew his mother wouldn't, not when she had carried him so carefully in her arms into the infirmary.

He burst into his Mother's room but found it empty, so he quickly thought of where his mother might be and took off running towards his mother's private piers, infinitely grateful when he saw her sitting with his sister talking quietly.

"*Mother!*" He yelled, "*Help! We need help!*

His mother's eyes quickly flashed and she got up from the table, "*Jiang Cheng! What's happened?*

"*The tunnel! We found the tunnel!*" He almost tripped over his feet when he halted in front of his mother, "*Wei Ying is trapped! It was an accident! He's trapped in a wall!*" He grabbed his mother's sleeve, "*Please, you've got to help! I couldn't get him out!*"

"*A-Xian?*" His sister covers his mouth in horror, eyes widening, "*What were you doing in the tun-!*"

His sister turns pale and looks up at their mother, "*Tunnel... Mother!*

His mother's violet eyes narrow and turn cold as ice, "*That idiotic child!*" Zidian sparked in her hand and Jiang Cheng trembled as his mother's eyes locked into his, "*Where is he?*

There was a second when Jiang Cheng feared he wouldn't be able to speak because the intensity of the glare, but then he felt like a hand was placed on his shoulder.
Warm and calm and familiar.

Brother.

"You did, good work." His brother congratulated him as he hit a bullseye on the target.

You can do this, Platypus, you're strong.

Be brave.

"I'll take you there! Come, Mother, please hurry, Brother needs help!" He took his mother's hand and pulled her.

He could do this. He could be brave.

For his brother, Jiang Cheng could climb the highest mountain and face the strongest foe, because there was no doubt in his mind that his brother would do the same thing for him.

The dark was suffocating, all consuming and weighing down on me like a heavy blanket, and the memories came flooding just like before.

LOCKED

IT'S LOCKED

WE'RE LOCKED

LEAVE ME OUT

'Mummy, let me out!'

Ike had fallen silent trying to contain the memories as best as he could, and so I was all alone in the darkness.

I hit the wall in front of me again and the same vermilion array sparked to life, searing flaming hot pain over my hands again, and my eyes traced the lines trying to read it and find a way to break it.

Unfortunately it was only visible for a split second before it started to fade away.

LOCKED

LEAVE ME OUT

LEAVE ME OUT NOW

PLEASE LEAVE ME OUT

'Mummy! I'm sorry! I'm sorry, please, let me out of here!'

IT HURTS

STOP IT

IT HURTS

LEAVE ME OUT
I screamed and hit the wall over and over again until I could feel blood drip from my fingers and it hurt too much to move them.

I T H U R T S I T H U R T S I T H U R T S

‘MUMMY!’

There’s a cacophony of sounds, screams and yells, shrieking terror that reminisce nails on chalkboard and I claw at my head, walking backwards until I hit the wall behind, and I drop down onto the floor.

Ghosts of a past that I could never get rid of get out from their hiding places in the recesses of my mind and tore apart all the safety nets and safeguards I had in place that held them back.

The dark was suffocating. The air thinner and thinner by the second. My heart rabbited out of my chest and it was getting hard to breathe.

If there was light in this room I was sure my vision was getting dimmer and dimmer.

My thoughts were in chaos, scrambling to comprehend the situation and keep reality coherent and not the kaleidoscope of colors, visions, and hauntings that had once been common ground.

Phantom hands reached out to me, grabbing a hold of my wrist in deathly cold fingers, biting cold iron shackles, and pain exploded across my body.

I T H U R T S

MAKE IT STOP

PLEASE

I‘M SORRY

I T H U R T S

I W O N‘T D O I T A G A I N

HELP ME

PLEASE MAKE IT STOP

I‘M SORRY

I screamed and screamed and screamed.

There was nothing else I could do.

I was all alone in the dark.

And all my demons were out to feast.

HELP ME

‘Mummy... What did I do wrong?’

I T H U R T S
'Do you hate me, Mummy? I'm sorry...'

WHY DO YOU HURT ME.

'No one cares about me.'

WHAT DID I DO WRONG

'No one will come help me.'

I'M SCARED

I couldn't breathe.

It hurt to breathe.

It hurts... It hurts... It hurts...

HELP ME

Someone, please, get me out.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

LET ME OUT

I thought it'd be a blessing if I could lose consciousness, if only so I wouldn't have to endure the terror that shattered my reality to splinters, but that relief was out of my grasp.

I was helpless.

I could only curl into a ball against the rough stone wall and scream as I'm ripped to pieces.

NO ONE WILL HEAR ME

'Mummy!'

I AM ALL ALONE

'Come back!'

HELP ME

'Don't leave me here!'

I'M SORRY

'I promise I won't do it again!'

LET ME OUT

'Mummy! Please! Please, don't go!'

LOCKED

'I'm sorry! Let me out! Let me out! Anyone! Please!'
I'M LOCKED

'I want out! Let me out!'

LET ME OUT

'Please...'

I HURT

'I'm sorry...'

MAKE IT STOP

"Please..." My throat feels raw and I taste blood in my mouth,"Stop... I can't... I'm sorry... Please, make it stop..."

There was no answer.

No relief.

There was only the memories, the screaming and terror, the pain of wounds old and new, and the overwhelming darkness.

I felt the last of my will snap under the strain.

And I lost myself

to

the

darkness.

The tunnel was a tight fit for so many people and Jiang Cheng feared that they wouldn't be able to push the wall open.

It had taken ten minutes or less to gather some disciples to come down to the tunnel to help pry the wall open again, but it had felt like hours to Jiang Cheng.

Standing there watching as they tried to push the wall open was worse, so much worse.

They could hear him screaming.

No, not screaming... Wailing.

Loud, piercing wails that stabbed through you, rattling your bones and left you feeling cold.

No one had ever heard someone scream like that.

Bloodcurdling shrieks that threatened to drive them to nightmares.

It sounded like someone was in agonizing pain.

No, not someone...
There as only someone on the other side of that wall.

Wei Ying.

Wei WuXian.

*His brother.*

His brother was the one screaming.

He was the one hurting.

Jiang Cheng could only stand there and tremble, listening to nightmarish wails coming from the other side of the wall, clinging to his sister and watching as the seniors got more and more desperate when the wall refused to give way.

And then the wailing stopped.

Everything went quiet.

Jiang Cheng could not think of any words to describe the terrifying moment when everything just stopped.

One thought went through all of their minds.

An unfathomable possibility that no one wanted to contemplate.

If he wasn't screaming anymore... could he be de-

"Step aside," His mother ordered with a lethally calm voice.

Zidian sparked with violent arches of electricity and all of the disciples hurriedly complied with her order and backed away from the wall.

Jiang Cheng's vision swam and his trembling increased, his mother looked worried, he could see it in her eyes, the worry and the resolute conviction that he couldn't be gone just like that, and he clutched his sister's hand tightly.

Zidian sparked brighter and his mother formed her famous whip and harshly steps her hand to the side.

The purple whip struck the wall and numerous vermilion lines sparked over the wall.

"Damn thing," His mother swore.

YanLi held Jiang Cheng tighter and he struggled to hold back his tears.

His mother pulled her arm back again and struck her whip once again against the rock, harder this time, and the same squiggly vermilion lines resurfaced.

Something niggled in the back of his mind as Zidian struck again and again against the rock.

Jiang Cheng had shared his room with his brother for nearly three years and another three with constant visits between bedrooms.

Plus, his brother had tutored him in basically anything that cultivators could use whilst on night-
hunts, and Jiang Cheng had been witness to many of his research sprees.

His brother loved Talismans, Arrays and anything that you could potentially draw to cause some sort of effect.

Jiang Cheng wasn't so enthusiastic about it but endured the long-winded gushing his brother sometimes descended into whenever something caught his interest.

Arrays are just like Talismans, the seals are organized the same way and function just like Talismans do. If you know and understand the components of a Talisman, odds are you can dissect an Array.

In practice Arrays are slightly more complicated than Talismans, but in theory they are the same.

Jiang Cheng focused on the squiggly lines and did his best to separate it into the different sections his brother had taught him.

'How do you deactivate an array?'

'Hmm, there are a few different ways to deactivate one. But the most practical one and the fastest would be to disrupt its energy. You focus your Chi and 'break' the array from the inside out.'

Jiang Cheng didn't think twice.

He focused his Chi into his palms and struck the wall.

It felt hot underneath his palms but the vermilion array shone brightly before he felt the wall give way.

Immediately three other disciples rushed to the wall and pushed it open.

With the glow of more torches they could see a curled up figure against the back wall, hands pressed against their ears and face hidden behind their knees.

The wall had muffled the screams somewhat but now that it was open they could faintly hear the gasps and raw whimpering coming from the figure.

One of the seniors reached in to grab him but the minute his hand touched him, he flinched violently.

His brother looked up and they could barely recognize him. There was blood dripping from his nose and mouth, which was open in a soundless scream, and his eyes were wide-open and his pupils were blown wide.

The senior froze and did not attempt to reach out to grab him again.

The wall started to close again.

Everyone struggled to keep it open, using the wall of the tunnel to prop their legs up to prevent it from closing.

His mother scoffed entered the small room and grabbed Wei Ying in a single swoop.

He kicked at her, struggling out of her grip with gasps and animalistic growls but his mother just grabbed his tighter to her, one arm keeping his legs trapped under it, and another preventing him from pushing away from her.
"I want everyone out of this tunnel!" She yelled, "And if I find anyone exploring this again before it is properly studied and evaluated for more traps, you will not like what I have in store for the culprit!"

The seniors let go of the wall and allow it to close before picking up their torches and hurrying out of the tunnel.

Jiang Cheng reaches out to grab his brother's hand but flinches when he twists in his mother's hold.

"Shh," his mother whispers to him, "Calm, it's okay, calm."

She looks at YanLi and his sister grabs Jiang Cheng's hand and pulls him towards the tunnel exit.

His mother follows close behind them, not once struggling or hissing at his brother's attempts of getting loose.

Jiang Cheng doesn't quite believe he imagined the tears streaming down from his brother's eyes.

He doesn't think he'll be able to forget them either.

The world is out of focus for a while.

I couldn't really move or talk, I heard people talking but everything was muffled, as if they were speaking underwater. Or maybe I was the one underwater?

I couldn't speak either, my mouth wouldn't cooperate with me and my throat hurt.

Actually, everything hurt. It hurt to swallow, to blink, to breathe. Everything hurt.

But I could feel perfectly fine.

Pain.

Exhaustion.

Confusion.

Warmth.

My body pressed itself closer to the warmth around me and felt fingers run through my hair in response.

Something colder tried to touch my hands but I flinched away and burrowed closer to the warmth, fearing what the cold would bring but someone shushed me quietly, and slowly moved my arms away from the warmth and into the cold.

I tried to form some words, a disagreement or plea but my tongue wouldn't work as it should and I only managed a pained gasp and a whimper. The warm fingers returned to my hair and the same shushing voice whispered in my ear.

"...burnt his fingers...take a week...to...fully...I don't...broken...irreparable..." A quiet stern voice said.

I couldn't make sense of all his words.
What was he saying?

The cold touched my face and my body reacted on instinct kicking out against them, my back arching, and I open my mouth to scream but only a horrible broken keen was voiced out.

My throat hurt.

The warmth pulled me back against them and forcefully pressed me against them.

"Calm down," A voice said.

The voice was familiar to me but I couldn't pinpoint exactly who it was.

I blinked to clear my sight but it still swam in and out of focus, I could see dark-ish hair and a glint of gold but nothing else.

The warmth spread through my body and I relaxed under it.

Fingers once again brushed my face and carefully examined my mouth and throat.

"Screamed...raw," The stern voice said,"Warm...soft food only. Plenty...rest."

The cold fingers then examined my head and ears but only hummed and applied some cold liquid to it.

They reached for my hands again and dipped them into a container of cold liquid.

I made a vague noise of complaint and a huff of breath tickled my nose.

"Is...going...alright?" Another voice asked.

The voice was also familiar, it brought a sense of longing and the need to bring the world back into focus that instant.

But I couldn't.

My body hurt, I was exhausted, and my thoughts and responses slipped through my fingers like sand.

I just wanted to sleep and stay curled up next to the warmth.

The stern voice replied something but I didn't catch his words.

I feel something wrapping around my fingers and I try to curl them but they hurt too much to do that, so they twitch minutely before splaying limply in the hold.

"A-Xian," A soft voice whispers next to my ear,"...afraid...here."

A-Xian... That was me.

Yeah, I recognized the nickname.

Who was calling me?

Aah... I know her...

Who is she?
Aah... It hurts to think.

I'm tired.

I want to sleep.

If I fall asleep, will you disappear?

Don't leave me?

I don't like being alone.

Stay with me.

I won't fight. I won't make a sound. Just...

Please, don't leave me.

I don't want to be alone again.

Being alone is scary.

The world is scary.

But I won't be scared if you're here.

Brave. I will be brave. For you.

If you stay here, I'll be brave.

So you won't be scared.

Stay with me.

The warmth envelops me and I feel my eyes slowly close, I make an odd muffled croak before I lose the battle against sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now that all those feelz are out of the way, let's jump right to it. Sarah's Phobia is severe, and I mean SEVERE and the reason why it immediately escalates to 'omg, if I don't get out of here I'll die' is explained in the future (but author-san, why make it so mysterious? Well, I have plot revolving around it, so it stays silly mysterious for now)

As I vaguely alluded to, Ike isn't just a voice in their head but he's not something paranormal, it makes sense when the full backstory is presented (or it should make sense by then, idk) but basically whenever these types of incidents happen Ike goes offline trying to contain the damage.

But it only works for a short while, meaning that if they are trapped for more than twenty-minutes... Not pretty.

At this point in time I still have a vague dislike for FengMian (but I think that's partially my failure as an author to not get my personal feelings involved) so I didn't
have JC go to him for help. Growing up ignored or dismissed by a parent makes it so that when you do need help, you automatically assume you're going to get ignored and go elsewhere for said help. For all YZY is strict and very scary, she's already proved that she'd help them if they needed it.

Also, I read this Naruto fic a while back (or well, one of many I read) that might've or might not have been a time-travel fic, I forget exactly, but basically Naruto is a Seal Master but is crap at making seals, not because of practice (he could copy seals no problem) but because he had no imagination/creativity when it came to seals. He could, however, dismantle any seal the minute he laid eyes on them.

JC and WWX are always together and from a casual perspective if someone is constantly working on something or talking about a subject you end up getting some form of learned knowledge from it. So, despite having no talent for Talisman-Making (or Arrays) you best believe Purple Boi can utterly destroy it in a matter of minutes.

Finally, an odd question (especially given the chapter) but - as we're getting to the puberty part of their lives and WWX being a grown adult with teenage hormones - how do you want me to portray their sexuality? Like, should I write actual s*x scenes? Should I just make nuances about it? The beginning and immediately cut to the end? They won't be having s*x! Just like... Teenagers. Hormones. HuaiSang's 'special books'. Get it? Obviously when they're adults I'll have to think more on this, but then there's the story rating (that might very well go up, eventually) and I'd like your opinion.
Chapter Summary

Recovering from the shock.
Might want to have tissues on hand.

Chapter Notes

Omg, I forgot we have fanart now!
I am so sorry, Sanyok28! I had to quickly upload the chapter and get ready to go back
to the hospital, I didn't even notice!
So sorry!
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188623793537/
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188673979202/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." - Confucius

Chapter 62: Recovery

From experience I knew that the first week following an incident involving my phobia is the worst.

Depending on how long I was trapped or how extensive my injuries were, it could take months
before I completely felt like myself again.

Fortunately - or unfortunately, given my state of being - Jiang Cheng and YanLi refused to leave
me alone for more than an hour and had been given a rare exemption of lessons and tutoring to
spend their time with me.

Why both of them and not just one was because the first few nights I had woken up with night
terrors and had attacked myself and whoever tried restraining me.

So it was best if there were two people with me, and a senior stationed outside the room at night,
just in case.

The first day I woke up and felt minimally human was a week after the incident and I had sat up in
bed, tired, sore and confused out of my mind to find an exhausted Jiang Cheng asleep at the foot of
my bed.

I had an headache and my throat felt like sandpaper but I had the presence of mind to pull back my
blanket and toss it over the kid. Before trying to get up off the bed and nearly fall flat on my face
because I felt as weak as soaked noodles.
My knees hit the ground and I let out a garbled expletive catching the attention of YanLi - who had been rearranging some things in the adjoined bathroom - who poked her head into the room and ran to help me up.

"A-Xian!" He sighs,"You can't get up just like that, you'll hurt yourself."

"See that," I reply in a croak.

She flinches in surprise and looks me in the eye.

I blink at her slowly, trying to make sense of her shock and surprise, but my thoughts scatter like flies buzzing in and out of reach.

"You're awake," She breathes,"Oh, thank GuanYin's Mercy, you're awake."

She makes me lie back in bed and tuts when she sees my blanket over Jiang Cheng, but lets him sleep and just retrieves another from the closet.

"Promise me you'll stay in bed and not try to get up again, ok?" She gives me a hard stare after she's done smoothing the new blanket,"I'll go in the kitchen and fetch some warm soup, how does that sound?"

Oh, yes, please.

My stomach grumbles in hunger and her smile widens.

Her eyes have a new light to them.

"Then I'll go get that soup now, stay in bed, A-Xian," She warns me, pointed finger and all.

I pat the blanket and nod.

When she leaves the room I look down at my hands. They're bandaged and feel sort of numb but warm.

There's a flash of vermilion glow and a searing pain across my palms.

I flinch but the pain is gone in the blink of an eye.

Phantom pains.

It's gone now.

I try to relax and calm my heartbeat down again and look out the window of the room I'm in.

But I only stare out the window for a second before I look around the room.

This wasn't my room.

Why was I here and not in my room?

Why was I here at all?

I got hurt.

Where did I get hurt?
I couldn't immediately recall what happened and decided not to push it.

I had the feeling that remembering wasn't going to be pretty and if I was going to have a breakdown I'd rather have it after I ate something substantial. And A-Jie's soup was the best.

Although Qinghe won in most other dishes.

I watched Jiang Cheng as he slept, he had dark circles underneath his eyes and I knew, somewhere in the back of my mind, that they were because of me. I wanted to drag him to curl up next to me, if only so I could be reassured that he was okay and breathing - and maybe to play with his hair - but I knew that the moment I tried to move him, he'd wake up.

And he needed to sleep.

So I just laid there in bed, half sitting up, and waited for YanLi to come back.

My eyes focused on my hands again.

I moved my hands and fingers into several shapes and basic finger-spelling BSL, and was confident I hadn't lost any mobility in them. Even if they felt sore and somewhat 'tight' after a few shapes.

The numbness didn't bother me but it did confuse me.

Did they have painkillers? An ancient version of painkillers?

Or maybe it was the Golden Core?

I know that cultivators have enhanced healing so could they potentially numb wounds once they are healing?

Ike wasn't here to answer any of my questions.

Where was Ike?

My mind was quiet if disjointed and vaguely empty, like everything had been flushed out of it. Or blocked.

Ugh, my headache intensified so I settled for being sore and bored in bed instead of curious and hurting.

I didn't have to worry for long as YanLi returned with a tray with a bowl of soup and some rice congee.

I immediately felt my mouth water and my stomach growled louder.

Big Sister was an angel and I would fight anyone who dared to contradict me on this.

She placed the platter carefully on the bed and insisted she fed me.

I pouted at her but she refused to budge on this so I internally shrugged my shoulders, bottled up what little self-consciousness I still had in my body, and opened my mouth like a little baby bird waiting its meal worm.

Sister's cooking was infinitely better than a simple meal worm anyway, so it wasn't that bad of a deal.
I was walking about three days after I 'woke up' from my stupor and there were still people walking on eggshells around me.

I could speak again too!

Though I sounded like a forty-year old smoker most of the time and would rather stay silent until that passed too.

The bandages around my hands had come off and only showed some signs that they'd been burnt badly. The scarring would fade with time, if I cared about the scarring at all, and they weren't particularly visible either way.

Memories of what had happened came filtering through over the next few days and I was uncomfortably aware that the 'warmth' I had possibly - most definitely - snuggled up to had, most likely, been Madam Yu.

I could potentially ask Jiang Cheng or YanLi to be sure but I didn't really want to know the answer. What could be more embarrassing, snuggling up to the woman who disliked you on good days and wished you were gone from her sight on bad days; or being unsure if you have ever snuggled up to that woman. Or any woman, and have no clear memory of it?

True, I was in acute stress and wouldn't have been able to tell ShouShan apart from Jiang Cheng even with my eyes open, but still...

It was just the tiniest little bit embarrassing.

So I was ignoring it.

If she ever came up to me and mentioned it, I'd talk to her, if not... Well, mind over matter. If you don't mind it, then it doesn't matter!

By far the worst possible situation was that FengMian was aware of my phobia and had decided to get to the bottom of it, which included trying to 'convince' me to speak to the Sect Doctor and nurses, and got upset when I rebuffed all of his attempts and got prickly and agitated enough that I actively avoided him and was not above turning tail and running in the opposite direction if I came across him.

Really, what was he expecting from me? I didn't know these people, I barely talked to any of them, and how could I possibly explain a trauma that wasn't even supposed to exist in this life because I'd gotten it more than fifty-so years ago?

Was it really a surprise that I clammed up faster than retail workers batten down their hatches for Black Friday?

It made meals very awkward though.

Another thing that didn't help my dislike of him was how he tried to handle the incident.

He tried to punish Jiang Cheng for accidentally locking me in.

I was furious.

Now that I thought about it, that was the first time in a long while that I got upset enough that I was nearly roaring at the top of my lungs - and aggravating my throat enough that if I were a dragon I'd be spluttering smoke - and accidentally on purpose might've thrown a bamboo seat at his head.
Sorry, not sorry.

Thankfully Madam Yu was there and she quickly set things straight, plus YanLi backed us up, and I got to witness something extraordinary.

FengMian apologized to Jiang Cheng and left the room - probably to go stew on his wording and my anger at him - with minimal fuss.

I'll admit I was surprised, having expected more resistance from him, but let YanLi - and Jiang Cheng, what the hell - worry about me and my sore throat and sat back down to eat.

On Doctor's orders I was only allowed to eat warm mushy food, which Jiang Cheng wasted no time teasing me about, and part of my brain drawled out that it looked like baby food.

Infinitely tastier baby food, but baby food nonetheless.

Anyway, I got angry at the situation and the angrier I got at it, the more I got angry at myself for causing it.

It had been such a stupid mistake, not thinking for one second that a tunnel like that would have traps, especially considering the time period and circumstances in which such a tunnel would be exploited. And then make the whole mess worse by shutting down the minute the wall slammed shut.

I shuddered in remembrance and waved off the concerned look YanLi gave me.

We were currently having a nice, quiet afternoon in one of the piers and I wasn't about to ruin it by being a grouchy little shit.

The kids deserved some rest, they'd been badly shook by my adverse reaction to the incident and weren't going to forget it any time soon.

I just hoped everyone else knew how to keep their mouths shut and not speak about it to outsiders.

Although... Apart from the 'walking on eggshells' thing everyone had going on, no one had said a peep about the incident.

Oh, sure, there was a group of seniors going over every inch of the recently rediscovered tunnel - and had already found seven other similar traps - but due to it's nature no one was supposed to know about said tunnel.

One thing that made me feel guiltier about starting the whole 'adventure' with Jiang Cheng before considering the dangers of it, was that - out of the seven other traps - only one of which was deactivated.

And that there had been a mummified skeleton next to said deactivated trap.

Go figure, right?

Yeah, I should've been smarter than to think that exploring an old tunnel with a twelve year old - actually twelve, and not the weird 'it's complicated' answer when people asked me what my age was - would be a good idea.

It wouldn't happen again, ever again, I swore to myself that I would never do something as stupid as this again.
Seriously, the right thing to have done then would've been to tell Madam Yu about our discovery and let them handle it.

But no, I let myself be a cocky little teenager and got Jiang Cheng and I both in hot water.

I startled awake and shivered as the night air blew over my skin. I was covered in cold sweat and felt disgusting.

It was week two (and a half) of the incident and I still had recurring nightmares of being trapped behind that wall.

I let my fingers run through my hair and pushed it away from my face, I swore that if I could I'd just cut it all off. It was now all the way down my back and it got terrible knots whenever I had a nightmare and trashed around.

And don't even get me started on how heavy it got when wet.

I sighed through my nose and shook my head to clear it, distractions weren't working, my heart still pounded in my chest like a war drum and I was reasonably jumpy over everything.

I got out of bed and looked out the window, dawn wouldn't be coming for another three or so hours but damn, I had had earlier starts to my day.

I was going to soak in my bathtub for a while and then make myself scarce for a bit, probably play some music in a more distant pier and go bother Donkey.

My feet silently made their way to the bathroom but paused when I noticed my Parrot had a slight glow.

ShouShan had sent me a message.

I walked over to it and open the cedar box, smoothed and polished by yours truly, and press my fingers to the receiving talisman.

"Hey, kiddo, sorry for the late hour. I wanted to tell you the good news."

The message ended but I noticed that there were other recorded messages, I pressed the talisman again.

"A-Xi had the baby tonight, well, she started labor in the early afternoon and there were some complications b-..."

I immediately started the next message, worried out of my mind about Sister Xi, I'd witnessed one home labor and while part of me would forever long for pregnancy, birth was... Birth was terrifying.

"But everything's okay! She pulled through, they both did, baby is fine, all red and wrinkly."

I let out a breath of relief and then imagined ShouShan's baby, would it take after the mother or the father? Would they be tall like ShouShan was, or petite like his wife?

Aah, it made me really sad that I wouldn't get to see them anytime soon.

"It's a little girl, I have a daughter! I'm so happy, A-Ying, you'll love her. She's as cute as a button!" ShouShan crooned over the message.
I was definitely writing this one down and tell the girl all about it when she was older.

And it wasn't just because ShouShan sounded close to tears as he bragged about his new little girl.

And I was definitely not crying! Nope, no way!

"Her name is Bai Ju, little A-Ju, courtesy YingLai. How lucky of a girl is she, to be named by the future world conqueror?" ShouShan couldn't help but tease me.

Even over miles and miles away from me he still managed to make me groan and want to slap him over the head.

Jiang Cheng caused the same reaction in me, whenever he was being particularly dense and listening to outsider's opinions when they didn't matter, so I guessed it was what having brothers felt like.

But I was happy.

I was really, really happy.

There were no other recorded messages and I decided not to reply immediately, given my throat and the fact that I was chocked up slightly from the news.

My vision wavered and I decided to quickly get that bath going.

If only so that no one could question about the water in my eyes.

As I got things ready I barely noticed that I wasn't shivering anymore and that my heart was beating peacefully in my chest.

The sky was barely beginning to lighten when Madam Yu found me perched on top of a wooden pillar by a pier.

I was playing one of the songs Mistress Zhu had taught me, a genuinely traditional chinese song, on my dizi - the one ChangZe had made for me so long ago - and letting the cool air carry away the tune.

Madam Yu, and YinZhu, approached casually as if taking a normal mid-morning stroll and came to stop beneath the pillar.

I played the last notes and let them hang in the air for finally looking down at Madam Yu.

She was wearing her usual purple robes, perhaps a bit warmer given the colder weather, and staring out at the water reflecting the fading moon and stars.

"Good morning," I said voice still hoarse.

"You shouldn't be talking," She looked up at me with a complicated expression,"Neither should you be walking around whilst everyone is still asleep."

I nod in acknowledgement and look back out at the waters.

"Are you aware that you'll be receiving your cultivator's blade soon?" She speaks.

I turn back to her and nod, slowly, not sure why she'd bring it up.
"YanLi and I will be travelling to Meishan in two weeks, I heard there will be a night-hunt organized by my old Sect, you will be accompanying us," She tells me.

I blink, startled, and open my mouth to question why when her fierce violet eyes lock into mine,"Do not speak."

I clamped my mouth shut.

"That night-hunt will do perfectly fine for you to test out your sword and my husband will be too busy teaching my son his rightful birthright as heir of this Sect, makes it so that he cannot join us on this travel either," Madam Yu informs me with the barest smirk on her lips.

I lean back on my perch, impressed, and with the very real realization that if I was a betting man - and one who took sucker's bets - I'd think Madam Yu had planned this whole thing.

"I expect you to be on your best behavior, should you embarrass our Sect you will not like the consequences," She warns me and then starts to walk away,"And I'll inform Mistress Zhu that she needs to start you on more complicated works if you can play a famous piece when you're supposed to be healing."

I winced but bow awkwardly on my perch as the Madam leaves.

When I'm sure she's gone I can't help the huff of laughter that escapes me, and look back on the waters. The moon was sinking beneath the horizon and all of the stars grew obscured by the dawn's rise.

The scene would be a pretty sight to send Lan Zhan and XiChen.

I wanted to think of something else to send ShouShan for little A-Ju, especially now since I knew the gender and name of the child.

A-Ju...

I smiled gently at the sky and closed my eyes.

I prayed that child would grow up happy and loved, healthy and strong, that she could one day stand proudly of the name I had bestowed her.

Bai Ju, courtesy YingLai.

To usher prosperity.

That child was a new branch on a family tree.

A hope for the future.

She's a promise.

Tomorrow will be better.

Yes, tomorrow will be better, we'll make sure of that.

Welcome back, my friend.

Missed me?
Yes. I missed you very much.

*Figures, gone for a few weeks and your world threatens to collapse.*

My smile widens.

Then let us try to keep it from happening again.

There's a huff of breath by my ear and I open my eyes again.

Somehow, the world looks brighter and more colorful than before.

I take a deep breath and hold it in before breathing out.

*What are we going to do now?*

Now?

I ponder for a few seconds and twirl the dizi in my hand, before I decide on what to do and jump down from the pillar.

Now, we are going to see if Jiang Cheng is awake. If not well, I have in good consciousness that there's some fluffy puppies in need of petting. Should probably look for Yunru, if she's not sleeping among their fluff.

*Just put some food by a window or something and she'll come running.*

I chuckled to myself as I meandered towards the residential wing at a sedate pace.

Yunru had a wonderful sense of smell, which would be amazing in hunting but was put to use by sniffing out whenever someone was eating or had left some food unattended.

The only reason she didn't sneak into the kitchen pantry was because I had warned her never to do that, if the food was out of the pantry or kitchen it was fair game, but she was never to take food from the kitchen.

And never from the people out of the Sect, like guests, because there were limits to how much I could protect her from.

I worried she wouldn't find a mate, given that Sables were rare this far south, but she refused to budge and leave to find a mate.

Not that I could bear to send her away, whenever my nightmares got the best of me and I struggled to fall back asleep, she'd come and snuggle next to my cheek, purring and squeaking.

She'd make a good mother when she finally got her own litter of pups.

*The though of a whole litter of constantly hungry water-rats just like Yunru gives me chills.*

I snort.

Maybe we'd get them to invade the Cloud Recesses.

*My Lord, the chaos, you are absolutely devious.*

Thank you, I think so too. Best part is that if I find sables and give them to Lan Zhan instead of
rabbits, he just might do the job for me.

_That's even more devious and we are not doing it._

Eh, I'll keep in mind for later use.

_Lan QiRen would find a way to murder you if you unleash a wave of ravenous sables down on his peaceful mountain._

By the time they become an honest problem I'll already be the Yiling Patriarch, and I'd like to see him pin that event on me just so I can introduce myself as 'Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian, the dark and evil Yiling Patriarch, the one who raises armies of the dead and releases waves of ferrets down on his enemies'.

_You have issues._

You won't find me arguing, but you can't deny that it makes life interesting.

**Chapter End Notes**

Reason why it hasn't taken longer for the 'recovery' to happen, a) we're running out of time for Arc III, and b) the constant soothing presence of people (and perhaps one or two more doses of spiritual energy) around him helps. A lot.

That said, it took almost 20 days before he could walk around and 'be normal' yet he still has frequent night-terrors and does not want to get close to the Ancestral Hall (tunnel).

FengMian's attempt at punishing JC, here's the thing. And this is in no way a correct form of parenting. Growing up, my brother and I were frequently told that, if we played rough, and one of us started crying, you could bet your bottom dollar the other one would start crying soon.

That's mostly because my grandmother had the brilliant idea that if one of her children came crying to her because one of their siblings did X, Y, or Z to them, then she'd call them to her and whoop them. So now they were both crying. Fair's fair, right?

Yeah, please don't ever do this. It's a lot more damaging than you think.

Here, he was in some misguided way that WWX would feel vindicated if JC got punished for hurting him, except WWX thinks the whole thing was his fault because he was the one that decided to explore the tunnel, and the actual 'incident' was an accident. Had it been JC locked in things wouldn't have escalated so much (except Madam Yu would've killed him /WWX/)

I can just imagine ShouShan blubbering over the Parrot about his new amazing daughter, and omg, A-Ying, you've got to come see her! She's so beautiful *proceeds to blubber some more*

A few years back there was this little toddler, about one or two years old, that got some weird fascination with me and demanded that I hold him for a while. I kid you not, it felt really good to have this tiny little kid snuggling with me. I would've taken the kid home with me if well, that wasn't kidnapping. And I wasn't fourteen or so at the time. Yeah.
The song WWX was playing on his Dizi was "Drifting Life Unending",
(https://youtu.be/sd2hDTbm614) which turned out - after reading the comments - that it was just a chinese instrumental cover from a japanese song "Sakurairo Maukoro",
(https://youtu.be/2nIY9bj37gE).
It works anyways, I have more songs for WWX to play later on (and serenade to LWJ, when he's totally not doing it on purpose).

No, WWX and Ike won't unleash sables into the Cloud Recesses, he'll still get LWJ his precious bunnies (who may or may not be mates, heh).

For anyone interested, the doctor's appointment went as great as it could be (meaning I was emotionally wrung out and utterly exhausted after it) and we're going back today because that's how serious they're treating this.
Oh, I also got politely asked if I was contemplating suicide, so there's that.
Chapter Summary

Arrival at Meishan, Suibian is here, and there's more resemblance in the Yu family than it is first apparent.

Chapter Notes

Remember when Madam Yu first met WWX and tested him? Yeah, I'll just say it's a family trait/quirk thing.

Fanart!
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188623793537/
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188673979202/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb." - Old Saying

Chapter 63: Blood and Water

Meishan was different than what I was expecting.

And, to be honest, I wasn't sure exactly of what I was expecting.

*Maybe a bunch of Madam Yu's?*

If there was ever more than one Madam Yu woe be to the universe if they ever manage to meet.

*Imagine of they fell in love with same man?*

It would mean war, no doubt about it. Now stop terrifying me and help me not to mess this up.

*What are you afraid of messing up?*

These damn robes and introductions with Madam Yu's birth family.

Thanks to how culture worked here, girls would literally abandon home and their ancestors when they got married, and only visited home once in a while as it was now their duty to look after their husband's family as if they were her own.

Including calling them 'Mother' and 'Father'.

I'd asked Mistress Zhu if even noble ladies had to do that, considering that in Sects bloodlines were
important, and the answer was ambiguous. Some did, some didn't, it all depended on the husband's desires.

I swore if I heard that slimy Jin GuangShan even try to have A-Jie call him 'Father' I'd find a way to turn him inside out. Slowly.

*You're temper is strangely fluctuating between what we'd consider normal and weirdly quick to combust.*

Yeah, I noticed that. Jiang Cheng is also grumpier than usual, but so far no one has commented on it.

...

What? You think you know what's wrong?

*I do, and you probably know it too, you just haven't stopped to think about it.*

About what?

*Oh, no, my mouth is sealed, I'll let this one run it's course.*

I mentally roll my eyes at him.

"A-Xian," YanLi smiles at me,"Are you feeling alright?"

"Perfectly fine, A-... Shijie," I quickly correct myself.

I called her A-Jie in front of everyone except Madam Yu, same with calling Jiang Cheng Didi. I knew she knew I called them that, there's no way she doesn't know about the brotherhood/siblinghood oath we three had made, but to refer to either of them like that in front of their mother bordered on suicide.

Even if the face she'd make if I ever slipped up promised to be hilarious.

*For the 1.2 seconds where you're alive to appreciate it.*

True.

"You're not tired? Does your throat hurt?" She asks.

I restrained a sigh and instead smile widely at her,"Why, Shijie! My voice is much better than it as before! And tired, pssh, I'm not tired. What about you, Shijie? Are you tired?"

She could totally see through me, her eyes twinkled with amusement but let me brush off the subject,"I'm fine, A-Xian, your shijie doesn't tire easily either."

"We should be arriving soon," Madam Yu speaks before either one of us restarts a conversation,"Make sure you have everything with you before you leave the boat, whatever you leave behind belongs to the boat owner."

I highly doubted that if Madam Yu forgot one of her gold ornaments or some piece of jewelry that she'd let the poor boatman keep it, but I said nothing of my opinion and instead nodded.

Turning to make sure I had everything.
My hand brushes against the black sheath of my sword.

I pick it up and feel the weight of it, the cool black sheath with the pale metal and red tangling cord from the pommel, were beautifully made and carved. An excellent example of the high quality swords Lotus Pier's blacksmith forged.

My fingers trace the characters written on the sheath.

Suibian.

My lips curl into a bemused smile.

I had been excited to get the sword, practically bouncing in place, and driving Jiang Cheng nuts with the level of energy I managed to exude so early in the morning. He was a bit upset he had to wait a bit longer to get his own sword but I pacified him by promising to let him swing my sword around and to teach him all the cool tricks I developed - as if I wasn't doing that already - so the only thing that really bothered him was the fact that I would start going on Night-Hunts by myself.

Or well, as 'by myself' as I could because I suspected someone had made it an order to have a senior shadow after me, if either of the my siblings couldn't tag-along to my outside excursions.

Anyways, I had went with FengMian to pick up the newly forged sword and had felt an instant connection when the sword was placed in my hands.

"Player has received a Spiritual Sword not aligned with the System's requirements."

"Does the Player wish to align this item with the System?"

[YES] [NO]

I paused as my eyes flickered along the glowing blue letters before turning the sword in my hands to gain time to question the words' meaning.

What did the System mean?

If I said [YES], what would happen, if I said [NO], then did it meant I could never align the sword later?

"Do you like it?" FengMian smiled down at me.

I pretended to finish inspecting the sword and smiled back in response,"Yes, it's not as heavy as I thought it would be."

True, I had expected the sword to be much heavier, but then again, I had been practicing with practice swords for years now and my Strength Stat meant I could probably try to bench press Lan Zhan with minimal trouble.

So quick to get your hands on your Lan Zhan?

I'm not talking to you.

So cruel.

Jiang FengMian nodded,"As you are used to knives and that short sword of yours I thought it would benefit you from having a lighter sword, it's just as resistant and durable as heavier swords,
do not worry, it just values speed and accuracy over innate power."

Which explained why Wei WuXian couldn't pull Su She out of the water and up on his sword fast enough to escape the waterborne abyss. Either way, it didn't really bother me.

"What will you name it?" Jiang FengMian asked me.

I pretended to give it some thought, I had already knew what this sword would be named - and truthfully had no reason to change it's name - but I couldn't just blurt out 'Suibian' and not offend either FengMian or the poor blacksmith.

Due to my - what polite word to use - circumstances, everyone and their mothers knew that I was long over due a cultivator's sword and everyone wanted to be the one who forged YunmengJiang's prodigy's sword.

Which would be named Suibian.

I could just imagine how unbearable Jiang Cheng's gripping would be when he saw the name, and how his Mother would probably try and flay me alive for the embarrassing name I chose.

A-Jie might just sigh and mutter how she should've seen this coming.

The glowing words still floated over my head and I couldn't wait to be alone so I could investigate them.

In the meantime I said about ten or fifteen names I picked off the top of my head before shrugging,"Well, whatever!"

FengMian smiled,"If that is so, well, why not name it Suibian?"

"Checkpoint Finished!"

I pretended that I was amazed at the solution and grinned,"Yes! Suibian!"

FengMian took the sword back to have the characters engraved and the poor blacksmith looked like he'd just been told his dog had died.

He'd been so happy, and smug, that he would be the one forging this sword. But now he didn't think he'd have the guts to reveal that the 'masterful' sword he had forged for the prodigy would be named Suibian.

Wei WuXian and his mighty Whatever!

That could seriously be a book title and I'd buy it if only to learn what the 'whatever' actually was.

Honestly, you've bought weirder titled books.

That I did. The kids loved it, especially when I placed them in open view, and every so often someone had to do a double take to check if they'd read it right.

Hilarious.

The blacksmith gloomily engraved the characters into the sheath and the sword was handed back to me. The glowing letters of the notification reappeared the second my hands touched it again.

I really wanted to skedaddle out of here so I could figure out what they meant but it would be
awfully rude to do so, so I had to at least silently endure my curiosity for a few more minutes.

Thankfully it seemed like my luck was shining on me for once and an emergency occurred shortly after we left the smith, and FengMian was called away when he was mid-way through suggesting we head towards a practice ground so I could try out my new sword.

When FengMian was gone I wasted no time in booking it to the nearest isolated area so I could investigate the notification.

"Player has received a Spiritual Sword not aligned with the System's requirements."

"Does the Player wish to align this item with the System?"

[YES] [NO]

'Help, System,' I thought,'Player does not understand notification.'

No answer came.

*You might need to be more specific.*

Ugh.

'Help, sword not aligned with System's requirements.'

«An item not aligned with the System's requirements cannot explore the full extent of its power and the Player is limited in its abilities.»

So...It meant that the sword had to be upgraded?

*Why are you asking me, I know as much as you do when it comes to this System's weirdness.*

It's not weird, don't offend it, the System is cool.

I could feel Ike rolling his eyes.

'Help, align items.'

«Items that can be aligned will be highlighted upon touch if the Player wishes it.»

"Currently the Highlighting Feature is turned [OFF]."

"Does the Player wish to turn it [ON]?"

[YES] [NO]

I pressed [YES] and looked back down at Suibian, which had now a very faint bluish glow to it, and back at the words.

'Help, not aligning items.'

«Items that are not aligned cannot explore the full extent of their power and limited abilities.»

That just repeats the same thing the other notification said.

'Help, delay aligning.'
You think this will work?

We'll see.

«The Player can refuse to align an Item at the System's prompting and later manually align it.»

That answers it.

You sure?

Sixty per cent sure, which is as much as we're gonna get.

I pressed the [NO] button on the first notification and watched as the words disappeared but the glow around Suibian remained.

Why did you not align it?

Two reasons, first I don't actually know what the ‘aligning’ would do to the blade, if it would cause it to feel ‘off’ to anyone who doesn't know my weirdness; and secondly, because I want to try and align something else before I do the same with Suibian.

Surprisingly thoughtful of you. What are you going to align?

I have no idea!

And just like that you're back to the same air-head I am so used to.

I can't think of everything!

Yet you can strategize an entire battle plan to cripple over fifty per cent of the Wen's forces and create a whole network that will be fully independent and operational in three or so years.

Aren't I just the most awesome human being?

You are the craziest human being and I will laugh at you when this blows up in your face.

It will work out as it should, oh ye' of so little faith.

Yes, I know it will work out. I just wonder what lines you're going to feed people when they asked how exactly you managed to pull it off.

I have connections.

You started this when you were five.

...It was an accident?

How the hell do you accidentally take over a country?

I am not taking over anything!

Keep telling yourself that.

Okay, you know what, this conversation is done. I am going to look for Jiang Cheng and I'll spend the rest of my afternoon watching him get torn between delight at my sword and horrified at my naming sense.
Introductions in Meishan were slightly awkward - and not just because of me - and somewhat tense.

From canon we knew that Yu ZiYuan came from the MeishanYu Sect and was known as Third Lady Yu, that she grew up with Madam Jin, and that the Sect had mild influence in the area because they managed to force FengMian into making an alliance with them.

What canon never explored was the fact that Madam Yu had an older sister who married into another different Sect - I'd heard it had been to a Lanling region Sect, other's said it was a Gusu based one - hence her name as 'Third Lady Yu', after her mother and older sister.

And then we had her brother.

Who had greeted us at the door fairly amicably but couldn't quite suppress the smirk of being the Sect Leader Yu, and straight-up antagonized Madam Yu by calling her Lady Jiang.

I swear I thought the man had a death wish.

YanLi bowed primly at the man,"Greetings, Uncle, it has been a while."

Saintly YanLi, she was a reincarnated Goddess and would ascend to the Heavens through sheer kindness alone.

"Niece, it is good to see you," The man smiled back,"And who is this?"

The man looks straight at me with a very familiar look in his eyes.

I stand with my back straight and bow politely,"This one is Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian, disciple of YunmengJiang, Sect Leader Yu."

"Well, who'd have thought you'd stand to travel with that whore's son," The man laughs.

He's not laughing for long.

There's a sudden weight to the air making it hard to breathe, like someone is sitting on your chest, the man pales and looks at the source of the weight.

And meets chilling silver eyes piercing like a knife up to his throat.

"Intimidation Skill leveled up!"

I smile at him, showing perhaps too much teeth, and surreptitiously move my body so the sun catches on both Suibian and Xiaodan at my waist. I had Xiaotong back in my arm-guard and Xiaohui in my boot.

You have too many knives.

You can never have too many knives.

You also have a second cultivator's sword in your inventory.

If I ever bring it out and explain it's origins someone will definitely laugh at me.

Why? Because you picked up a corpse's sword when you were four and never used it even nine years later?
In my defense, I couldn't use it for much of that time, and when I could there was no easy explanation as to why I had it.

*It was a gift?*

I'd have to remove it from my inventory, send it somewhere and then ask them to send it back? Nah, I'll just leave it there in case it's ever needed.

"Wei WuXian," Madam Yu spoke calmly,"Release the killing intent."

I adjusted my posture again and just like that the pressure was gone.

The man stumbled back and gave Madam Yu a sour look, to which she responded with a rather toothy smirk.

"YunnengJiang's disciples are very spirited, aren't they?" She says,"Don't worry, dear brother, we won't be staying for long. I have business with Mistress Juan."

The man paled far more than he had when I threatened him and his eyes got very shifty.

Interesting.

He cleared his throat and gestures for his disciples to help up with our luggage.

"It's good to have you back, sister," He said airily in an attempt of keeping his fear hidden.

It didn't work, everyone could see it.

"Yes, it's been a while," Madam Yu barely even looked at him.

"Shijie," I whispered to YanLi,"Who's Mistress Juan?"

YanLi gave me a predatory look I never thought I'd see on her face,"Oh, she's the one who created Zidian."

I swear she never looked so much as her mother's daughter than she had at that point.

It was bloody terrifying.

And so freaking cool!

I probably had stars in my eyes as I looked up at YanLi - probably my last year of doing it, actually, I'd probably start growing like a weed once I hit fourteen - and she chuckled at me.

"Is A-Xian impressed with the Mistress or with me?" She asks.

"Shijie is the best person and A-Xian is so lucky to know her!" I laughed.

She bated softly at my head,"Oh, you! A-Xian is too free with his words!"

I pouted,"But Shijie, it's true! Shijie is the best girl in the world! Best shijie! I'll fight any who argue against it!" I make a show of 'pugilist' fists and watch as she tries not to roll her eyes at me.

"A-Xian, how old are you?" She asks in a bemused tone.

Well, there's only one response to that.
"XianXian is three!" I grin shamelessly.

The five other YunmengJiang senior disciples just collectively sigh and shake their heads, ignoring the looks they get from the MeishanYu disciples.

Admit it, you just love sowing chaos.

I never denied it, have I?

No, you have not. I apparently just hold some semblance of hope that that thick face of yours thins enough to realize how stupid you look like when you do this.

Ah! Jokes on you, I'm far too old to be feeling any shame!

Heh, we'll see.

Uh? What does that mean? Ike? What do you mean?

I mean, we'll see.

We'll see what? Ike!

How shameless you truly are.

When?

Oh, you'll see.

Ike!

There's no other reply and I do my best not to sulk outwardly.

Really, Ike was such a big meany at times, he could've at least given me a hint about what I could possibly be embarrassed about!

"A-Xian," YanLi spoke up again,"After we are settled in, do you want Shijie to show you around?"

I smile brightly,"Yes!"

She giggles,"Then A-Xian has to be on his best behavior, or Mother will ground you."

I pouted at her,"Shijie, how cruel."

She pats me on the head,"Yes, yes, Shijie is very cruel to poor A-Xian."

Have I mentioned how much I love this girl?

Not recently, no.

Because I love my sister. Jin ZiXuan better watch out because if he badmouths her I won't stop at one punch.

She loves him.

And he better learn how to love her and treat her like the Empress she is!

He's fifteen when you meet him.
Old enough to know how to treat a woman.

_I seem to recall one little boy at fifteen that was serving 'timeout' with you at the cafe because he did something, what was it?_

Uhhh...

_Oh, that's right! He made fun of a girl for having her cycle._

I mentally groaned as I remembered.

It was Bobby, the oldest of all of my nephews, a real handful of a hellion in his teens. In comparison, after having him over Colin and Landen were a breeze. At least for the boys, I swear Caroline and Martha gave them a run for their money with their mood swings.

_So, what was that you were saying about fifteen being old enough?_

He still doesn't deserve her.

_According to you, no one does._

I ignored him and totally did not end the conversation because any response to that statement would make me sound like a petulant child.

_Totally not._

"A-Xian," YanLi said as she sat on one of the chairs in a fairly private courtyard surrounded by flowers.

"Yes, Shijie?" I look at her and stop poking said flowers.

"What does A-Xian think a family means?" She asks me.

I pause and think over her words, coming to sit on the chair beside hers,"Well, they're people who care for each other and support each other through life."

YanLi looks a bit surprised at my words,"Not blood?"

I give her a wry grin,"Family doesn't start as blood, family are bonds. Father and Mother weren't related after all," I laugh.

A-Jie wrinkles her nose at me and tuts,"Really, A-Xian!"

I chuckle and continue,"Family are people who love each other and know each other, they accept both the good and the bad. Family means... home."

She sighs,"I will leave home when I marry," She tells me.

I nod,"I will leave too, eventually."

She turns back to me with sad eyes,"Why does A-Xian have to leave?"

I give her a sad smile,"I will also leave to make my own home, I'll fulfill the promise I made to my parents and then... I don't know."

"Doesn't A-Xian want a family?"YanLi asks me.
I laugh, "I already have one! Two actually, since mom and dad still are my parents, even if they're gone."

"But A-Xian must marry a nice girl one day, A-Xian will make a good father," She smiles softly at me.

I shrug, "I don't know, A-Jie, we'll see. I wouldn't mind my family to grow, children..." My eyes turn sad as I remembered the children - all grown up and living their own lives - I had left behind.

I obviously couldn't get pregnant in this life either, which stung a bit when I thought about it, but it was an old wound that had long since scarred over.

I hadn't put much thought in making my own family, especially since I was so invested in surviving this war and making sure that no one died in result of my actions. Actively trying to prevent deaths and make plans on top of plans to keep as much of this family of mine whole and safe.

It was hard.

Even if I was successful and it all worked out, odds were I'd still be painted as a villain and a monster. My mountain wouldn't just be my quiet little haven and pet project but my own self-exile from the rest of the world.

People wouldn't be able to associate with me without political repercussions.

The mess of Qiongqi Path could still happen, my network wasn't foolproof and there was also the slight problem of capacity (although I was working on, hopefully, an overestimate of refugees) and shelter. I knew I wouldn't be able to get everybody out, but I was doing everything I could to diminish the massacre.

No, the genocide.

Because what would happen would be nothing short of genocide.

"What is A-Xian thinking about so intently?" YanLi asks me.

I give her a crooked smile, "Shijie... Can I ask you something weird?"

She blinks, "Weird? What is it, A-Xian?"

"If you had to choose, between doing what was easy and what was right, what would you choose?"

She frowns, "I don't understand, A-Xian."

I chuckled and looked away, "Yeah... I don't think anyone does."

Not until it's too late to turn back.

Chapter End Notes

Interesting fact: "Blood is thicker than water" supposedly 'teaches' us that family wins out over friendship/bonds outside of blood. But the original full proverb "The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb" means that people who spill blood
together (in battle, since covenant is an agreement/vow thing I didn't totally get) are closer/stronger bonds than familial ones.

Poor Blacksmith, he only wanted to brag about this one sword. And now he can't because everyone will forever be too embarrassed to say the sword's name (with a handful of exceptions).

Madam Yu's brother seems like the type of brother who likes to needle his younger siblings. Unfortunately for him Madam Yu is very much the same, and she knew exactly what her brother would say. Also, give a round of applause for WWX not immediately flying into a rage and skewering the idiot who called his beloved mother a whore. Progress!

So, I've been anticipating the odd 'wait, how many nieces/nephews does she have?' so here's a simple edited version.
Walter's side: 1 brother (Matthew), 2 sisters (Hannah and Abigail). Brother had 2 children (Bobby and Annie); Sister 1 had 3 daughters (Cynthia, Caroline and Helen); Sister 2 had 3 children (Martha, Colin and Landen). When Sarah died 4 of her nieces/nephews had children of their own. So... Yeah, lot's of family.
*Also, Sarah was considerably younger than Walter's siblings. They were already in their 30s while Sarah was in her 20s.
Brothers

Chapter Summary

Where Wei Ying misses his Platypus and home; Where Jiang Cheng misses his XianXian and is troubled; and Oh MY HEAVENS, IKE! Stop laughing!

Chapter Notes

Fanart!
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188623793537/
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188673979202/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Brotherhood means laying down your life for somebody, really willing to sacrifice yourself for somebody else." - Tim Hetherington

Chapter 64: Brothers

Madam Yu had taken YanLi to the Mistress who had created Zidian early the second day at MeishanYu, I accompanied the other seniors - who'd been here before - to this Sect's training grounds and sat around to observe them.

Each Sect had slight variations to their martial arts formations, or even swordplay forms, so it was a good opportunity to observe how differently they did things here.

Unfortunately, given that it was Madam Yu who was responsible for all the disciples training and discipline, there was little to be learnt from them.

The footwork was, personally, subpar and there were unnecessary motions and wasted movements because these disciples had little to no improvisation.

It was boring.

Or maybe you're just too used to a certain quality of life, MeishanYu isn't a Great Sect.

They're supposed to have a reputation though.

They did. Years ago.

It made me eager to get to the Cloud Recesses and spar against Lan Zhan. Maybe Lan XiChen if I could catch him on a free day.
From the novel they were strong opponents and had brilliant swordsmanship, they'd prove to be a challenge, surely? There were also the Nie and, maybe, Jin ZiXuan. Once we were all disciples I could ask them to spar, build up my skill and help them get their up to par.

Actually, Jiang Cheng would love to spar against strong opponents.

Usually he fought against me, who gave him the biggest challenge, and also against some of the seniors. But he mostly stuck with the Juniors of his generation because they were the ones he'd be commanding once he took over as Sect Leader.

By the time he became Sect Leader - in his mind, unaware of what the future had in store for him - it was expected that the majority of the seniors now would be gone, either to start their own families and serve the YunmengJiang Sect differently (as instructors, guards, or servants) in order to keep the 'disciples' a fairly young percentage of the Sect.

That's not to mean that they kicked anyone out, it was just that they stopped being disciples.

A handful of former-disciples would stay and exercise great influence in future generations, usually the Senior Head Disciple of each generation, but not all.

"Are you just going to sit there staring?" A MeishanYu disciple asked with a frown.

"Depends, do you want me to come down and spar against you?" I ask them.

He shrugs,"You've got a sword with you, don't you? Why don't you put it to use?"

I bob my head and get up, walking down the stairs to the training ground and stepping into the ring.

I pull Suibian out of its sheath and watched the sunlight glint off its blade.

"That's a weak glare," My opponent scoffs,"How new is it?"

"It was forged last week,"I answer,"But don't think this match will be easy for it."

He laughs,"A week? I've had my sword for a year!" And he pulls out his own blade, a mellow glare coming from it, nothing too spectacular,"I'll show you how MeishanYu disciples fight, not your copycat style swordsmanship the Third Lady teaches!"

I wanted to comment on how they were calling us copycats when we updated our swordplay moves and routines every few years - and had big annual reviews on all the forms and teachings - while the MeishanYu hadn't changed their footwork in thirty or forty years, but wisely kept my mouth shut.

I had no doubt that the Madam would ground me - or make me apologize - if I embarrassed them so viciously they wouldn't be able to look me in the eye again.

Honestly, I'd settle for beating them using only the most basic forms I knew of.

No use in letting them know all my attacks.

The boy came at me and I parried his blow without much effort. My wrist twinged slightly from the impact and I had Ike start making mental notes about improvements to my gear and technique, whilst I focused on dodging and parrying his blows.

Before my eyes I could see the System highlighting weaknesses and openings in their position but I
let him set the pace for the match.

To an inexperienced outsider it looked as if the Meishan Yu disciple was driving me to a corner, chasing me whenever I managed to get a bit of breathing room, but to the experienced eye...

I was playing with him.

The oldest YunmengJiang senior with us took one look at what I was doing and sighed, he knew this wouldn't end in Meishan Yu's favor and short of stopping the spar - and having to explain why he was stopping it - there was little else he could do but watch the fireworks.

And, dear lord, were their fireworks.

After leading the guy on for about ten minutes he finally clued in that I was messing with him and he turned angry.

It was a stupid decision on his part.

Getting angry meant that it was as easy to manipulate him into exactly where I wanted him to be, as it was to annoy Jiang Cheng with a catchy tune or have his dogs come running to me because I had treats in my pockets.

I suddenly strike, pushing his sword upwards and hitting him with the flat of my blade on the side of his chest, a soft spot normally protected by the arms. He twists slightly in that direction and I use the opportunity to point my sword at his jugular.

In a real fight, he'd be dead ten times over.

I didn't really want to think about how I'd be neck deep in war in three or so years time.

The disciple grunts and steps back, conceding the win to me, and I lower Suibian. My seniors cheer a bit and shake their heads, sharing looks between themselves and poking fun at the Meishan Yu juniors.

I kind of felt bad for not enjoying the spar as much as I should've. It wasn't fun.

I had skill and experience heads and shoulders above them, I wanted a real challenge. If I was a mean person maybe I'd brag and incite these guys into fighting me all at once but I didn't want that to happen.

I genuinely just wanted a fun spar, with everyone involved knowing it was just a spar and that it was meant to be fun.

I wanted to fight someone and learn from their, see their moves and go 'oh, that's smart. I should do that.' not just... this, I guess.

*Maybe YanLi would like a spar?*

I hadn't seen her wielding a sword much, although I knew she had one - just like Madam Yu had a sword herself - and didn't think I ever heard its name, but if she had one she must know how to use it. And with how she was starting to resemble Madam Yu more and more... Well.

*Maybe she'll get a Zidian herself.*

It would be interesting to fight against that lightning whip - and try to figure out how it worked - but since there was only one ever wield of such a thing and said wielder was Madam Yu, I wasn't
exactly sure how to ask.

Could I even ask her for a spar?

_That's literally asking her to kill you._

Maybe she'd just tell me to go away and not be offended?

_You're thinking of asking her?_

It shouldn't hurt to ask?

_Until she takes offense to it._

I can't really see her getting angry at me for asking.

And it wasn't just because I was very aware that I had most likely cuddled into her arms.

I'd ask Ike to block that memory if it wasn't just so... I couldn't even find words to describe it.

It reminded me of CangSe. That safety, the warmth... I missed it.

It... stung. And made me want more. But I firmly drew back from those desires and focused on other things, on more important matters.

Yet I knew that that longing wouldn't fade. I was a family person at heart, I yearned for a family of my own who I could stand with and watch as they grew up and got older, who'd talk to me and be happy together.

Walter had open a door into a world I never knew it could exist. People linked by bonds and not just blood, loving each other and caring for one another. There were arguments at times, sure, but it was never that suffocating ambience where you couldn't step one toe out of line for fear of what they'd do to you.

For the first time I was part of a family and not an outsider looking at them through a window, or standing on the staircase as they had their holidays and celebrations.

Heck, I remembered that up until I was eight I had never stepped one foot outside of the manor.

Walter opened the door, my parents taught me how to live anew, and the Jiangs were teaching me how to open my heart into loving more and more people.

But once I got to the Burial Mound the chances for family were slim.

I would have my mountain. I would make it as awe-inspiring and as bright as I could, but to the Wen remnants - if there were ever any I hadn't managed to get out and hide - it would hopefully be a mid-stop before I found a more permanent home for them.

I understood that my passion for the mountain wasn't something many would share, and I wouldn't force anyone to live on what was basically a mountain smothered in Yin Energy.

But it saddened me.

Understanding what I would be giving up, regardless of how willing I was to give that up, was harsh. Knowing what I'd leave behind and that I could very well never see them again should things go right (as in, I didn't get anyone killed) hurt.
I didn't want to lose my family.

The big sister that always looked out for you, the little brother who I taught everything I knew and would share in my misadventures. Even Madam Yu and her prickly self, combined with FengMian's failed attempts at being nice.

Lotus Pier was home.

I would keep my home safe.

Even if it cost me my position in their lives.

I would see them safe and sound.

I promised myself that.

And that would have to be enough.

Jiang Cheng was happy. And excited. And eager.

Slightly hesitant, too. And the tiniest bit scared.

Mother, A-Jie and Brother had gone to MeishanYu and Father had decided to have their first Heir lesson. From a rumor he had heard while sneaking into the kitchens for a snack (and he hadn't been following his brother's pet rat's example!), his mother would be taking both his siblings on a night-hunt and had told his father to teach him about Heir duties while they were gone.

Something that the kitchen servant had chuckled about, before gossiping that everyone thought he had been delaying teaching him about it so he could find an excuse to teach his brother as well.

It stung, Jiang Cheng could admit it, that people talked about others behind their backs, and didn't really care if it was true or not.

His brother had given him a sad smile when he'd complained about it, and explained that people were gossips because it made them feel better about themselves. Sometimes, although he shouldn't ever do it because it was incredibly rude, people did it subconsciously. They didn't mean to gossip, it just came out. Speculation and rumors flying from ear to ear.

Though some did it quite maliciously, other's just... They just talked, he guessed and shrugged, they didn't mean to hurt you. They just talked.

That's what his brother said, and his brother was very smart.

Even though he could be very stupid about other things.

Like not telling them about his fears, or going on night-hunts when he was four.

When he was younger the prospect of going night-hunting with his father and mother that young was awesome.

He was a bit stupid when he was younger.

Jiang Cheng was twelve, turning thirteen next year, and would receive his own sword and be called a Cultivator shortly afterwards.
The thought of going on night-hunts alone was... daunting.

And that was when he had a Golden Core and had been training since he was six!

To do it at four? With little to no education? Using just a tiny wooden bow and arrow?

His brother was crazy.

And stupid.

That's why he needed him and his sister to look after him.

"A-Cheng," FengMian smiled down at him, "Have you been waiting for long?"

Jiang Cheng stood very straight in front of his father, willing himself not to do anything to mess up, and shook his head no. Truly he hadn't been waiting for long, he had gone to check on the dogs - and on his brother's sable - before snacking in the kitchen, without Wei Ying here it was startling to find how boring it was with nothing to do.

Whenever his brother was around no one was ever bored, either because he wouldn't stop fidgeting or talking about something that had caught his fancy, or because he'd come up with a game or something. Jiang Cheng didn't ponder too much on just how much time they spent together until his brother wasn't here and it felt like a part of him was missing.

He'd already turn to speak to him twice alone today, only to twitch in surprise when he remembered his brother wouldn't be there.

"Well, that's good," FengMian nodded, "I would've like to wait until you were a bit older to start you into everything but I guess that starting young means I can ease you into the chores and responsibilities." He gestured him to follow and started walking back to his office.

Jiang Cheng had entered that office perhaps twice in the last five years. When he was little he'd used to sneak into the office and bother his father, having ditched the nannies tasked with looking after him, but after he'd turned five he started being scolded harshly for doing so.

His sister had started to take time off her own busy schedule to come spend time with him, understanding that he was lonely and sorely in need for a friend.

And then his brother had entered his life.

Despite having only come into his life when he was nearly seven, it was astounding how everything always came back to him.

"We'll start with discussing how the Sect is structured, then we'll slowly go over the people inside the Sect and how you, as Sect Leader, will have to direct and lead them," FengMian told him.

"Like how the servants have an hierarchy and you're supposed to order the higher ups because they command the lower ranking ones?" Jiang Cheng asked.

FengMian blinked and looked down at him, surprised, "Yes, I suppose. How do you know that?"

Because, like it or not, he paid attention when his brother talked. He could make it as embarrassing as possible but his brother imparted a lot of knowledge and advice whenever he talked.

And his brother liked to talk.
"B- Uh, Wei WuXian talked about it, he learnt about it in Mistress Zhu's lessons," He answered his father.

If the thought of taking such lessons, which were firmly 'wifely lessons' regardless of what his brother said, wasn't so embarrassing he'd consider joining. Some of the lessons sounded very interesting.

But then he remembered the dancing lesson he had accidentally barged into and quickly dispelled all thoughts of considering it.

He had never thought he'd see his brother dressed up like that, and whilst he had a good laugh about it, Jiang Cheng had felt his face flaming like an inferno and wouldn't look him in the eye without turning red again.

His sister had laughed at him too, which was so not fair!

His father nodded again in understanding,"Ah, yes. A-Xian has... interesting lessons with Madam Zhu. He will make a good second-in-command when you become the Sect Leader."

The words confused Jiang Cheng. Second-in-command?

He frowned,"What do you mean, Father? Wei WuXian will leave before that, won't he? I'll only become the Sect Leader when I am an adult and have my own family, Father is still young after all. Wei WuXian will have left by then, to find his mountain."

Which meant little to Jiang Cheng. He understood he meant finding an actual mountain to live in, but why a mountain and why it had to be a specific one was beyond him.

His father sighed,"I had hoped he had dropped that childhood notion, A-Xian should stay here in Yunmeng, given what happened that day and how dangerous the world outside can be, he'd be safer here. With people who care about his well-being and don't just let him wander off, gallivanting through the countryside and getting into countless dangers."

Jiang Cheng swallowed thickly.

His brother wanted to leave, he dearly loved Lotus Pier and the people in it - of that Jiang Cheng had no doubt - but he wanted to leave and find his own place. Him and sister had watched him stare off into the distance with such longing and yearn that it hurt. He wanted to leave, but wouldn't until they were grown.

For his father to think that it was only a childhood fancy, that he'd grow out of it, when he had been speaking about it for years...

Furthermore, Jiang Cheng had the distinct feeling his father was talking about the Bai Clan who, while they had allowed his brother to continue his old lifestyle, were people his brother cared about deeply.

He'd gotten a letter just before they'd left for Meishan that ShouShan's wife, Sister Xi, had had her baby. A little girl. His brother had been so happy...

If his brother heard his father speak like this, he had no doubt he'd be very angry. And hurt.

He wanted to stand up to his father, defend his brother and his dream, but he was scarred.
Jiang Cheng took care to hide his clenched fists from his father's eyes.

He didn't know what angered him most, his inability to stand up to his father, or the fact that he was too scared to stand up for his brother.

*What kind of a brother was he?*

But he couldn't stay angry for long, his brother's face - smiling kindly at him and looking *so proud* of him - always appeared in his mind and drove away all those hurtful emotions.

Regardless of everything, his brother loved him and always said how proud he was of him, of his little brother, and nothing could take that from him.

He would be better. One day.

One day, if anyone ever hurt his brother he would protect him, he would stand up to everyone who thought to target his brother.

Even when he left for his mountain, he'd remain Jiang Cheng's brother.

Nothing would ever change that.

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When YanLi and Madam Yu returned from the guest rooms it was near evening and I had conned two of the seniors into playing a few games with me, including poker (which I had 'invented') and was making a rather big sum of pebbles - because if we started gambling with money I would make many, many enemies - and the seniors were starting to get annoyed with me.

*To be fair, you are cheating.*

I have no idea what you're talking about.

*Not only are you counting the cards, you made a second deck and are shamelessly pulling the necessary cards out of your inventory to get a good hand.*

The corners of my lips twitch and stretch into a wide grin.

Again, I have no idea what you're talking about.

There's a huff of laughter by my ear and Ike goes quiet.

"What are you doing, A-Xian?" YanLi sits down beside me.

"We're playing a card game, Shijie," I tell her. And then I have an unholy idea,"Want me to teach you how to play? It's easy!"

YanLi looks amused at the disgruntled seniors and at my pile of rocks, and decides to indulge me,"Alright, Shijie will learn how to play this game of yours."

I start by showing her the cards - therefore pausing the game and allowing the seniors to go mingle elsewhere or go fetch more pebbles outside - and explaining the rules, what each card meant and how you played the game, how you won and the 'money' system.

It didn't take long for me to take notice of the new ring in her finger, very similar to Madam Yu's own ring, and I kind of stared. I was too curious to let it go, but hesitant to ask about it.
Could I ask about it? Would she answer?

YanLi chuckled and fiddled with the ring between her fingers,"So, A-Xian noticed it."

I pouted at her,"Shijie..."

She pinched my cheek,"A-Xian, you shouldn't pout, what would Mother do if she saw you?"

"But Madam Yu isn't here, Shijie!" I grin at her,"Is that ring like Zidian? Does it make a cool whip?"

YanLi chuckles again and shows me the ring,"This is Chidian, it does form a whip like mother's but it is shorter. It has a bit of a surprise though, so it's alright if it's shorter."

I stare at the ring in awe, the name doesn't bode well for any foe she encounters and I would be lying if that doesn't impress me.

"Can we spar?" I ask her,"Not today, tomorrow? Or when we're back at Lotus Pier? Please?" I almost start bouncing in place.

YanLi gives me a look and makes a big show of thinking it over, watching me as I wilt until I'm laying on the floor with crocodile tears in my eyes, visibly pouting, and looking as miserable as a wet kitten.

Finally YanLi puts me out of my misery,"I'll have to ask Mother, but I'm sure she'd allow for one spar."

I bounce up and hug her,"Thanks, A-Jie! Sister is the best big sister! What would this little brother do without her?"

YanLi giggles and pats me on the back, pinching my ear,"A-Xian! Really, where's your manners?"

She asks and she giggles, but doesn't push me away, instead she hugs me close.

I'm the one that has to let go first.

I quickly get to my feet and go to run outside,"Ah! I have to go get some rocks to start playing the game, be right back, sister!"

I ignore her 'But you have pebbles here', and rush outside.

I can feel the heat starting to take over my face.

As I hugged YanLi I felt two very distinct bumps on her chest.

Ike's laughter wasn't helping things, either.

Chapter End Notes

If that doesn't answer the 'does he like girls?' then yes, he can appreciate the fairer sex.

But AGF!WWX will have a 'pretty boy' thing that will make his days in Gusu hilarious.

WWX is a strong swordplay opponent against anyone that hasn't already spent years
training in swordplay (and good swordplay at that) so whilst he would lose against say, LXC or NMJ, he'd be even matched with LWJ and JZX (although the Peacock might get to endure WWX's dirty moves because he feels like being a little shit).

The System highlighting openings and certain moves he can make isn't something new, just never written about in-story, I think. Once the Player gets to a certain level in Skills, that happens. It's a way for the System to 'help' the Player without being too overbearing.

For example, the Foraging Skill highlights all forageables in the area (if there's visibility or the Player has sufficient level to know how to forage them).

I know very little about swordplay so forgive my inexperience. Apart from the 'stick them with the pointy end' there's isn't much short of saying 'they were defeated/cut down/sliced to ribbons'.

A difference over the years, WWX still wants his mountain (and he'll get it) but with the way he's built things he believes that the mountain might only become something of a rest stop for the Remnants (meaning, they'll likely leave to go hide/live elsewhere) /But we knows that's not happening/

For the family thing, he doesn't really plan on interacting with the outside world much and he wouldn't force anyone to live on the Burial Mounds (he's also not even considering living with LWJ in Gusu) so it's looking 'bleak'. (Have no worries tho, because this WWX is going to get a big happy family of his own)

And maturity means that all the kids going 'I want to be like WWX and nigh-hunt' are now starting to realize just how easily the kid could've ended up killed. And are very glad their parents didn't allow them to do it.

Just research Traditional Chinese dancing and let your imagination run wild. WWX really did get a laugh at the whole thing (and how he convinced Mistress Zhu to teach them to him /or even let him dress up/ is up to the reader).

FengMian really does hope WWX decides to stay. JC knows better.

YanLi's ring means 'Red Lightning', which will come into play later and serve as a little nod to her (soon-to-be) infamous 'nickname'/title'

Poor WWX, his body has recently discovered boobs, and it doesn't know how to react.
Chapter Summary

A brief interlude before I try to get back into regular updates.
(Life's a mess)

Chapter Notes

I'll explain things fully at the end of the chapter.
Sorry for taking so long to update, things have been hard over my side of the screen.

Fanart!
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188623793537/
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188673979202/
https://sialu-the-arts-cat.tumblr.com/post/189019690663/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"If you just watch a teenager, you see a lot of uncertainty." - Jamie Lee Curtis

Chapter 65: Roller-Coaster

On the spring of my 14th year, I was named Head Disciple of my generation - a full year earlier than usual - and was granted permission to flutter around the country so long as I returned to Yunmeng every few weeks - lest, of course, if I sent word I would be going to a further away area and wouldn't be able to return within that time frame - which was awesome.

Jiang Cheng had turned thirteen a few days after I turned fourteen and was taken to the swordsmith a week before Christmas. Or well, what I considered to be a week before Christmas as this world didn't have the holidays I was so used to.

I would never admit it, but I kind of missed Halloween, if only because it was my frikin' birthday and I'd get to dress up in scary costumes and get free candy from people.

Technically, only the children get to trick or treat.

But people don't need to know that to kick start the holiday into existence.

How you're supposed to be the Head Disciple and yet still remain so childish is beyond me.

I'm surprisingly smart and hardworking, plus there's my reputation for getting things done quickly and efficiently.
I grumbled under my breath as I remembered the various incidents and encounters I had had with... 'spirited' young ladies trying to get lucky with the 'rising star of Yunmeng'.

After the... incident, with YanLi I had quickly discovered that this body was very, very responsive to stimuli. Active or passive stimuli, at that.

There were an awkward four or so weeks before I managed to get control over them, mind you, it was a very flimsy control I wouldn't bet money on holding up if the stimuli continued for a few minutes longer. But I managed to keep myself calm and cool while trying to extricate myself of that situation and make a run for my dignity.

But, as I ought to do in this life, I rolled with the punches and made the best of my recurring shitty luck and timing. That is...

You learnt how to flirt.

I bit my tongue to keep from laughing.

While dealing with a handful of junior disciples high on hormones and trying to make themselves puff up in front of the ladies was, in a polite way, exasperating to say the least, it had also given me the chance to start one of Wei WuXian's biggest traits.

He was a big flirt.

I never really went anywhere with it, just coy smiles and winks, jokes and small talk with subtle undertones that left all the girls blushing and boys jealous, but it was something alright.

Jiang Cheng had started puberty shortly after hitting thirteen and wow, it was hilarious.

'Course, it also made him very angry and irritable - or, honestly speaking, more angry and irritable than usual - and it had prompt us to get the 'birds and the bees' talk from the Sect Doctor, something that I struggled my hardest not to burst out laughing at the sheer lack of medical or common knowledge and just full-blown 'this is where you put it' and 'this is what a female body looks like'.

I had reasoned on whether or not I should pull Jiang Cheng aside and give him a more in-depth talk and ask him if he had any questions or doubts about something, but seeing him that cherry red and embarrassed I couldn't bring myself to drag him further into the hell that was hormones.

That said, I almost coughed out a lung when I caught him going through porn - which I was betting money it had been Gao, a classmate of his, who had given it to him - and grumbling about how weird the bodies looked.

Apparently he had taken my lessons on how a body was supposed to be drawn to heart, and it was bloody hilarious.

Less so when he asked me if I had seen a naked body before.

To which you had answered honestly.

"Male or female," I asked him, not even blinking at how out-of-the-blue the question came from, still focused on what I was working on.
"Female," He grumbled, starting to turn pink.
"I've seen it," I nod absently,"Why? Curious?"
"So you could draw it?" He asks after a pause.
I stop what I am doing and look up, confused, at him.
Did he just..."You're asking me if I can drawn a naked female body?"
He seems to notice just how awkward that question was and made to get up and flee but I grabbed onto his wrist and pulled him back down.
I looked around to make sure that there were no eavesdroppers and asked him,"And female in particular you want for the face, just the body, or do I let my imagination run wild?"
Jiang Cheng gapes at me and turns redder by the second.
He still answered, though.
That he did.
"Feng, from the grocer's?" He mumbled, not daring to look me in the eye.
Ike quickly brings up the picture of who that girl was exactly.
"Hmm, I'll see what I can do," I nod,"I'll leave it in your room when I'm finished, don't make a ruckus when you get it, if I end up punished for it, you're coming down with me, brother."
He purses him lips and nods before getting up and stiffly walking away.
I just need to ask this, did you just agree to draw a porn picture for him?
I think the proposition over in my head.
I guess, yeah.
Friendship goals?
I made a face at his words and shrugged, let the kid be happy. If he gets caught with it, it's not my problem.
Unless he snitches.
My brother is many things, but a snitch ain't one of them.
And it was true, tell Jiang Cheng a secret and he'll never mumble a word about it.
So, a few days later I left a very, very, very, suggestive sketch of the grocer's daughter in Jiang Cheng's room. Dinner that night was definitely one for the funniest ones I've had in a long time, with Jiang Cheng's bright red blush and stiff posture, plus his dodgy eyes and generally nervous behavior, coupled with Madam Yu's suspicious looks, questions and accusations - in my direction of course -, to which I had endured with a cheery smile and countenance, which only served to confuse YanLi and FengMian even more.
Gods, I barely made it back to my room so I could burst out laughing into my pillow.
I completely blocked out any and all thoughts of what Jiang Cheng would be doing with that sketch; but I definitely gave him a knowing look whenever I saw him.

Soon after that a mysterious package of sugary goods made its way into my bedroom desk.

I didn't need to guess who it had came from.

No, the question was, was this a 'thank you' gift, or a 'hush' bribe?

*Does it matter?*

Well, if it's a gift, then this is all that I'm getting, if it's a bribe, however, I'd appreciate one or two more boxes.

*You're impossible. What kind of person are you?*

What kind of person? What else?

I gave him a very toothy grin.

I'm a man, of course.

Or well... Partly a man, I get confused myself at times.

*You're weird that's what you are.*

Can't argue with that.

---

Sparring against Jiang Cheng was... well, it wasn't exactly blood-pumping exciting - but the fault was entirely mine, fighting against beasts that could kill you in a single swipe of a paw, kind of took the fear out of facing a not-so-fearsome opponent - but it was fun.

And Suibian needed the exercise.

As my body grew taller and my limbs started to stretch out, I had started to 'update' and 'revise' my old moves and attack sequences. I was strong and could toss an opponent away with a swing of my sword, not to mention the 'brawl' like fighting style I would spontaneously bring out during a fight, but I wanted to keep improving without revealing the sheer brute strength I hid under my slim and only slightly muscular frame.

Dear GuanYin in Heaven, was I glad that my Strength Stat did not show as muscles. I would look like a bodybuilder on steroids.

But it was good practice, to learn how to fight on an even level with 'weaker' opponents so as to know how to not bring attention to your own 'unnaturalness'.

And Suibian did need the exercise.

Cultivation swords gained a 'glint' after a certain level of cultivation/fighting experience was reached, something that Liling would never get because it wasn't a cultivator's sword.

The exact wording and logistics went right over my head when I had asked the smith in Yiling - which I frequently wandered off to and totally did not go there just so I could make moon-eyes at the Burial Mounds - but it all boiled down to the metal it was made from and what that sword's function was to be.
See, Suibian was my main weapon, with Xiaodan my backup weapon in case something went south or I had to throw it and pin some prey down, but Liling I had acquired to be a 'support' weapon.

Back when Xiaodan was my main weapon and I needed something more substantial to deal with pesky bandits and persistent idiots who thought I was easy to 'rob blind'.

Liling was never to be my main weapon.

And so, apparently, it would never become a cultivator's sword as whoever forged it, made it unable to conduct Spiritual Energy like Suibian could.

Except, no one had 'forged' it and I could conduct energy perfectly well with it.

I didn't voice my doubts about the man's words and just asked the Sect's smith, who told me pretty much the same thing.

Liling couldn't conduct Spiritual Energy.

In the privacy of my room I had pulled it out of the sheath and sent my Chi into it. The blade lit up with energy and I could feel the power bleeding into the metal.

Irrevocably, Liling was able to conduct Spiritual Energy. So what were the smith's talking about?

The answer came when I had asked Jiang Cheng to try and channel Chi into Liling in one of our bouts.

He couldn't.

Liling didn't spark up like it did with me.

Strange.

It bore more investigation.

I brought out Xiaotong and Xiaohui, the two other blades I had gotten from the Store, - although this was supposedly Xiaohui 1.2, as the original was lost in that Lotus Seed lake - and tried to channel my energy into them. They all lit up, just like Liling did, but, once again, Jiang Cheng was unable to make them spark up.

It was... weird.

Until it wasn't.

I had grabbed Xiaodan and, for the first time, noticed that it had a barely noticeable glow to it. The same glow Suibian had which was only visible to my eyes.

The glow that let me know that Xiaodan wasn't 'up to System's standards' and could be 'upgraded'.

The other blades did not have this glow. Obviously because they came from the System itself, and therefore would work perfectly fine with the System.

Xiaodan, on the other hand, was a gift from the Bai. It didn't come from the Store.

I pushed my energy into it and I was still able to do it, except I had to focus harder on maintaining that energy and not overpowering the blade - which would cause it to shatter -, and there lied my
My energy wasn't the same as Jiang Cheng's.

I used alignments and the System's own cultivation method, my Golden Core was formed through the YunnengJiang practices but my energy itself came from the world around me and directly flowed into my meridians.

My Golden Core was, basically, superfluous.

But at the same time it wasn't.

A Golden Core brought benefits that my usual 'cultivation' couldn't. Such as the stronger body, faster healing, and the 'no-aging' crap that made forty year olds look like they were in their mid-twenties.

Without it I would age just like everyone else, something that did not immediately concerned me.

I mean, what was scary about growing old? I knew I wasn't going to live forever, I had already died of old age once, and apart from not being killed or getting my family and people killed, I was perfectly fine with aging and dying old and grey in my house on the Burial Mounds.

So the potential to losing my 'core', which was something I couldn't exactly ignore as even if I prevented Jiang Cheng from losing his, I still ran the risk of getting jumped by Wen Zhuliu.

But I wasn't going to worry about that now.

What interested me in this moment was the fact that Xiaodan did not respond as my other knives did, yet Suibian reacted as I expected it to react given that it was a cultivator's sword.

Yet Suibian itself was not 'up to System's requirements'.

What did that mean?

*Only one way to find out, dearest.*

"Does the Player wish to align this item [Xiaodan] with the System?"

[YES] [NO]

I mentally pressed [YES] and watched as Xiaodan started to glow in my hands. The glow fully encompassed the blade until I couldn't see it, I still felt the weight of it in my hands but I couldn't look at it without my eyes burning with how bright the glow was.

Then it started fading.

"Item [Xiaodan] fully aligned with the System's requirements."

There were markings running down the blade, upon a closer look they seemed to be swirling flames, and the blade felt more responsive in my hand. The second my energy touched it, let my Chi run freely within it. No more 'barrier' or fear of it shattering under the weight of my Spiritual Energy.

It was certainly something.

But was my Chi that much different from other people's?
If so, wouldn't someone have noticed something was off by now?

Every so often, disciples were required to visit the Sect Doctor for a check-up which involved making sure that all the meridians and Golden Core were functioning as they should. Because of my special circumstances, and various stunts I pulled over the years, I was well acquainted with this type of check-up and knew that if something was different in my Spiritual Energy then someone would've already thrown a fit over it.

Remembering the Jin elder that wanted to know my 'secret' for faster cultivation, and the Wen's rather dodgy attempt at figuring me out, was something that came to mind when I thought of my variation of Spiritual Energy.

Which wasn't really a variation as much as me using the whole spectrum of Spiritual Energy and not just bits and pieces of it.

Well, to be fair, I was a well-rounded cultivator, with pretty balanced alignments - although I tended to side with my Fire Alignment more often than not - with the slight weaker Air Alignment than I probably should have, considering what was in store for me.

I was also making sure that Jiang Cheng and the other disciples were also growing into their more latent alignments, while also accepting that there were better ways to accomplish a goal, instead of always rushing in head-first. Which was a bit hypocritical of me, since I often did rush head-first into danger, and showed no signs of stopping that.

*Which will get you in serious hot water someday, mark my words.*

I am aware and I do not care, at the moment, given that my priorities lie elsewhere right now.

*Yes, prioritize other's safety while painting a big red target on your own back.*

The target was already there to begin with.

*You're impossible to argue with sometimes.*

Only sometimes? Really, Ike, it seems as if you don't know me.

*Unfortunately I do.*

So did it have anything to do with my approach to Energy? Or was there something else?

Why would a sword or item have to be altered in order for it to function with the System?

*Maybe because people don't know about alignments?*

Would that change anything? A sword is a sword, isn't it?

*Not if you go by this world's smiths. They said Liling would never be a cultivator's sword because it wasn't forged for that purpose.*

So there was more at play here than just energy... And I really didn't want to get into sword making.

*Why ever not?*

Because I'm still trying to get to the bottom of what Spiritual Energy is made of, trying to theorize a valid way of cultivating Yin Energy without being allowed to properly experiment with it, also
trying to figure out a way to trap Yunmeng to high-heavens for when the Wens come, and, lastly, conspiring behind everyone's backs to create a hundred-man crew of people that could literally be called an 'Underground Movement'.

Are there only one hundred of them?

I... I am not sure, exactly. I think I asked ShouShan to stop sending me names and addresses after the hundredth one.

And when was that?

...

...When.

Two years ago?

So there might be one thousand or more people involved in this.

Technically possible?

If anyone ever finds out about this Network...

No one will, there's very limited information that can get out, considering only ShouShan and PeiZhi know the full story, only a third or less (considering I'm going by the hundred-man unit) even know about the Talisman Factory, and even less than that know I'm the one who created this.

From what I understand, I have a pseudonym or 'code-name' in the Network, and only ShouShan has access to my Parrot, although I've planted several other ones in safe houses that connect to 'live-houses' in case of an emergency.

But you still run the risk of someone finding one of these things and connecting the dots about who could possibly be the mastermind behind this.

I'm sure there are more valid suspects than the newly turned fourteen year old.

You, 'the newly turned fourteen year old', are the first person to create, or even imagine, long distance, near instant, communication without the use of third parties. Such as postmen or carrier-birds.

Someone would think this up eventually.

Yeah, eventually... In about 1000 years or more from now. And don't get me started on your own 'secret' stash of blueprints.

I like architecture, sue me!

You've mapped out an entire city, there's improved road systems and your own 'modern' buildings like a schoolhouse and a clinic in there!

I was bored!

Oh, and what about the blueprint labelled 'Dream House'?

...A woman can dream, alright! Jeez, why are you prickly, right now?
Because you don't understand how your genius might actually be terrifying to outsiders.

What's so scary about a free-clinic?

You're turning society as it currently is on its head. You plan on making education freely available, you plan on making books - which only the rich and noble can buy and read - readily printable, not to mention actually getting the commons to be able to read them, and with the inventions you plan on adding...

...When you put it like that, yeah, I can see why you'd call it scary.

And if you think some people will just sit back and allow you to do this without opposition is crazy. You're low-key starting, if not outright instigating, a revolution, at best.

At best?

Yes, at worst, it could be said you're planning to start a revolt.

Because I think society is ass-backwards and needs some fixing up?

Because the rich govern the poor and the poor have no power, whilst you're giving power and opportunities for the poor and taking away the 'birthright' of the nobles of being above everyone else.

Screw the nobles, I'm doing what's right!

I'm not stopping you, I'm telling you to be careful! You're not immortal, you idiot!

Bah, who wants to live forever! I'm getting this set up, maybe instruct ShouShan on half a dozen things, or let PeiZhi and BaoZhai handle them - as they're the ones more versatile when it comes to merchandising and trading - and live a quiet life in my Burial Mounds.

And the city plans?

...It was an honest art study, I wanted to try and see how to 'invent' plumbing, and what sorts of alterations you'd have to make to the houses in order for that to be possible.

You haven't figured it out?

You know I have. Mostly. Maybe. Might require some practical testing.

And the Dream House?

I miss my damn house, okay? But I've grown fond of the traditional architecture of this culture, so I started making up a mix of things.

And you ended with this?

A rather shoddy rendering of what my house supposedly would look like pops up in my mind.

It's not very big, I'd have my room with a big bed and a private bathroom - which would have a very solid bathtub and a shower (God, I miss showers) - and a private study, so I could stop having to hide every single piece of paper with my usual ramblings on it. Then I'd have a kitchen and a eating area, with a living room next to it.

I liked to picture a big yard around it, and one of those cute ponds because I'd also grown used to
Lotus Pier brand of lotus filled lakes.

*Only one room?*

Why would I need another room?

*Kids?*

...This house will go on the Burial Mounds, why would children be there?

*A-Yuan.*

If things work out, and I don't see why it shouldn't, A-Yuan will never end up in Yiling because him and his family will be safe elsewhere.

*And if things don't work out?*

The Network. After the war there's about two years or so of 'exile' before my 'death'. I don't want the Wen Remnants to have to come to the Burial Mounds and be miserable.

*Why would they be miserable?*

As you've often told me, not that many people would be happy on a mountain of corpses.

I hear a sigh beside my ear.

*Listen, when you're done with the Burial Mounds no one would believe that it was once a corpse dumping ground. What happened to the flower infested Burial Mounds? What happened to the Burial Mounds that would make everyone stare in awe?*

I look down at my hands to see them shake.

I'm scared, Ike. Time is running out.

I go to the Cloud Recesses at fifteen. At sixteen there's my 'first' meeting with the Wens. Seventeen the XuanYu. And then the war.

One year for 'canon' to start. One year.

As each day passes I feel like a shadow is starting to hang over my head. But I can't show it. I don't want to worry the others.

Should I tell them? Should I trust someone else with this knowledge? Would they even believe me?

*Oh, darling...*

I'm scared. Can I even do this?

For all my bravado, can I really save them? Help anyone? Will I get them killed?

*Stop this, right now. This kind of mentality will get you nowhere. Get up and get moving. You're not stopping here.*

*You've come this far, eleven years have been put into this goal, into this bright and shiny mountain that will make Jin GuangShan choke on his own ego, and I will not stand and let you bring yourself down with doubts.*
Get. Up.

What am I going to do, Ike?

*You're going to do what you do best. Be yourself. Be your damn annoying, cheerful self, the terrifying self that both adores and exasperates people. You're going to take a break from this hell that is your studies and experiments and you're going to go out and play with the juniors.*

*Hell, I don't know, go to Yiling and help out the old man at his store. Go boat riding, go lotus seed picking with YanLi. Frikin' fly a kite! I don't know. But you're getting out of this room, right now. Or I swear I will make your dreams of steamy Lan Zhan the steamiest.*

I choke on a bark of laughter and shake my head.

Gods no, I liked my sleep and this body was... interesting, to deal with when riled up.

I was so not fond of puberty.

*I make no promises, if I start seeing you having these stupid thoughts again, oh, I will make you regret them.*

Aren't teenagers supposed to be angsty?

*They're also hormone fueled, do you want me spur you on?*

No. Ike, please. See? I'm getting up! I'm going out. I'm going to track down Jiang Cheng and I'll see if he's up for some fun.

As I put Xiaodan back in its sheath and put away Liling, I couldn't help but smile faintly.

For all the roller-coaster of emotions that I seemed fond of undergoing every so often, Ike always knew how to make me feel better.

...I could also try and make puppy dog eyes at YanLi and see if she's willing to make some soup. A-Cheng will help.

And flying a kite doesn't sound like the worst way to spend my time.

Not to mention there were a handful of new little juniors that barely reached my tight that I had yet to meet.

Really, it was like A-She was trying to keep the impressionable youngsters away from me on purpose.

My grin turned wry as I opened my bedroom door and walked out.

Surely not.

(Who am I kidding, the seniors are all offering prayers for sanity now that I, technically, have free reign and range of motion.)

Chapter End Notes
So, I'll start by saying I'm really sorry for taking so long to post another chapter. November this year is starting to be very hard to my family. As you might (or might not) know, I'm the caretaker of one of my immediate/nuclear family members. Their birthday also happens to be in November (the 10th, if you're interested) and this is possibly the last birthday we'll ever have with them. They turned 53, and the odds of them seeing their 54th are pretty low.

The start of the month was a big snowball running downhill, getting larger and larger with each passing day. They've given up, my other family members have given up, and I'm left holding on to someone who does not have it in them to keep struggling. Dementia and ALS, by themselves, are devastating. Combined? I'm not even sure how I'm still reasonably put together.

Dealing with things has been hard. And finding the motivation to write has been hard. I open my doc tool and I stare at the blank pages, knowing that I have the next Arc all planned out, I just need to finish this one arc in order to move onto the next. And the words just don't come.
I've lost track of how many times I've written and rewritten this chapter. Reading all of your comments (because even if I don't immediately message back, I still read each and every one) has given me a much needed light and safe harbour.

I'd like to thank you for all your support. It truly means a lot.

After much intense arguing back and forth with my own brain, I had to skip the planned 'funny WWX discovering his own body' and the awaited 'Night-Hunt with YanLi'. I really couldn't write them, I'm sorry.
As much as I want to say I could've potentially delayed this chapter further until I could reliably write those scenes, I desperately need to start writing again.
Stopping now, letting this whole situation drag me under to that black void I know I won't make it back out again, is something that I cannot do.

So I'm sorry, if you were really excited for those scenes. I could try to add them later? If I ever revise the previous chapters? An outtake? I don't know.
You guys have been amazing and so damn sweet, that I really wish I could give you all those good and super cool scenes. But I'm not back at 100% yet.
It's easy to ignore time passing by when there's a lot of it, but when you're at the end of the line it makes it very, very hard to let go. To deal with.

But I really need to keep my head above water. So I'm tackling on AGF like a lifeline. Apologies if the writing seems kind of scattered, mind's a mess, most often than not.
Flying

Chapter Summary

Some fun time with the tiny juniors, lessons about loopholes, and Ike is afraid of heights.

Chapter Notes

Fanart!
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188623793537/
https://28sanyok09.tumblr.com/post/188673979202/
https://sialu-the-arts-cat.tumblr.com/post/189019690663/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Right" he said "Let's get one thing clear. I am not here to teach you law-I am here to teach you loopholes." — Catherine Jinks, Evil Genius

Chapter 66: Flying

So, little juniors from ages six to ten usually live in dorms, supervised by older disciples - ages fourteen through eighteen, they rotate - and they have a light work course. Back when A-Cheng and I were that young, we usually had the afternoon open to get the energy out of our system before dinnertime.

Which was a smart move if you didn't want a dozen or so wild hellions hyped on energy before bedtime.

And, to my delight, all the littlest juniors liked to play together in the main courtyard under the supervision of any passing senior, making it super easier for me to recruit a troupe of tiny minions in search of entertainment.

"What are you doing, A-Ying?" Senior Bao, a sixteen year old disciple who I sometimes sparred with, asked me as I passed him by with my eight ducklings tottering after me.

"Eh? Why the suspicious look, Bao-xiong?" I ask him with an innocent look.

He sighs,"Will you not get the children in trouble?"

I scoff,"Everyone knows that if they get in trouble with me, then I'm the only one punished." I wave him off,"Besides, we're not going to do anything against the rules, I'm teaching them how to fly kites."
He blinks. "That's surprisingly reasonable of you."

I roll my eyes."Oh, ye of so little faith. I am a responsible person, ya' know?"

His expression tells me he believes none of my words.

"Wei-xiong," Little A-Shui, six years old and the youngest of the bunch, pulls a big at my pants,"Are we not gonna be able to fly kites?"

I smile down at her,"No worries, A-Shui, this senior promised to take you flying kites, and I don't break my promises!" I boop her on the nose.

She giggles and smiles, showing a small tooth gap.

Seriously, this kid was too adorable for my poor heart.

"Just be careful around the riverbank, I know you know how to swim but they don't," Senior Bao advises me.

I nod and politely bow in return,"Of course, Bao-xiong, I will keep a careful eye on all of them."

"And don't leave the Sect Compound! They're not allowed until they're...!" Bao calls out as we walk away.

"I know! Don't worry, senior, this disciples will take good care of the ducklings!" I wave at him cheerfully.

A-Cui, another little six year old - but still older than A-Shui, poor girl was destined to be the baby of the bunch - giggled behind her hands, followed by A-Shui and A-Zhi, their classmate and designated 'protector' as I understood from A-Chan's - seven years old - whispered explanations.

"Alright everyone, listen up, we're gonna pair up. Buddy-system, as I call it, no one goes anywhere alone and I want everyone to stick together," I inform my little minions. "Oldest one with the youngest one, and following that pattern, pair up!"

There was some mild confusion and switching around as they got their birthdays involved, but we were off to gather kites and head to the riverbank where the older disciples usually flew theirs.

I was leading the group with A-Cao, one of the juniors I had given the introduction tour to two years ago, was at the end of the line with A-Shui, making sure that none of the little ones broke off and went 'exploring'.

Not that I had to worry, my little juniors were super well-behaved.

To you only, I assure you. Since you spoil them with stories and 'play time', they do their best to stay on your good side.

No they don't! Ike, really, these tykes are innocent.

In your eyes only, you're a terrible influence.

I mentally roll my eyes at him and get everyone to the riverbank quickly.

The eight year olds - and the nine year old who decided to join us, A-Hu, - could fly kites by themselves, so it was just making sure they didn't run blindly and fall into the water.
The six year olds needed help keeping their kites flying, thankfully there were only two, so it was manageable.

"It's flying! It's flying!" A-Shui gleefully yelled, with that shrill little kid's voice that made me twinge a bit.

I loved kids, but damn they had a set of lungs on them.

And the 'squeaky-toy' whistle stuck in their throats.

I laughed and covered it by ruffling it her hair, pretending I was laughing at her joy and not at my invisible friend's comment.

"I want mine to fly too! Wei-xiong, help me!" A-Cui pouted at me.

I grinned, bemused, down at her and placed my hands on my hips, "What do you have to say, first, A-Cui?"

She makes puppy dog eyes at me, but, unfortunately for her, I'm immune to them. She holds them for a few seconds before caving in,"Please help me, Wei-xiong. A-Cui can't make her kite fly."

I chuckle and tweak her nose,"Okay, okay, this senior will help his adorable shimei," I say as I take her kite from her hands and teach her how to hold the string.

A-Cui preens as I call her adorable, and I don't think I imagined A-Shui cutely glaring at her with a pout, with A-Zhi inching away from her.

You're start a civil war in the junior dorms if you're not careful, you know.

Eh? What did I do?

Little girls with puppy-crushes.

You think they'd fight it out because I called one adorable?

Remember Martha and her 'bestest friend'?

Oh... Yeah, we'll nip that in the bud if it acts up.

I run a bit to get the kite up and flying before walking back to the group and watching them as they run around with their kites.

I hear some faint giggling from behind and subtly shift so I can see what it is from the corner of my eye.

There's a group of older sect disciples, female, who I rarely if ever interacted with - that was more of A-jie's area - watching me and the juniors from afar. Pointing and whispering to one another before starting to giggle again, actually they looked a bit re-...

Oh.

I look away from them and twitch, feeling my body grow hotter, and blood threatening to rush to my face in a luminescent blush.

Damn, they were observing me.
And giggling.

*Wei WuXian, the ultimate heart-breaker, what would your Lan Zhan say?*

Ike, we are not doing this now!

*Weren't you the one who wanted to create an immunity against this sort of attention? Well, there's not better time to practice then.*

I've got literal chills down my spine.

*Well, they are pretty, even if we both know that someone is much better good looking than them.*

I take a deep breath through my nose and pretend that I can't hear the giggling coming from behind me.

We don't even know what Lan WangJi looks like. We haven't seen each other since we were like five years old.

*Aah, but we can make a decently educated guess.*

And then Ike has the gall to bring up the memory of the portrait *I* drew for my niece.

...The delicate features of the golden eyed man caught my eye immediately.

Ike, that's foul play!

*Oh? Should I take it away then?*

Yes!

*Well, okay.*

The picture disappears only to be replaced by Mistress Zhu dancing a complicated dance with light silk robes, which curved nicely around her hips and-...

Oh, my dear lord in Heaven, **IKE**!

There's loud ringing laughter in my ears, and my heart is pounding in my chest. It definitely takes some focus to keep a blush from rising on my cheeks or neck, and directing it away from my south bits too.

"Wei-xiong! Look, look!" A-Hou, the shy kid from two years ago, laughed as he ran, looking back at me.

And promptly tripping over and face-planting onto the ground.

Xian Qiu and Feng Hu snort and look away from him with quivering shoulders, while A-Cao runs to help him.

I got to make sure the kid hadn't hurt himself anywhere.

"Oww... Ow..." The kid sniffled as I turned his arms and legs to make sure there weren't any cuts anywhere.

"Just bumps and bruises, buddy," I gently ruffle his head,"Let's be more careful next time, alright?"
He nods, still sniffling, and curls into my side.

I sigh and rub his back until he feels ready to get back to his friends.

*If you look back now, I think half the girls are cooing or fainting from the sheer cuteness of the scene.*

Go to hell, Ike.

He chuckles lowly in my ears and ignores me.

"Wei-xiong!" Feng Hu - or A-Hu, as I called him - turns to me, still holding his kite,"Is it hard to ride a horse?"

I hum,"Not really? It's scary at first because horses are quite big, but apart from learning how to jump, horse-riding is easy to learn."

"I wish I could ride a horse," A-Shui pouts.

"We're not allowed until we're older," Lei Chan, the oldest girl here, tells her.

"I supposed I could let you ride one with me," I ponder aloud,"You won't technically be riding it."

Feng Hu shoots that down,"Wei-xiong will get in trouble with the Madam!"

All the juniors shiver.

I suppress my amusement and nod,"True... But what if we didn't use a horse?"

The juniors, including the one curled up at my side, look up at me with various degrees of confusion.

I give them a wide toothy grin.

"Did you know, my sweetest and adorable shidi and shimei, that this senior has a personal mount?"

I ask them.

Their eyes widen.

*Your Senior was right to worry about this outing. You are getting into so much trouble.*

The rules state that they aren't allowed on horses, specifically stated too, but there's nothing that says they're not allowed on donkeys.

*And you just happen to have one in the stables.*

Donkey needs the exercise anyways.

"Why am I not surprised you find yet another rule to break," Jiang Cheng sighs as he watches me lead Donkey in a circle, with the two littlest juniors on his back, giggling and awing.

Donkey was loving the attention, especially when I whispered that it was the kids' first ride on any mount and he beat all the horses of the Sect in giving them their first riding lesson.

Every so often he'd look at the mare that resided in the stall opposite to his and snort.
I got the impression that she rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm not breaking anything, didi," I laughed,"Bending them, sure, but no rule breaking happening here."

"Clearly something that needs to be revised," Madam Yu comments.

I jump, startled, and look back at Jiang Cheng - who's too amused for his continued well-being - before my eyes fly to the Madam of the Jiang Sect, walking to stand beside her son.

Busted~!

Shut up, you.

Someone's in trouble~!

Shush.

"Oh oh," A-Shui perfectly summarizes the situation.

"We're not getting to ride Sir Donkey again?" A-Zhi asks one of the other minions, and is promptly shushed.

"Do you want to be punished?" Feng Hu hisses at him.


"Hey, Donkey deserves respect, he's a certified Cultivator's Mount!" I manage to retort with an even tone of voice.

"Really?!" A-Cui gasps.

A-Shui looks equally impressed.

"Yup," My lips tremble,"But now we need to end this joyride before the Madam comes in the circuit to drag us all out," I stop Donkey's walk and pluck them both off his back and back to firm ground,"A-Hu, can you make sure everyone gets back to the dorms?" I ask him.

"Yes, Wei-xiong!" He beams, happy to be helpful.

And get away from the scene without Madam Yu biting his head off.

That too.

"Wei WuXian, you have a talent for finding loopholes everywhere," Madam Yu comments.

"It's purely by accident, Madam Yu, I'm not doing it on purpose," I tell her.

This time, at least.

She scoffs, and probably would've rolled her eyes at me if it was dignified, and gestures for another disciple to take Donkey's lead from me,"Come, I have a task for you."

I blink and look at Jiang Cheng, but he shrugs and follows after his mother. I quickly catch up to them.

"You are going night-hunting soon, aren't you?" She asks.
"Yes, Ma'am, I'm planning to tour the surrounding towns before trying to go any further. For Sect Leader Jiang's peace of mind," I answer.

Madam Yu sneers,"I suspect he tried to make you reconsider that decision."

I nod,"Correct, Ma'am."

Jiang Cheng frowns by my side and I wonder if it is because his father is still showing too much attention to me.

"You are the Head Disciple of your generation now, a bit too early I suspect, given the activities you choose to spend your time on," She comments,"It is expected of you to start night-hunting without supervision, and often times leading night-hunts."

"I understand, Ma'am," I nod.

"Then make sure that whatever activities below that of a Head Disciple of the Jiang Sect are kept inside the walls of the Compound and never outside them," She warns me.

"This disciple will heed the Madam's words," I lower my head slightly.

Jiang Cheng gives me a sidelong look. I wink at him. He rolls his eyes.

"The exploration of the recently discovered tunnel is over and it has been deemed safe to use," Madam Yu speaks.

I flinch at the memory of darkness and bitter agony that was the tiny room, something that neither Jiang Cheng or Madam Yu miss, but plow through it and take a deep breath before shaking away the thoughts.

"D-Do you wish for us to secure the tunnel using new seals?" I ask her, clearing my throat at the first word.

"No," Madam Yu answers,"For all of your gifts and aptitude, Wei WuXian, I am not handing the responsibility of securing a secret entrance to the heart of the Sect over to a fourteen year old," She sneers.

Point.

"I want you to work with several other seniors, who have been disciples of this Sect for longer than both of you have been alive, and are completely loyal to the Sect, to secure the tunnel and it's entrances," She tells us.

Pretty routine work, Jiang Cheng and I could possibly do it by ourselves - my lovable little brother had taken a shine to utterly dismantling my talismans and test arrays as a sort of hobby, for some reason - but I was relieved to not having to go near the tunnels again.

I had already stressed myself enough with walking into the Ancestral Hall in order to visit my parent's altar every other week, so there was no need to intensify the uncomfortable feeling that there were nightmare-fuel rooms not twenty feet from me, by going in and out of the tunnels in order to make it so that anyone not invited in couldn't waltz inside the Sect.

But there was a golden opportunity being dangled in front of my nose right now.

"Won't a new array system beneath the Sect conflict with the already existing defensive array?" I
ask her, mentally crossing my fingers that she didn't know the answer, wouldn't look too into it, and let me see the array plans and location.

Madam Yu stops walking and turns to look at me, thankfully I was growing taller so it there wasn't that much of a height difference - hopefully it would disappear entirely before the war started - "You are studying arrays, aren't you?"

I nod, seeing no point in lying,"Arrays are somewhat more complicated to create than Talismans, but more rewarding. Plus most are self-sufficient, so there isn't a need to constantly feed the array Spiritual Energy in order to keep them in pristine condition."

"And how advanced are you in your studies?" Madam Yu asks.

I fidget in place,"I...I'm near a level where I can reliably produce any array I have studied before, and should start to be able to create my own variations of arrays soon."

Jiang Cheng looks impressed,"Aren't arrays super complicated to change because of how seals interact with each other?"

I shrug,"If you understand the theory behind the energy, you have a lot more freedom about what to pick and choose and rearrange."

Jiang Cheng frowns,"You're still going on about how there's more to Spiritual Energy than just energy."

I sigh,"I'm telling you, it's sentient. And I will prove it!"

Madam Yu breaks up the conversation before it can get off-topic,"I'll see about getting the defensive array schematics brought up from the vaults."

Vaults?

"vaults?" I echo.

Madam Yu gives me a look,"Just because you are favored by my husband doesn't mean you are privy to every secret of this Sect, and I strictly forbid you from ever trying to find them."

I raise my hands in a show of submission,"I wasn't going to. I'm already too busy working on my own projects to go search for more trouble."

"Oh?" She lifts an eyebrow at my words,"And what projects might those be?"

Oh, you got played.

I did not.

Yeah? Well, what are you answering then, genius?

Ugh... Well... Hmm..."Pillow books," I answer.

Jiang Cheng turns a very unattractive shade of red and looks away from us.

Madam Yu gives me an unimpressed look.
"What are your actual projects," She demands.

Well, it was worth a try.

*Writing pillow books isn't a bad idea, think of all the stories we have cooped up in our brain.*

Technically it's my brain only, you just reside in it.

*Semantics.*

"Some talismans I have been working on for a while, they're faulty and I want to improve them. Arrays bring a wider variety of ways that I can improve them with, and I'm trying to get them working to a certain standard. Finally, I am interested in knitting," I answer her.

Jiang Cheng looks at be, taken aback,"Knitting?!"

I shrug,"It passes the time."

"You could spend that time sparring!" He tells me.

"Against who?" I ask him,"The oldest disciple that has enough free time to spar now is Senior She, and he doesn't spar with me after the last time I almost broke his ribs," I inform him.

Jiang Cheng huffs.

"You almost broke his ribs?" Madam Yu frowns.

"We were using practice swords, I used too much strength, my attack hit him in the ribs," I explained.

"Why were you using practice swords?" Madam Yu is still frowning.

"I wanted to see how far I could go at full strength," Or like, seventy five percent strength,"And just in case someone got hurt, which it did, I didn't want it to be gashes or open wounds. And it was my fault, I targeted an opening and Senior She couldn't parry it, struck him firmly in the ribs."

I made sure to tone down on my attacks after that, and only matched pace with my opponent, never upping the pace unless they did first.

Made worse by the fact that I could read everyone's attacks before they came at me, and it sucked because the fun of sparring against someone was quickly dwindling down.

"Have you asked YanLi to spar with you again?" Madam Yu asks.

Jiang Cheng grimaces, he'd fought YanLi and he wouldn't want a repeat.

Whoever said our sister was a sweet girl who could do no wrong, clearly had never seen her wield Chidian. Goddess reincarnated she might be, don't think of messing with her, she'll have you crying for mercy not two minutes after activating her new weapon.

"I'll think about it," I edge way from giving a definitive answer.

"When you are in the Sect Compound I expect you to spar against her, it's a waste of potential lounging around the practice grounds. And more so when you bring the moral of the other disciples down by not even trying when fighting against them," She tells me, booking no argument.
Guess someone's getting their ass kicked pretty frequently from now on.

I can beat Shijie, I just don't like Chidian.

Because it hurts getting hit by it?

I grumble at him and leave the conversation at that.

"We are here, Madam Yu," A man, maybe early to mid-twenties - who knows anymore, Golden Cores cheat -, bows to her.

"Good, introductions," Madam Yu walks to the side and introduces the four men lined up,"This is Hai ZheLan, he is the one responsible for this project; Duan YiJun, Hao XinYue, and Tian JianHao. This is my son Jiang Cheng, and the Head Disciple Wei WuXian, they will help with this project."

"Greetings," Jiang Cheng and I bow to the men.

"Likewise," The men bow in return,"Should we get started now, Madam?" Hai ZheLan asks.

Madam Yu nods,"Whenever you are ready to start, your rooms have been set up in the guest wind, I am sure that Sect Leader Jiang will ask for you to be present at dinner tonight."

Hai ZheLan smiles,"We will be honored to attend dinner with the Jiang Clan."

Madam Yu walks away and leaves us after that.

Hai ZheLa turns to look at us and his smile turns the slightly strained.

He has no idea about your abilities and I suspect he might try to condescend you.

Just let him try.

"Should we get started, gentleman?" I ask them,"Have you been informed of what the project involves and requires?"

They blink, surprised, but they recover quickly,"Of course."

"Then how many layers are we making the array? Or are you making several arrays intertwined together? Maybe even a single layered array that spans the length of the tunnel?" I ask them in quick succession.

Jiang Cheng struggles not to show his amusement, having noticed the men's shifting countenance, and remains standing at my side.

The men fumble to answer.

I grin innocently at them.

Oh, fun days ahead.

This was awesome.

This is crazy and you should go back down. Like. Right now.

Don't be such a wet blanket, Ike, this is perfectly safe.
My darling dearest, I don't believe you, can you please stop this and go back down.

Hmm... Alright.

I turn Suibian into making a nose dive out of the sky.

Ike screams in the back of my head.

"Whohoo!" I laugh, narrowly avoiding going 'splat' on the ground and take up to the skies again.

I genuinely believe you hate me at times.

Oh, don't be such a drama queen, Ike. Live a little!

I will make you regret this.

You'll get used to this, just remember, we'll have to start flying about everywhere pretty soon.

Flying swords are unnatural.

Really? Jeez, and here I was thinking that Walking Corpses, Fierce Corpses and all sorts of Beasts and Ghosts walking about were totally normal.

Sarcasm doesn't suit you.

Chill, Ike. Look, I'm outside and exercising! I'm not cooped up in my room hiding under tons of paper and scribbles!

Progress.

Don't be such a grouch. Look, just another hour or so and then I promise I'll head back inside so we can do some quiet time or something.

Quiet time doing what?

Hmm, I'm thinking of working on those robes, ya know, the black and red one?

The Yiling Patriarch robes?

Yeah, I'm going on an estimate on how big I need to make them, given that I'll be, what, seventeen? when I become the Yiling Patriarch?

I think seventeen is a pretty good guess, and you know the Yiling Patriarch was 186 cm tall.

Yeah, but was I already that tall at seventeen or did I grow a couple inches during the war?

Make it for 186 cm, even if it looks a bit loose on you, we can adapt them temporarily.

True. So it's a plan?

Sure, I'll just go lie down in a corner and block out the outside world until you're ready to go inside.

What's so scary about this, Ike?

You're flying. On a sword. What if you fall?
Well, it's going to be a pretty damn embarrassing way to die, won't it?

*I'm not dealing with this, call me when you're back on firm ground.*

Chicken!

*I'll pay you back for this.*

Oh, I'm so scared!

*I'll hit you when you least expect it.*

I'm quaking in my pointy toed boots!

Ike grumbles for a few seconds before my mind goes quiet. I can still feel him in there, a comforting presence, but he's not actively making white noise or acting as my talkative Jiminy Cricket.

It's weird having 'space' inside my own head to myself.

Having grown so used to his presence and voice, whenever he goes quiet, it's startling obvious something was missing.

I shake my head and decide to make the most of my time up in the sky.

Flying felt great.

The wind on my face, the whooshing sound of air blowing past my ears, ruffling my hair and making the loose edges of my robes flap, it was divine. I grinned at the feeling.

The freedom.

Flying was amazing.

For some reason I had the distinct feeling that Suibian felt the same.

The same love for the open air and the freedom that came from being carried by the winds.

The empowering feeling that bubbled forth when you actively went against the winds.

It was amazing.

I took a deep breath of crisp clear air.

It was cold.

I laughed.

I was happy. *Really* happy.

Aah, I thought, Moments like these are worth it all.

I love this world. This life. This existence.

I love it all.

I lift a hand up at the sky and see the sparkling sun rays through my fingers.
Words are spoken and carried away by the wind.

Nothing more needed to be said.

Chapter End Notes

An early update (to some, it's late over here) yay!
Thank you so much for the responses in the last chapter, you guys are amazing. So thank you, very much. (You made me cry, and I'm an ugly crier 😞)

I heard this lullaby last week, and I can't get it out of my head (like, I love it. Unreasonably fascinated with it and I am using it, in many, many future fic. I'll just make it my go-to Lullaby from now on.) So I just had the urge to hand WWX a cuddly child to hold (because there's still a bit of time left before he meets baby A-Ju and gets his rather big brood of children).
So here you go, WWX surrounded by small children where he's at his most natural and softest.
(LWJ get back here! You're not supposed to appear for two or so chapters yet!)

These juniors will appear later in-story (WWX's minions) and they'll be Jiang Cheng's main source of headaches.
"S-S-Sir..."
"What is it?" *glaring*
"There's a situation in the courtyard, sir."
"Who's causing it?"
"Uh... Well..."
"Don't tell me. It's the hellions again." *sighs*
"Yes Sir."
"Which ones?"
"All of them."
"F*ck"

I find Ike being scared of heights hilarious. I have no idea why, it just makes me bust a gut out laughing. So here we go, Ike is terrified of heights.
And he'll totally make WWX pay for this. (he's so waiting for when they arrive in Gusu)

Also, before I forget (like I did just before coming back to edit the chapter) Arc IV is starting after the next chapter. So we'll have one final chapter (67) for Arc III, and then we'll move on with Arc IV Gusu.
Chapter Summary

When it's the last day before heading to Gusu.
Where there's feels and worrying, and Jiang Cheng is a good little brother.

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, back again, AGF is back, tell a friend.
Yes, I know, cheesy. But c'mon! It's Christmas and I'm feeling cheery.
Or well, it's the holidays of whichever religion you follow.
And I hope you guys are well and happy and excited for what's to come!
Updates will still be irregular until I get my massive cache of chapters up and running,
so tonight you get a big chapter to devour.
Mind the spelling mistakes though, my computer was wiped clean and it has decided
that it dislikes my writing in english to the point that it ignores it as actual writing and
not squiggles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

+ A Game for the Fool +

"Let's just say that the theater is not for the faint of heart." - Phylicia Rashad

Chapter 67: Curtain Call

There were moments when I woke up or I walked along the Piers of Yunmeng and thought to
myself:
I must be dreaming.
It wasn't that I couldn't believe that I was here, or that something weird was happening.
But because everything was so beautiful, so colorful, bright... Alive.
Everything was so alive. Connected.

Today was the day before last in regards to our departure to study at Gusu.

I was fifteen years old, when I returned to Yunmeng next year I would be sixteen. And a couple of
months after that there would be a Discussion Conference in Qishan, where I would meet Wen
Ning for the first time - and soundly kick the ass of the competition in the Archery Challenge -
before the QishanWen Sect decided to start the downward spiral towards war.
I took a deep breath and felt the cool scent of the lake tickle my nose.

I was fifteen years old.

I had been living in this world for twelve years.

Truly, sometimes, everything felt like a dream.

The sun rose in the sky and chased away the dark hues of the night, the water shimmered under its rays and I could see the many lotus blossoms floating here and there.

Jiang Cheng was still asleep - as was much of the Sect, seriously I needed to stop waking up at four in the morning unable to go back to sleep - but Little Love had decided to accompany me on my early ass walk around the Compound. After about two rounds around it, I decided to come sit by one of the piers with and gaze out at the water.

Little Love sprawled over my lap and I absently ran my fingers through her thick fur.

Yunru was... somewhere.

Honestly, I woke up some mornings with her curled up beside my head, other times I would only see her during dinner time when she came to make puppy eyes at my food.

She knew she was coming to Gusu with me, though.

*A bad idea.*

It's an excellent idea, Ike.

*Pets are not allowed in the Cloud Recesses, such as why Jiang Cheng is not allowed to bring his puppies.*

Not that they can be called 'puppies' anymore...

Little Love, Jasmine and Princess were officially joining Jiang Cheng and I during our regular night-hunts - and Jiang YanLi when she joined us, although more often than not she went with Madam Yu for special training (which I had experience the results of, and I low-key pitied Jin ZiXuan if he tried his old tricks on her) - having finished their training to become spiritual dogs.

And boy, were these girls vicious against Yao and Beasts.

I had seen Jasmine rip the hand of a Fierce Corpse right off its decayed arm.

You bet I made sure to give her a nice treat afterwards. Forget getting on their bad side, having stitches done by the Sect Doctor the old-fashioned way with no anesthesia and proper sterialization gave me nightmares.

*So, how are you planning to smuggle Yunru in?*

I'll think of something.

*When you inevitably fail, I will laugh and say 'I told you this was a bad idea'.*

Shove off, I don't see you spouting suggestions.

*How about, leaving the water-rat here and not taking her to Gusu?*
I sigh.

Can't.

*Can't or won't.*

Fine, won't.

Why?

I need Yunru with me.

...Again, why?

I sighed again, deeper this time, and Little Love's ears flickered. She made a low whine sounds and I scratched her behind the ears.

She went boneless against me, tail wagging lazily to show contentment.

I need her there, I guess. An anchor.

*Anchor?*

We're out of time, Ike.

*There's still months before the war.*

No, this is it. Once I reach Gusu everything will be out of my hands. No matter how many more updates I can do to the Parrots, how many more contingencies I can request to have put in place, or how many plans I can have squirreled away in my sleeves... This is it.

Showtime.

The snowball has already reached the peak of the mountain.

When they call us to attend the Re-education of the Wens... That will be the last push needed to send it barreling downhill.

I took a deep breath and savoured the scent of the lake.

My thoughts curled inwards and outwards like thick black vines, growing from the black hole in my mind and reaching out to everything.

Everything.

Nothing.

Void.

Balance.

I had made a breakthrough regarding the Energy of this world last month, after working on the defensive Array around the secret tunnel and adding a few extra - and very secret - additions of my own creation to the Defensive Array around the Compound. I had known that Energy was alive for a while, mostly because it responded to stimuli differently depending on what you did.

The System and its peculiar view of how Energy was supposed to work - and which I agreed
wholeheartedly - mentioned Rituals.

Rituals which were supposed to contact beings made of Energy.

Or well, I assumed they were made of Energy because they weren't physical beings. They were invisible to the naked eye but ever-present. They lived in the Energy around us, feeding the world and everything in it.

When the uninformed cultivator read the rituals all that they thought of them were 'weird practices involving gods and deities', which wasn't out of the realms of possibilities, but never looked further into it. Why would one look twice at a scrawled out rune in chalk with a lit incense stick? Weren't offerings left out on altars a common occurrence? Sure, the rune looked odd and there was no statue the offerings were given to, but those were details that you could miss unless you were searching specifically for them.

I knew better.

I had been working on a prototype for an ice-box - don't ask, I was bored - and had used one of the rituals I had learnt from the Store to coat the inside of the box with ice.

Or... Well... That was what I had been trying to do.

The ritual mentioned offerings of fruit, so me being my usual thoughtless self brought a bunch of random fruit and placed it in the array while chanting the small invocation - similar to a prayer, so I could see how people could get the two confused - and half-expecting nothing to happen.

What I was not expecting was for the fruit to decay in seconds - except for the grapes, apparently ice spirits dislike grapes - and the box to suddenly burst apart because of the giant piece of solid ice that shot out of the ritual array inside of it.

I had stared at the ice for a solid minute, unable to process what the hell had happened, until Jiang Cheng opened the door to my room to ask for something.

We both stared at the ice for a few seconds longer before he glared at me.

"What did you do?" He sighs.

I look back at him, betrayed,"Platypus! What makes you think I had anything to do with this?! I could be innocent!"

Jiang Cheng gives me his 'are you serious' look that makes him look so damn similar to his mother, and asks:"Do you really want me to answer that? We are in your room. There is a piece of ice in the middle of your room, when it is not cold enough for it to exist. What did you do?"

I pout at him and cross my arms,"You're so mean to me, A-Cheng, and I've done nothing."

"Then why is there a piece of ice in your room?" He then frowns,"How did you even manage to get ice in here?"

I blink innocently at him,"A miscalculation, I assure you. It's not like I was trying to create my own personal flurry."

Jiang Cheng processes my words, opens his mouth to reply, before closing it. Thinking better of it, he instead shakes his head and asks me whatever it was that lead him to enter my room in the first
place.

I thought that would be the end of it and I could go back to my research notes and figure out what the hell happened, when a couple of minutes later YanLi and her mother walk in.

I remember YanLi taking one look at the ice and sighing, while her mother simply arched one eyebrow and walked out.

"Really, A-Xian?" YanLi smiles softly at me,"What have you done now?"

I pout at her,"A-Jie, where's the trust? Why does everything have to be my fault?"

YanLi - saintly, goddess of Mercy, YanLi - nods and sits primly down on my bed,"I'm sorry, A-Xian. I won't think it's your fault if something happens in your room, with you right there beside it, with what looks to be another talisman or array you've cooked up."

I whine,"A-Jie! You wound me, your poor didi is wounded."

She laughs and comes down from the bed to kneel beside me and pinch my cheeks.

"Oh, A-Xian." Her eyes gleam with amusement,"Never change."

Never Change.

A thorn under my skin stabbed me when my flesh was tender.

I cannot promise that, sister.

I'm sorry.

I'll try.

I promise that.

I'll try to stay the same.

I will try my best.

Is that enough?

(No...No...It will never be enough. More. I need to do more. Please...I need to do more...It's not enough...Not yet...)  

I had delved deeper into rituals after that.

I had learnt two big things:

First, Energy was very much alive and I could finally prove it.

Second, the practice of using rituals and their correct invocation was either banned or forgotten from the memories of man.

There were two reasons my relatively small ritual nearly flash froze my room, one was that I offered too much; and two, the ice spirits - or elementals, I had read both used to describe the beings - were ecstatic to help.
Except their version of help doesn't really equate all that well in human terms.

At first I had though, oh my lord, this is awesome and super helpful!

And then I read the fine print regarding rituals.

See, there was more to it than just ink or chalk to write the runes with, the offerings, and the invocation. The beings themselves had to be willing to help you.

And from pop culture and many, many, many warnings about fairies and benevolent invisible beings, I knew that they were bound to be prickly and temperamental.

I would too if an entire race of people, who cultivated their energy for centuries, simply forgot about them and never paid them any respect.

And from what I had seen - an entire spike of ice coming out of a small palm sized array - they certainly deserved respect.

How does one exactly pay respect to these beings?

Easy.

*You become religious.*

Hush you, it has nothing to do with religion.

*You make offerings without asking for nothing in return, your small invocations do sound a lot like prayers, and you hope that they consider you worthy of attention.*

I roll my eyes at his tone of voice.

Anyway, I had ended up making a small guidebook with relevant rituals and their requirements, since I bought them from the Store individually or in specially made books - which were by Alignment - and needed a master rulebook of sorts.

So I had worked on that for a while - it was an ongoing project, and another outlet for my frustration to being unable to prevent future events from happening - between my already packed schedule with night-hunting, mentoring Jiang Cheng, sparring with YanLi, and being the best senior disciple the little juniors have ever known.

A-She would be proud of my work with them if it wasn't for the fact that they regularly put my teachings to good use in pranking him.

*This is why I say you're a bad role model for kids.*

I am totally not, my nieces and nephews all turned out to be well-functioning and very successful members of society.

*And your apprentice, which was with you 24/7 and absorbed most of your teachings?*

...

*Is that confirmation enough?*

No, artist can be excentric, I honestly believe it is expected of them.
There's eccentric and then there's the 'I'm going to paint my whole shop pink for the day, I feel like painting the shop pink.'

...Why is it, Ike, that you always succeed in making me feel embarrassed?

Because I am literally inside your head and we've been together for... How many years now?

Nearly ninety?

...We're going to be centenarians soon!

That's what you choose to take out of that sentence?

Hey, how many times can you say you've lived past a hundred?

Seeing as I died before seventy, my opinion is already made, but must I remind you we're currently inside a world where there's a really old wise woman in a mountain that's seemingly immortal.

Speaking of Baoshan Sanren...

I pull out my mother's necklace from inside my robes and hold it up to the dawn sunlight. The sunrays lick at the mysterious metal, catching on the feathers and reflecting back into my eyes, and the mountain scene carved into the center piece hold my attention for a few moments.

There would only be three amulets like these in this world, Xiao XingChen; my mother's; and my mother's shixiong, Yanling Daoren.

In a rare event of sharing, Jiang FengMian had spoken with me about my parents - and kept it fairly on topic with no deviations into the 'why don't you become a permanent member of this sect?' - and had told me the story of Yanling Daoren.

Or well... As much of a story as one could have when their whole life was shrouded in mist.

One thing that was consistent in all the legends and spooky stories, however, was that he had his amulet buried with him. A final sign of respect, Jiang FengMian had said.

I thought otherwise. While I did understand - somewhat - that this culture valued respect above nearly everything, I doubted that someone wouldn't have tried to take the symbol of Baoshan Sanren's teachings, if only as a prize and not some scheme to try and fool people into thinking they're the real deal.

That made me wonder why no amulet had ever been stolen, or imitations made.

Sure, it was a weird metal, but there had to have been attempts, right?

You're distracting me, aren't you?

Uh? What are you talking about?

You're jumping from topic to topic and making me dizzy, you're avoiding something.

My impending panic attack, if you must know, Ike.

I close my eyes and sink into my subconscious, the empty void with a single orb of liquid light, steadily dripping into the darkness below it, and rippling like a disturbed water surface.
It was funny, there was no ground, yet I walked solidly on something.

There was no liquid, yet there were still ripples.

There was no wind, yet I still felt a breeze on my skin.

I cupped my hands and the swirling light came to rest on my palms, warm and gently revolving like a tiny sun.

I held it like one would a small bird, carefully and cautiously.

I wasn't afraid of it, far from it, the orb and I were very close acquaintances - after all these years, we had little choice but to be - but because it was so fragile.

And fleeting.

My Golden Core was one of a kind, it was powerful but steady, like a controlled fire. It commanded respect but unless you got close to it, it wouldn't burn you. Warm you, certainly, burn you? No.

Demonic Cultivation, on the other hand, I suspected would be more like a wildfire. An uncontrolled blaze that ripped through everything in its path.

Dangerous.

Malicious.

Ravenous.

Ever since the System had locked me out of learning more about Demonic Cultivation first-hand, having to rely on observations made by yours truly - it never said I couldn't stare at the fierce corpses from a distance - or by other cultivators, I had to try to reverse engineer Spiritual Energy. Which was not easy.

It was like one of those Russian puzzle dolls, you opened something and there were more questions and inconclusive answers staring back at me.

I sighed once more. Little Love finally had enough of my pessimism and gets off of my lap, sitting up and giving me an unamused look before trotting off towards the residential wing of the Compound. I contemplate going after her, maybe try and catch some shut-eye before I have to resemble a functioning member of the Sect, but decide against it.

I stare out at the calm waters and pluck my flute from the Inventory, twirling it between my fingers and seeing the dim sunlight reflect on the polished wood.

The flute ChangZe had carved for me, one so similar to his own, and the one I cherished from the very moment he first handed it to me.

I put it to my lips and thought of anything that could pass onto my feelings into a melody.

I start playing a song I'd heard before on the radio, I believe, once in my store. The strings don't quite match up to the flute but the melody is a bit easy to follow and improvise on.

I play for a while, long enough for Jiang Cheng to wake up, get ready and come look for me for probably not showing up for breakfast. I'd heard a few fellow sect disciples spot me and walk away, knowing better than to intrude upon my privacy when I was in one of my moods, so I figured that I
had been sitting in the same spot for two hours or so.

Except I didn't really take notice of the passage of time.

Truly, this life sometimes felt like a dream.

No matter how many times I had to reassure myself that I wasn't dreaming, that this was way too complicated for it to be a fever dream in my dying old body, I just couldn't quite grasp the fact that I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to be here.

To meet these people.

To understand them.

Love them.

Regardless of the hardships that awaited me in the future, I could safely say that I was lucky to be alive, to be here with them.

With my family.

"Are you moping over something?" Jiang Cheng approaches me, steps quiet but steady.

"Not really, brother." I answer him,"I'm just thinking."

"As usual." He mutters and sits beside me.

He looks out at the water, now reflecting the bright sunlight coming from above. "It's a pretty sight, here on this pier."

My lips quirk up at the corners,"Yes, it sure is, Platypus."

"What are you worrying over now, idiot?" He asks me.

I slump to the side and rest my head on his shoulder, he fidgets a bit in place to get more comfortable but doesn't push me away.

"We are leaving for Gusu tomorrow," I tell him.

"I know, Mother won't stop lecturing me about presenting a perfect image of YunmengJiang to the other Sects, never mind that A-Jie is coming with us, thanks to her interest in furthering her cultivation." He grumbles.

I chuckle,"I'm sure the thought of catching a glimpse of the Peacock never crossed her mind. Or your mother's."

Jiang Cheng groans,"Shut up. He doesn't deserve her."

"No one deserves our sister, Platypus." I roll my eyes, feeling myself relax with the usual banter he and I had going on.

"So... What? You're worried about going to Gusu? Aren't you supposed to be happy, you have friends already there, don't you?" He asks me.

"Gege and A-Zhan? Yeah, I'm eager to see them again. But..." I sigh.
"But?" Jiang Cheng presses.


"After Gusu?" He frowns.

"I will leave." I tell him,"I've been preparing for it for so long, and now that it's here... That it's
time...! I... I worry..."

He opens his mouth, perhaps to say 'You can always just stay here with me', but we both know that
is not possible.

Jiang Cheng would one day be the Sect Leader of YunmengJiang, it was his birthright as Heir, and
I would forever be CangSe Sanren and Wei ChangZe's son. Despite it having been years, rumors of
a potential affair between our parents still managed to trickle in occasionally.

Rumors that, as I outperformed every single disciple in and out of YunmengJiang - my challenge
with Sect Leader Nie had made rounds for months if not years afterwards - I would be chosen to
succeed Jiang FengMian over his real son still existed.

After all this time, I did not think Madam Yu would kick me out. In fact, I had frequently felt that
she bit her tongue to keep herself from voicing any concern or disapproval of my choice for leaving
the Sect sooner rather than later.

But I had to leave.

"Where are you headed?" Jiang Cheng asks instead, his voice trembling slightly.

"Hmm, I'll think I'll stop by Qinghe briefly. I won't stay there, it has beautiful mountains and lots
of open fields - has to because of all the cattle and such - but I want somewhere a bit more isolated,
I guess." I tell him.

"Isolated?" He frowns.

"You think me leaving the Sect and telling the world I'm going into a bit of unorthodox seclusion
is going to stop idiots from trying to recruit me into their Sects?" I chuckle.

"Oh..." Jiang Cheng looks at the water and his eyes narrow,"Would you join another Sect?"

"No." I answer immediately.

"Isolated?" He frowns.

"Where are you headed?" Jiang Cheng asks instead, his voice trembling slightly.

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"Oh..." Jiang Cheng looks at the water and his eyes narrow,"Would you join another Sect?"

"No." I answer immediately.

He blinks,"That was a fast answer."

I grin a bit at him,"If I joined a Sect, didi, I'd join you. Even if I marry - which is unlikely, no don't
give me that look - I wouldn't join into their clan or Sect, if they have one. I'm going to find my
mountain, Platypus, and I'll make it the most beautiful mountain you'll ever see. Once I find it, I'll
never leave it to live elsewhere."

"But you'll come visit," Jiang Cheng feels the need to ask, once again, if only for the reassurance
of it.

"Yes, brother, I promise I'll definitely come to visit you." I chuckle,"But you'll have to come visit
me also! I need you to gawk at my mountain and hear me gloat about how awesome it is!"

He scoffs,"If you're in charge of that mountain, I'm expecting crooked walls and patchy roofs.
You'll be too engrossed in you maniac research to actually build something... Or if you have, for
you to accidentally blow it up."

I gasp theatrically, clutching at my chest and rolling over to splay all over his legs,"You wound me! How could you! The Great Wei WuXian, felled by his unfeeling brother! Oh, how the mighty have fallen!"

I see Jiang Cheng attempt to keep a straight face and not burst out laughing at my goofing around, and the sight of his twitching lips and gleaming eyes send the last remnants of slow dread and cold fear back to the darkest corners of my mind.

I finally stop moving and just lay in his lap, looking up at the sky.

"Thing will change soon, Jiang Cheng." I tell him.

He frowns minutely before his face smooths over, his eyes dimming slightly,"Yeah... I know, dage."

I smile at him,"We'll always be brothers no matter what, though, so don't be too sad about it."

He nods,"And don't you forget it either. You're my brother, you'll always be welcomed here. This is your home too, you know?"

My smile widens and trembles, my eyes itch and I feel tears threatening to pool in them. I sit up and hug him close.

"I'll make something for you, a song maybe - I'm good at thinking those up - and give it to you before I go away." I tell him,"And don't you forget it either, if you ever need me, just call me up and I'll come running, you hear? You'll always be my precious little brother and I'll kick however thought to hurt you where the sun doesn't shine."

He laughs and clutches at my robes, fingers curling against the fabric.

"I promise. I won't forget. You're my precious big brother, too." He tells me, voice thick.

I won't let anyone hurt you, A-Cheng.

Not now, not ever.

Until my last breath leaves this body, I will always be ready to stand beside you.

You'll grow so strong, brother, and face so much pain, I'm sorry I can't shield you from it. But you'll grow so strong...

You'll make everyone proud of you, A-Cheng. Your mother and father will be so happy to see how far you'll go.

I know the path we'll take won't be easy, brother. It will be the hardest thing either of us has ever done, but you'll make it out of there alright. I'll make sure of it.

So... Be happy, okay?

For me... For them...

Be happy. And healthy. And strong, you hear me?

I'll always be there with you, every step of the way. But you're going to have to fly out of this nest
and reach the stars all on your own.

I love you, Jiang Cheng. Now and forever.

Always.

I love you.

Even when we part ways, in joy or anger or sadness, please... I beg of you to never forget that. I love you.

And I believe in you.

You are my one and only littlest brother.

The one I taught and teased and goofed around with. We've had a long run. I'm glad I got to meet you, befriend you, and call you family.

So glad...

And that's enough.

I've done enough.

Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. But today is a gift, and that's why it's called the present.

However said kids movies didn't have any sort of message clearly hasn't ever seen a 'kids movie'.

Ike was right - as usual - and I had done plenty.

The Network would be up and running without my input or direction in less than three months. PeiZhi and ShouShan had finally vetoed the last joining members to the organization; from now on I would only be in contact with ShouShan and PeiZhi sporadically.

I planned on stopping by the Bai Clan's residence while I was in Gusu, with Suibian I could fly over there in an hour or two and be back by dinner time, so there was that.

All of the safe houses were ready and all of my emergency plans were green lit.

I had done all that I could.

There was no use in worrying now.

What's done is done and what isn't done isn't feasible anymore.

Let go.

Take a deep breath.

Tomorrow will be different.

It will be the first step towards the biggest obstacle in the path before my mountain.

And by all Gods and deities in this world and the next, I would make it bow at my feet and tremble before my power.
I was Wei Ying, courtesy WuXian, the son of CangSe Sanren and a follower of the Great Baoshan Sanren's teachings; I am the Head Disciple of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect; I am Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi's brother; I am the creator of so many revolutionary creations that there are too many to name here; I am the one who founded the biggest underground organization that could shake society to its knees.

I will be the future Yiling Patriach, the founder of Demonic Cultivation.

And I will be amazing.

The journey's just starting.

The Game isn't over yet.

I laid in bed that night, finishing packing my bags and putting everything else I wanted to bring along in my Inventory, when the System chimed in at the stroke of midnight.

"Story Arc Completed!"

I looked up at the words and took a deep breath, steadying my hands on the wooden floor.

I opened the timeline and saw the many, many little caricatures of events - checkpoints - scattered about. A single straight line leading to the last image before a new timeline, this one all knotted up and brand new, appeared underneath it.

The last picture showed two figures sitting together on a pier.

I smiled.

I've done enough.

Tomorrow will be better.

Everything will be fine.

I will keep them all safe.

I will keep my family safe.

I promise.

(Watch over me, mother, father... Watch carefully... I will blow everyone out of the water. I will make you proud. I will be strong. I promise. I promise. I promise.)

"Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them." - William Shakespear

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I know, long time no see. Life has been chaotic. And then my computer decided to implode on me. I literally just
got it back on the 23rd and the spent the little free time I had - between visiting family and having my best friend suddenly show up from London - to write this 5k chapter.

Hope you guys liked it!

Wei Ying Arc III Final Stats:
Age: 15 Class: Archer Level: 90
Int: 203 Ste: 193
Str: 203 Cha: 199
Agi: 198 Sen: 213
Sta: 205 Luc: 187

Skills:
[Martial] Acrobatics: MAX; Climbing: MAX; Brawling: MAX; Knife-Handling: MAX; Swordplay: 14; Archery: MAX; Throwing: MAX; Dueling: 11; Spear-fighting: 2; Flying: 13;
[Scholar] Investigation: MAX; Meditation: MAX; Foraging: MAX; Spiritual: MAX; Talisman-Making: MAX; Astronomy: 13; Flower Language: MAX; Region: MAX; Heraldry: MAX; Law: 13; History: MAX; Arrays and Rituals: 13; Warfare: 6;
[Social] Etiquette: 14; Taunting: 14; Intimidation: 13; Storytelling: MAX; Games: 10; Gossip: 7; Gambling: 6; Tea-Ceremony: MAX; Negotiation: 13; Politics: 7;
[Arts] Flute: MAX; Singing: MAX; Acting: 13; Dancing: 14; Painting: MAX; Crafting: 14; Composition: 13; Calligraphy: 13; Flower-Arrangement: 10;
[Mundane] Writing: MAX; Language: MAX; Animal-Handling: MAX; Swimming: MAX; Math: MAX; Riding: MAX;

Works inspired by this: one The Idiot's Guide to Transmigration by nuworldview

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