afterword(s)

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Summary

陳情; chén qíng

to give a full account

後記; hòu jì

epilogue; afterword

A post-series fic that takes off from the last scene of episode 50, and ruminates on some unanswered questions. Wei Ying and Lan Zhan take a road together once more, and for once it is (mostly) at their leisure.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The answer comes when he is least expecting it.

He’s stopped at the edge of a green, green cliff, Xiao Pingguo tame beside him. The vast expanses of mountain below him and the sting of the wind across his face remind him too poignantly of their parting in Gusu, and he is helpless to the urge to play that old, bittersweet melody, all too aware that there will be no reply. It’s a melody of many things, he’s come to realise, but most unmistakably of longing, suppressed under a leaden tongue, and he wonders fleetingly what it was his friend had longed for so achingly to have composed it.

He can barely believe it when he hears it — that soft, deep call of his name, uttered as no other can, like the drop of a smooth stone into deep still waters, or the brush of cold snow against outstretched plum blossoms. He’s heard his name in that voice too many times over the past two years, each time coming to reality with a hollow ache in his chest — but never in such broad daylight, such open air. He wavers on whether to turn back towards it, fearing his vivid imagination, but the hope tugging at him is too sharp, and eventually he twists around, and is graced by that beautiful, beautiful figure, so dearly missed.

The wave of joy and relief that washes over him leaves him temporarily breathless. He can feel a smile pulling at the corners of his lips, spreading across his face, can feel the telltale wetness of his eyes. He laughs helplessly at the warm smile he receives in turn. "Lan Zhan," he finally manages, around the lump in his throat. "You're here."

"I am here," Lan Zhan answers.

He steps towards him, reaches out to take both of Lan Zhan’s wrists in his hands. Squeezes, in part to make sure this isn’t some cruel illusion come to taunt him, and in part to hold him down and keep him there. He can’t stop drinking in the sight of him, poised and straight-backed, fluttering white outer robe casting him in an ethereal silhouette, regal hairdo as neat and elegant as ever. He shifts his fingers from Lan Zhan’s wrists to clasp his hands, palm to palm, letting their arms hang loose. “It’s good to see you,” he says.

Lan Zhan’s face is soft when he replies, “And you, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying beams at that. There are few who say such words to him now, and it’s all the more precious for having come from silent, stoic, reserved Lan Zhan. Their greetings lapse into silence as they take in the sight of each other, catalogue any differences their time apart has brought to the other. It’s hard for Wei Ying to judge objectively, because in certain ways Lan Zhan’s face will always be the same to him: peerless, flawless, sculpted from honour and benevolence and the essence of all that is good. Time, be it two years or two hundred, will hold little sway over the marble foundations of him.

Wei Ying asks the natural thing to ask. "How did you find me?"

"You were playing," Lan Zhan says. "I listened."

As though it has only ever been as simple as that. He laughs again, in delight. "And have you found a name yet for the piece I was playing?"
Lan Zhan’s fingers twitch in his hands. He tells him, "You already know its name."

Two years apart, and they’re back to this, as though there were no break following their last conversation! Wei Ying huffs and pulls his hands to his hips. "Lan Zhan, you said something like that before, too, but I really don't have a clue! It wouldn't kill you to stop being so cryptic after all this time, would it?"

"I'm not being cryptic," Lan Zhan says. "I have told you before."

"Lies, Hanguang-jun! When have you told me?"

Lan Zhan does not relent. "Think for yourself," he says.

"Too rigid! Far too rigid!" Wei Ying pronounces. "Always leaving me hanging like this — and after all that effort it took me to finally decide on a name for it myself."

At this, Lan Zhan’s eyes widen a fraction. "You've thought of a name?"

"Mmhm." Wei Ying grins cheekily. "‘Think for yourself’," he mimics, unable to keep the smugness out of his voice.

He’s sure, going by the unimpressed look he is rewarded with, that if Lan Zhan were a man of less composure he would be rolling his eyes now. Instead he breathes out in exasperation and turns his face to take in their surroundings. His eyes sweep over the craggy, shrub-infested rock face across the chasm in front of them, squint faintly at the hazy, ash-blue mass of forestation at the horizon. A look of confusion passes across his face as his gaze falls on the packs balanced on Xiao Pingguo.

"Where are you staying?" he asks.

"I've been camping for the last three days. The earth as my bedding, and the heavens as my blanket, remember?" Wei Ying waggles his eyebrows. "What about you?"

"The village at the foot of this peak."

"By the Huaxi River?[1] That's at least forty li away,[2]" Wei Ying observes. "Taking a long walk?"

"Mm."

Wei Ying smiles. "So what brought you there? Another night hunt, perhaps?"

It’s only lighthearted teasing, but Lan Zhan looks back at him meaningfully and says, “Yes.”

"Oh? Hunting for what? Feral demons?"

"No."

"Ghost puppets?"

"No."

“Ah,” he clicks his fingers, “then it must be the notorious Yiling Laozu you're hunting for.”

His breath stutters at Lan Zhan’s patient silence. He had thought, maybe, with the way Lan Zhan carried himself — but that had seemed too close to setting himself up for disappointment. "...Really?" he searches Lan Zhan’s face, desperate for a tell. “You travelled out here from Gusu looking for me?”
Lan Zhan inclines his head in answer.

"What for?"

His lashes flutter, and it’s hard to tell whether it’s a sign of consternation or simply a reflex against the wind tossing his fringes about. "Do you not want me here?"

Lan Zhan must have misunderstood his silence. "I want you here," Wei Ying says firmly, "but what for? Did something happen?"

It takes Lan Zhan some time, but at the insistence of Wei Ying’s gaze, he admits, "I wanted to see you."

Oh, Wei Ying thinks. He lets his heart skip over that, once, twice, then wraps it up and stows it away into the corner of his mind he’s set aside for nighttime musings, before his mouth can spurt out something too sentimental. Practical matters and oddities — there are many of those to be addressed at the moment, anyhow. "But what about your obligations?" he asks.

"I've resigned," Lan Zhan says.

“What?” Wei Ying exclaims, feeling thrown. He thinks frantically of the things that could conceivably push Lan Zhan into resignation — few enough to count on one hand — and begins to dread that his last letter may have revealed too much. "So soon? How?!"

But Lan Zhan only shakes his head. "We can talk about that later," he says.

"Later when?"

"At the inn."

"The inn?" Wei Ying parrots, bewildered. "You're taking me to your inn?"

Lan Zhan’s mouth softens, as though in amusement. "Will you come?"

It takes some effort for Wei Ying to push aside his apprehension, but the plaintive undertone in Lan Zhan’s offer eventually makes him smile. "I'll come," he agrees, taking Lan Zhan’s hand once more. "If you like it, I'll come."

"I would like it."

Wei Ying smiles and, one hand still warmly in Lan Zhan's, reaches back for Xiao Pingguo's lead. "Then head the way, Hanguang-jun! Let’s go, Xiao Pingguo, we’re off again!"

Chapter End Notes

1 Referring to the Huaxi River that flows through modern-day Huaxi, in Guiyang, Guizhou Province. [back]

2 Forty li: approximately 16.6 kilometres. [back]
to give you my hand in promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip to the village is mostly tranquil, with Wei Ying sharing the inane details of his recent activities, fishing out mundane news and gossip from Lan Zhan where he can. The atmosphere feels too tender for anything more; he wants to savour it before they talk, inevitably, about things of consequence. For all his aversion to idle chit-chat, Lan Zhan, too, is gracious and indulgent, contributing his own trifling questions. His primary concern, after informing him that Ah-Yuan has grown in leaps and bounds following his travels with Wen Ning and is now the Head Disciple of the Lan Sect, seems to be Wei Ying's welfare — something Wei Ying had once found patronising, but now welcomes. Really, if he takes into account how sheltered Lan Zhan has been, the sort of upbringing he's had, it's sweet.

And he appreciates it, that there is someone left to fret over such trifles.

With the both of them walking, the pace is leisurely. The wind loses its edge as their altitude decreases, and the smell of damp soil and evergreens and wildflowers being crushed under their boots becomes more apparent. At one point, Wei Ying offers Lan Zhan a ride on Xiao Pingguo, but Lan Zhan continues walking as though he hasn't heard, and Wei Ying can only roll his eyes and follow. It doesn't feel right to be riding by himself either, after so long, and so they stroll, side by side.

When they arrive at the inn, the sun is setting, dyeing the sky gold and pink and shadowing the overgrown mountains cradling the little fishing village. Lanterns have been lit and the dirt streets are empty of all but a few giggling children and women retrieving the day's laundry.

"Rather small space," Wei Ying comments, running his eyes over the crowded walls of the room Lan Zhan has boarded. The wood is old and thin, carrying in the steady gurgling of the river and the nightsong of crickets. "Very rustic."

His companion gestures for him to place his packs atop the chest of drawers pushed beside the room's cot, next to his own. "Small town," he points out.

Wei Ying nods, dumping his packs as directed. "True that." When he turns around, Lan Zhan is busying himself with tea.

Lan Zhan tilts his chin towards the cushion by his side. "Sit." He pauses and seems to reconsider. "Dinner?"

"A little later," Wei Ying waves him off, and takes his seat. He taps his nails against the scratched varnish of the table, gathering his thoughts. "I'm curious, what directed you to these parts?" he asks. "It's a lengthy journey, and I wasn't exactly specific in my last few letters...ah, please don't answer in riddles. I'm too tired for that."

"I, too, am curious, as to why you are so puzzled."

Wei Ying groans. "I literally just told you not to do this."

Lan Zhan holds back the hem of his sleeve and pours him a steaming cup of tea. As he pours his own, he says, very casually, "I am accustomed to looking for you."
Whatever Lan Zhan may be accustomed to, Wei Ying thinks, he is certainly not accustomed to such frank admissions from Mister Monosyllabic himself. "Huh," he manages. Then, watching Lan Zhan placidly sip his tea, he chuckles and adds, "I always misjudge how tenacious you can be."

But Lan Zhan only quietens further at this, so he backtracks hastily. "Ah, don't worry, I meant that in a good way, I wasn't trying to hide from you. You wouldn't have found me if I didn't want to be found."

Lan Zhan makes a dubious noise at that; something that almost passes as a scoff for him.

Wei Ying snorts. "Oh, alright then, maybe you would have, being the ever-resourceful Hanguang-jun himself. But you really do have a keen sense of timing. I was just thinking of heading to the Cloud Recesses myself."

"It's technically not a lie. It's just that visiting Lan Zhan is always on my mind."

Lan Zhan hums, sounding somewhat pleased.

Wei Ying blows into his tea and takes a mouthful, only togrimace and set the cup back down immediately.

"Too bitter?" Lan Zhan asks.

"A little. You know how it is, I'm not a fan of herbal blends."

"You liked the blends in Gusu."

"That was different," Wei Ying shrugs. "For one, your Gusu doesn't boast many other alternatives. And two, though bitter, the blends you kept had a milder fragrance, and there was this, mm, sweet aftertaste? That helped offset the bitterness."

The corner of Lan Zhan’s mouth twitches. "Sweet bark," he explains. "I can procure floral tea, if you prefer."

"No, don’t trouble yourself," Wei Ying declines. "I’m not much of a tea drinker anyway." He shifts closer to Lan Zhan, eyes gleaming. "But tell me, how did you manage to shirk off your duties as Chief Cultivator so quickly?"

Lan Zhan takes another sip of his tea. "I deferred to Xiong-zhang," he says as he returns the cup to its saucer.

"Oh?" Wei Ying frowns. He doesn’t recall Zewu-jun forwarding any objections when Lan Zhan had first accepted the position; it’s odd that he would do so now. And there’s something off about the way Lan Zhan’s putting it.

He hazards a guess. "Is Zewu-jun the current Chief Cultivator?"

Lan Zhan nods.

The substitution is not entirely a surprise, given that the elder Lan brother had been the more obvious candidate at first. But at the time, Lan Xichen had expressed no interest, being unfit for duty. For Lan Zhan to defer to him now would suggest that he’d volunteered to take up the mantle himself; possibly even encouraged Lan Zhan to resign. It strikes Wei Ying as an uncharacteristically ambitious thing for Zewu-jun to do.

"What prompted this?" he asks.
Lan Zhan shakes his head. "I am unsure. He said he wanted to take responsibility."

"So...penance? Or is it his way of grieving?"

"Likely both."

Wei Ying nods slowly, mulling over the new information. "With respect for your brother," he says cautiously, "I don't think that's the best frame of mind with which he should be taking on such a role."

Lan Zhan’s eyes fall to his teacup, and he replies without looking up, as though he had expected this response. "I advised against it."

"He didn't listen to what you had to say?"

"I could not refuse him."

To an extent, Wei Ying can now infer what may have provoked Zewu-jun into making such an appeal. Lan Xichen is a sensitive man, and in the time Wei Ying has known him has never imposed his will as Sect Leader on Lan Zhan without considering his brother's feelings. It wouldn’t be surprising if what had troubled Wei Ying had eventually occurred to him, too. He suppresses the niggling worry roused by this conclusion about how Lan Zhan had truly fared during his term such that others would notice, and decides to cut to the chase.

"Did your brother say anything along the lines of you having to bear the burden of others' mistakes?"

Lan Zhan is silent, but it's all the affirmation Wei Ying needs. "I see," he says. That phantom heartache from their time at the Guanyin Temple is trickling down again, from his throat to his chest. There is a part of him, of course, that is thrilled that Lan Zhan is free at last from the gilded cage of bureaucracy, free to maybe even hunt with him anywhere in the world. But his mind has always been too analytical, and he can’t help but think of Zewu-jun himself. Can’t help but think of the consequences for the cultivation world, with its deep fractures, if he’s pressed the wrong way. It’s this part that had understood what it would mean to keep his vow with Lan Zhan, and it’s this part that leads him to remark, "That's a lot of guilt riding on his shoulders."

Lan Zhan looks at him. "Xiongzhang has learnt his lesson," he asserts, at length. "His judgment won’t be clouded so easily again."

Wei Ying hums noncommittally, but Lan Zhan is insistent, and doesn’t seem to share his reservations. "Have faith. He has had time to himself. The change will be good, for others and himself."

As always, the words are spoken with weight, and Wei Ying can only relent. "Yes, you’re probably right. You would know best, having been with him this whole time."

"He is suited to the work, and has the support of the elders and Shufu," Lan Zhan assures him.

“Right,” Wei Ying nods, still in thought, and then he hears what was said. “Wait. The support of the elders and your uncle? Meaning you didn’t — ? I thought — Lan Qiren-laoshi seemed very enthusiastic about your appointment as Chief Cultivator.”

He waits as Lan Zhan sedately refills his cup. "There were times I did not fulfill my responsibilities as they would have liked," he says eventually.
"...Such as? Were there diplomatic issues?" Wei Ying smirks. "I bet you were terrible with diplomacy."

Yet Lan Zhan doesn’t rise to the bait, and Wei Ying grows more anxious. "It’s something else?"

"It’s irrelevant now," Lan Zhan says, with finality.

That particular way of speaking has never worked onWei Ying, unfortunately. "I can't imagine you'd ignore your duties without having a valid reason," he persists. "What was it that upset your uncle, at least? It couldn't possibly be your association with me? The worst of the accusations against me were cleared up. I wasn't even around to offend his eyes."

Lan Zhan purses his lips and shakes his head.

"Then what?"

"Irrelevant," Lan Zhan repeats, to Wei Ying’s intense frustration.

"You never tell me the important things," he sulks.

"It isn't important," Lan Zhan denies, and Wei Ying huffs and tops up his own cup to drink the bitter tea in childish protest. He’d prefer bitter tea a thousand times over being uninformed of any further incidents Lan Zhan had decided to suffer through in silence.

"So," he asks peevishly, "now that you've found me, what do you want to do?"

Lan Zhan watches him down the scalding tea and wince at the burn of it across his tongue. "What do you want to do?"

"I asked first."

He’s watched some more before Lan Zhan graces him with an answer. "...'Eliminate evil and protect the weak, maintaining a clear conscience'," he recites.

Wei Ying blinks. "Wasn't that the whole point of the past two years?"

"Yes."

"So...?"

"After Jin Guangyao's death," Lan Zhan says measuredly, "it was I who chose how to keep our promise. Now that I am no longer needed in that role, the decision should be yours."

He speaks in his usual low tones, without any pause or uncertainty, but to Wei Ying the words sound like pebbles that have scattered over terracotta floors. He sucks in a breath.

This isn’t fair. He’d steeled his heart against the despondency, the barest hint of that wretched, marrow-deep hurt. He’d reasoned and rationalised, he’d placated Lan Zhan himself when he expressed his qualms — this wasn’t supposed to come up again. And yet, when Lan Zhan puts it like this, it feels as though all Wei Ying has been doing for the last two years is licking his own wounds, cradling his fragile little heart; running, while Lan Zhan had dedicated all of himself to fulfilling that promise made in their adolescence, in every way he could, and even now has sought him out to keep it in the ways he thinks he’s neglected.

"Wei Ying?"
The call breaks him out of his trance. He tries not to be self-pitying — *heavens above*, he tries — but this man's talent for unstoppering all of Wei Ying’s meticulously arranged corks is unmatched.

"Ah, it's nothing," he reassures, that helpless, ever-present, pain-laced fondness swelling within him. “I was just thinking that promises are...strange things. One ends up doing the opposite of what's expected to fulfill a promise. Or breaking some, to fulfill others. A man of his word should deliberate well before making promises."

At the tilt of Lan Zhan’s head, he explains, “What I mean to say is, I really admire how steadfast you are. Your foresightedness and commitment are exemplary, Hanguang-jun."

Lan Zhan frowns. "You are no less steadfast, Wei Ying."

But of course he would say that. Wei Ying laughs, half charmed and half in ridicule. "If you say so, Lan Zhan," he yields.

Lan Zhan’s frown deepens. His fingers tighten where they are fisted on his knees. "...If you decide you would rather we travel our own paths—"

Wei Ying sighs and raises a hand, fixing him with his best look of utter exasperation. "Why are you taking my waffling for rejection, hm?" He snorts. “Impatient man, won't even let me take a moment to think for myself. Listen, Lan Zhan, you've had all the time in the world to stew over this; you need to give me a breath’s moment before you assume I don't want you around. Which you've been doing since our meeting at the cliff, don't think I didn't notice."

Hesitation. "It would be understandable," Lan Zhan says.

"What would be? Me not wanting you around? Tell me, then, what I've done to make you feel so unwelcome."

"Not you."

"Ah, then you. What terrible offence have you committed towards me, that I would reunite with you after two years only to ask you to be off on your way?"

The corners of Lan Zhan’s mouth tense.

"Have I upset you?" Wei Ying prods. “Good. You're being silly. Lan Zhan, explain what you mean.” Observing the stubborn way Lan Zhan clenches his jaw, he appends, "Or am I going to have to get you drunk to interrogate you?"

"Don't."

"Then be honest with me,” Wei Ying coaxes, gentling a hand over the curl of Lan Zhan’s fist, “please?"

Lan Zhan closes his eyes and exhales. He seems resigned when he finally looks at Wei Ying again. "Two years ago," he says lowly, “I worry I left you when you most needed me. Again."

It's not something Wei Ying could have prepared himself to hear. It feels, yet again, as though the breath has been punched out of him. —How long? For how long has Wei Ying’s carefully casual absence, his lack of involvement in Lan Zhan’s affairs, made him think this way? Strictly speaking, it hadn’t even been Lan Zhan who’d left. Wei Ying curses at the depth of his self-absorption. He’s learnt nothing, it seems, in two lifetimes.
"You didn't," he refutes, ignoring the heat in the back of his eyes. The lack of a response only makes him more desperate. "Lan Zhan, you didn't. You didn't abandon me two years ago, and you didn't abandon me eighteen years ago, or before that on Qiongqi Path, or before that when I started cultivating away from the Dao — Lan Zhan, I know I got testy at times but you have never, ever abandoned me. I'll tell you as many times as it takes for you to believe it."

Lan Zhan shakes his head. "This time, it could have been the case. If Xiongzhang hadn't taken the initiative—"

"Then someone else would have," Wei Ying cuts in. "Or we would have found a way to make things work out. You yourself told me you didn't intend it to last forever. You said there would be time afterwards. Were you lying to me?"

"I wasn't!" He sounds appalled at the thought of it.

"Then stop projecting," Wei Ying pleads, fingers hard enough to brand on Lan Zhan’s hand. "Look, I chose to go. I realise my disappointment was obvious, but I know it wasn't easy for you, either. I'm not a child; Lan Zhan, I'm a grown man living my second life. I don't expect you to eschew the needs of the many just to keep me entertained."

Lan Zhan looks as convinced as he ever will be on the matter. It’s not a lot, but Wei Ying is prepared to have this argument as many times as it takes. "Were you seriously brooding over this?" he reproaches. "I thought we'd taken care of any misgivings during my last stay at the Cloud Recesses. We parted on happy terms! All that self-reflection must've made you think yourself into knots."

This, finally, garners a look of disapproval from Lan Zhan.

Wei Ying beams in triumph. "You should have thought more carefully before foisting the choice onto me because of this, you know. What if I’m clingier this time, hm? What if I insist that you accompany me on my travels for the whole foreseeable future?"

"Then so be it."

Wei Ying falters. "...Because you're beholden to me?"

Lan Zhan is recomposing himself by replenishing their pot of tea. As he spoons the leaves into the diffuser, he counters, "Was it not you who just insisted otherwise?"

"Correct!" Wei Ying claps. "So long as we're clear on that point, I'll be happy to take you along."

"Where to?" he asks, unfailingly pragmatic.

"Ok," Wei Ying holds up a finger. "First rule of roaming the world with Wei Wuxian: we go where the wind blows. Don't expect me to have a route planned all the time."

He’s rewarded a flat look for his valiant effort. Wei Ying pulls a face. "...But, coincidentally, I do have something in mind right now," he admits.

“Elaborate.”

He leans forward, arms crossed on the table. "I’ve had my eye on a particular plot of land at the border of a forest near Yichuan for some time. There’s an old, run-down house, and it’s a short ways from some sites that look good for cultivating in, but the landlord’s left it unoccupied because of spirit sightings. He’s commissioned me to survey it.
"I was thinking of heading there tomorrow, in fact. It's to the north-east, though, so if you want to come with it might involve some backtracking for you…"

"Not a problem," Lan Zhan says.

"Great! I'll go take a room for the night, then. We'll set off at daybreak." He begins to rise to his feet, but Lan Zhan indicates that he should sit.

"There are no spare rooms," he clarifies.

"You took the last one?"

He nods.

“I did notice they didn’t seem to have many rooms to begin with,” Wei Ying muses.

"Share with me," Lan Zhan says. "Take the cot."

"I can't do that,” Wei Ying protests. “What about you?"

"I can sleep sitting."

"By that logic, I can sleep on the roof."

"It'll be too cold."

Wei Ying bites his inner cheek in amusement. "I'm aware," he says, raising an eyebrow. “I've been camping out a lot, so I am very much aware."

Lan Zhan, reliably, does not succumb, staring Wei Ying into compliance.

"Okay, okay," he holds up his hands. “Since you're insisting, how about this. I'll ask the innkeeper for some spare bedding. I'll take the floor, you take the bed— ah, ah, ah, if you protest any further I'll go straight to the roof without another word."

After a moment, Lan Zhan nods reluctantly.

Wei Ying sighs. "You've become far too much of a gentleman. I remember a time when you'd drag me around by the collar to get me where you wanted, and were all too happy to tell me to scram when I was not wanted. And now I'm getting the royalty treatment. I don't think I'll ever get used to it."

Lan Zhan does not deign this with a response, and eventually Wei Ying has to accept that he’s lost this round by a margin. Attention drawn from their sober discussion, his ears easily pick up on the low murmurs and quiet clinking noises of a meal being had the floor below. “So, how about that dinner?” he suggests, curious to see the other lodgers. On cue, his stomach rumbles. He pats it approvingly. Good boy.

Lan Zhan nods and rises, heading out of their room and downstairs. Wei Ying watches him leave, leaning back on his palms. He basks in the dimming cricket-call, the clean gush of the river, the muffled noises of eating and intimate conversation, and allows the affection to swamp him for a moment before he follows.

Chapter End Notes
Yichuan: historical Yichuan, which corresponds to modern-day Yichuan County in Luoyang, Henan Province. [back]

me: time to stop writing in first-person! it's becoming a bad habit
me: *writes in third-person limited instead, rendering the exercise effectively useless*
When at last they settle in for sleep, Wei Ying in his loaned mattress and Lan Zhan rather disgruntledly in the cot, the streets below are still and a late-night fog has set in. They’ve left a few candles and some incense to burn. With the windows shut tight and the brazier lit, the room is pleasantly warm and smells of thoroughwort. It’s luxurious compared to the cool open sky and flat hard bedroll Wei Ying has come to appreciate, and the warmth and fragrance soon lull him into drifting thought.

His mind turns to the two other guests who had been taking their meal downstairs; broad men dressed in coarse black robes and talking in low voices behind their partisan. They hadn’t struck Wei Ying as cultivators — ordinary travelling companions, perhaps — but as he’d passed them by the somber, handsome set of one’s face, with its vague resemblance to that old acquaintance's, had almost caused Wei Ying to stumble.

He finds himself feeling inexplicably melancholy. “Lan Zhan?” he calls. “Are you asleep?”

“No yet,” comes the response, but it’s slow. When Wei Ying turns to look at him, he is tucked away tidily under his blankets, hands folded on his chest, eyes closed. No doubt sleep is already curling its tendrils around him.

Wei Ying is full, and warm, and Lan Zhan is willing to humour him even though he must be weary from travel. Wei Ying will accept his kindness with a hoarder’s hands.

“Will you answer me something?” he asks.

“What is it?”

“Since you were serving as Chief Cultivator the past two years, you’re bound to have come into contact with all sorts of interesting people,” he prefaces. “I was wondering — did you happen to reunite with Song-xiong at any point?”

Lan Zhan doesn’t answer for some time, and Wei Ying traces patterns in the ceiling and wonders whether he has fallen asleep after all. At last: “No.”

He hadn't really expected otherwise, but it's still disheartening. He tries not to think about what might have happened to the pair of them, a tongueless fierce corpse and a fragmented soul remnant, and tries not to think about the loss of his last link to his mother.

“You?” Lan Zhan asks.

“No.” Wei Ying lets out a glum sigh. He had searched the places they would be likely to visit as he travelled, but there were never any traces. “I wonder where they went.”

He hears the susurrous of fabric shifting. “Most likely, they are safe and prospering,” Lan Zhan says, his tone more lucid, as though in an attempt to comfort him. Wei Ying smiles, instantly mollified.

“I hope so. Hope we’ll meet them while travelling too. Oh, right, about that, Lan Zhan,” he segues, recalling what he'd forgotten to verify amidst the excitement of finally having Lan Zhan here with him, "I know you’ve come all this way already, so it’s a little late to ask, but — is it really alright for you to gallivant around the world with me indefinitely? The elders, your uncle — they haven’t protested?”
“They knew it was coming when I resigned.”

“...Ah.” Wei Ying frowns. He’s painfully curious as to what the situation had been like when he’d left, that he can sound so unruffled about this. “So they just let you go? No insistence on your regular duties to the clan?”

He hears Lan Zhan exhale lightly. “Given age and prestige, one may take some liberties,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying bursts into laughter, heedless of the thin, reverberating walls of their room. “I see! So you just bludgeoned your way out of the Cloud Recesses and there was nothing anyone could do about it. There's the Hanguang-jun I know and love!”

Lan Zhan doesn't deny it. “In any case, there is precedent.”

“For our situation?”

“There have been ancestors who dedicated their lives to journeying in search of knowledge.”

Wei Ying thinks of the faceless elder who had compiled those old pieces of music from Dongying, and feels partly relieved. “That’s good then,” he says. But Lan Zhan's phrasing, his talk of dedication, reminds him obliquely of their earlier conversation, of words like regret and promise and the decision should be yours. True, they had supposedly resolved it before dinner, but it had felt strong-armed to Wei Ying, and the doubt, the anxiety, has yet to fully dissipate. He’s reminded of Qiongqi Path, of the look on Lan Zhan’s face when Wei Ying had brought up their promise back then— he’s certain that some of what Lan Zhan has done, has been doing, must be an attempt to prevent a repeat incident.

In general, Wei Ying tries to be a nice, undemanding person. He may enjoy teasing and making mischief, but with the same breath he makes an effort to be sensitive and generous where it's warranted. To not ask too much others. Part of it is the pride he takes in self-sufficiency. The rest is best not examined.

But he's terrible at keeping it up with Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan gives and gives and gives, and Wei Ying can't help but take and still want more. Oh, he tries to hide it, to wear the expected smile and shrug the nonchalance onto his shoulders, but the greed always leaks through, and it gets harder to keep up the charade each time, to convince himself he's fine and he doesn't expect more, because that would be bothersome and ungrateful.

So he’d told himself when they parted in Gusu, and so he's told himself for the past two years. But he doubts he can do it again. If Lan Zhan were to make this about promises and regrets and dedications once more, to part upon eventually fulfilling his purpose (or to fulfill his promise) once more, or to have his heart set elsewhere through the course of their forever, Wei Ying would not be able to keep himself from asking — from pleading, wretchedly — for everything.

(He knows that what he should be troubled by is that Lan Zhan would shackle himself for what he assumes is his responsibility — to Wei Ying, with Wei Ying, whatever — rather than pursue his own dreams. It would be what a good friend would be worried about. Of course, with a workaholic like Lan Zhan, the line between business and pleasure is ambiguous to begin with, which makes things all the more difficult. And it isn't that it doesn't trouble Wei Ying at all; naturally it does, Lan Zhan is his dearest friend. But it's not at the forefront of his concerns. He's pitifully selfish, when it comes to this man, and it's such an ugly, alien feeling.)

He doesn't dare to tell Lan Zhan any of this. They've just come together again, and his friend is
tired — Wei Ying won't spring this on him now, or ideally ever. So instead, he draws on that kernel of normalcy within him, that friendly friend's concern, and says, “But Lan Zhan, I don't want you swapping out one set of obligations for another. If you ever want to stop, you should say so. If you want to settle down, you should also say so.” He omits the possibility of separating altogether, and prays Lan Zhan will be too drowsy to bring it up. “If you are with me, it should be entirely voluntary. And you should act as a free agent. As an equal.”

Lan Zhan listens to his impromptu sermon intently. Wei Ying hears him take a breath before responding, as though he is considering how to soften the blow of some accusation. It makes his stomach twist itself into knots, but Lan Zhan's voice is benign, even mirthful, when he says, “I am not here bound by my guilt or my word.”

Wei Ying twists again to look at Lan Zhan, who now lies on his side, facing him. The look in his eyes is tender and amused. As ever with Lan Zhan, the smallest expressions yield the greatest effect. Wei Ying feels increasingly ridiculous.

“Whatever I am doing now, I am doing as a free agent.”

“I know how you are, though,” he protests, "You’re immovable about doing things you’ve made a personal commitment to, at any point. Even if it ends up becoming a burden.”

“It’s not a burden,” Lan Zhan says. He holds his gaze, insistent. "Wei Ying. Right now, I am where I belong.”

Well.

“Well,” Wei Ying says. A nervous laugh stutters out of him, and he feels his cheeks heat. He hopes the low light will mask his flusteredness. “That’s, uh. Flattering. Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Lan Zhan says, and Wei Ying swears upon Guanyin herself that he sounds smug about it.

He shifts to lie on his side. “Cheeky,” he scolds. Like this, with his head propped up on his palm, he can see how Lan Zhan's face is illuminated by the dim glow from the candles, sultry lighting softening his usually angular features. The feathery curves of his lashes cast long, dark shadows against his cheeks. A reflected flame dances in his eyes as he watches Wei Ying.

Wei Ying feels his heart leap into his mouth and grasps instantly for his go-to remedy. He needs to laugh this off. “Still, Lan Zhan,” he says, "Giving up your home is a little dramatic, even for you, the master of grand gestures.”

“I will return to Gusu as I am needed, or inclined,” Lan Zhan clarifies. "But I know where I want to be in the long term.”

He smiles shakily. “What, won't you say ‘If you will have me’ again?”

"At your behest, I will restrain myself," Lan Zhan quips.

Wei Ying laughs in delight, a deep and liberated laugh, sinking into his pillow. Full, and warm, and not alone.
They're on one of the decks adjoining the Jingshi, enjoying an evening of respite before Wei Ying must pack for his departure. The breeze picks up as the sky darkens from periwinkle-blue to a solemn indigo, blowing stray leaves and the moaning of willow trees their way. Overhead, the chalky moon peeks out from its bed of clouds, and the first stars are caught between branches. It's a peaceful, pretty sight; one Wei Ying has only learned to appreciate now that he must leave it altogether.

It's Lan Zhan who breaks the silence, at last. He's been acting rather antsy since their little talk by the waterfall; even more so after that exchange with Nie Huaisang. That is, of course, inasmuch as Lan Zhan is capable of expressing his anxieties, which Wei Ying has come to understand will generally entail more questions, perhaps a not-so-subtle bout of well-meaning pestering, and that soft, vulnerable, barely-there widening of his eyes that inspires a spike of contradictory feelings Wei Ying would rather not deal with in these innocent joyful moments.

He says, without preamble, "Where will you go?"

It's not hard to guess that the question has been weighing on his mind for some time, when he takes that bracing breath before asking. Wei Ying can't help but smile fondly. He's been giving him odd little anticipatory glances all afternoon, as though hoping Wei Ying would finally broach the topic of his leaving.

"I haven't decided yet," Wei Ying hums. “Maybe I'll have some idea by the time I set off."

He gets a sceptical look at that, and it only makes him smile more indulgently, feel warmer despite the settling chill.

"Don't worry, Lan Zhan," he pats Lan Zhan’s shoulder, leaves the hand curled loosely there. “You won't lose me, even if you don't know where I am. We'll meet soon enough, with how trouble seems to find us so often."

"You go looking for trouble," Lan Zhan chides.

"And now, as Chief Cultivator, you're officially sanctioned to do the same! Meddling is in the job descrip—" Wei Ying cuts himself off once his brain catches up with his words, wincing and clearing his throat into his fist. The damage is probably already done; Lan Zhan’s shoulder had stiffened under Wei Ying’s hand before he’d lifted it. He bites his cheek and fidgets, staring intently at the dark, dutifully polished planks under his feet.

"Is that how you still think of me?" Lan Zhan asks, very quietly.

Wei Ying scrambles to apologise, pushing past the awkwardness. "Oh, you know I don't think of you like that. I'm just teasing." He brushes a stray lock of hair away from his face and looks beseechinglly at Lan Zhan when there is no response, returning his hand to his shoulder to gently tilt him his way. "I couldn't think of you like that."

The problem, in fact, seems to be that he can’t think at all around Lan Zhan at times, his heart rate too fast, his mouth too rapidfire.

Lan Zhan’s gaze meets his own too steadily, and Wei Ying has to look away again. He clears his throat and waves a hand dismissively. "In any case, I'll write you. Won't let you get too lonely."

"And you?"

"Me?" Wei Ying chuckles, not letting himself think on it too seriously. “I won't be lonely. I'll have Xiao Pingguo. We'll be fine."
He watches the last few birds return to their nests as the last of the sunlight oozes into the skyline, sad black little things scattered from their flocks, a few larger ones travelling in lonesome pairs like slashes of ink. The wind coos at their silence in tandem to the first hootings of night-owls, tugging at the folds of their robes and the loose fall of Lan Zhan’s sleeves. After a period of quiet, Lan Zhan finally opens his mouth. He hesitates, appears to carefully consider what he is about to say. At last: "If you would like it, you are welcome to stay."

Ah.

So this, too must have been what those long, pensive glances had been about. Trust Lan Zhan to be holding onto that little nugget for so long that when he chose to voice it at last, it would be too late to really make a difference. Truly, what a constipated man.

"...Stay where?" Wei Ying asks mildly. "In Gusu?"

“Yes.”

"In the Cloud Recesses?"

“Yes.”

Wei Ying breathes in deeply. "For how long?"

Lan Zhan's tone is unwavering. "As long as you like."

Wei Ying lets out a bark of a laugh, glancing at Lan Zhan's face to ascertain his seriousness. His expression is unflinching.

"Lan Zhan," he says, "that won't be long at all. I can't stay here for long without submitting myself as a disciple, and we both know that wouldn't work out."

"You will not have to be a disciple," Lan Zhan responds, and it's too close to the sort of escalation that Wei Ying is not prepared to confront right now, not now that he's come to terms with the certainty of their parting. He summons the words he'd said to Ah-Yuan all those years ago, reminds himself that in this world, everyone has their own things to do, their own paths to walk. That paths may cross, may even merge for some distance, but must always succumb to their inexorable divergence. He reminds himself, and hardens himself, and gently attempts to dissuade Lan Zhan from what he knows must be an impulsive offer.

It stands to reason, considering all his dithering, and the impossible timing of the suggestion.

"Oh?" he asks. "Then what? How will you explain keeping me around as a — a permanent guest?"

He feels vaguely guilty at Lan Zhan's contrite silence, but barges on, letting the darkness mask his trembling, drawing his resolve from the shadows as he has learnt to.

"Will you declare that you're accommodating the Yiling Laozu himself in the Cloud Recesses because he's your trusted advisor? Your boyhood friend? Your— companion?"

He softens his tone when Lan Zhan retains his silence. "You're the Chief Cultivator, Lan Zhan. Even if they were to believe you, they wouldn't appreciate my hovering about. I'll always be the black sheep among cultivators. They'll do to you what they did to Jiang Cheng."

After a while, Lan Zhan addresses a single part of what he has said. "If they believe?"
It's really in his fashion. He thinks carefully on each word, considers thoughtfully what it means that Wei Ying has chosen *this* instead of *that*, gleans more from Wei Ying's sentences than Wei Ying intends to convey, sometimes.

He'll miss that, too.

Wei Ying smiles drily. "Chances are they won't. They're just as likely to point fingers at you, mock you for your close friendship with me. They'll humiliate you. You know how it is, those stuffy old fools thrive on gossip and speculation. You've given too much of yourself to me, I'm sure there's already talk about how I must have *sullied* you."

He hates to acknowledge it. To put it out there, as real sound in real air. But it needs to be said, because Lan Zhan needs to exercise a little more discretion now, and there aren't any *chances* about it — Wei Ying's fondness for beautiful men is no secret, and there have been more than a few insinuating glances thrown their way in the last few months.

"Would such talk truly be so terrible?"

Lan Zhan's gaze is keen, as though Wei Ying's answer will reflect on his character — as though this is a matter between the two of them alone. It ignites at the back of Wei Ying's mind a spark of irritation, which makes its way out before he can dress it up.

"Yes," he snaps, "it would, because how you feel about it won't change how people treat you, and bearing through wouldn't even be worth it because there wouldn't be any truth to it!" He exhales. "I won't have anyone insulting you. You're—" Wei Ying clenches his jaw and bites down on the words that clamour at his teeth, swaps them out for something more restrained. "—You're the most noble person I know. I don't want anyone giving you strife because of me."

A complicated expression passes over Lan Zhan's face, and his lips part as though he wants to object, maybe say *It isn't up to you to make that decision for me* the way Wei Ying might, but at the pleading dip of Wei Ying's brow he relents. Swallows, and nods.

There's a sense of deja vu here, Wei Ying thinks, and it comes with an edge of shame. He'd rather not make a habit of forcing Lan Zhan's acquiescence by drowning him out. Still, it's averted a difficult conversation for now; Wei Ying will have time to repay the favour. He smiles and nods in thanks for the understanding, and refuses to think about the pained quiver along Lan Zhan's neck. "I've already decided to travel for the time being," he says, steering the conversation towards practical matters, "and in any case, your focus right now shouldn't be on me. Your brother needs you a lot more than I do right now."

Lan Zhan averts his gaze. "Little I can do will help him."

Wei Ying scrutinises him, reflects on his own regrets as a brother. "Lan Zhan," he says firmly, "Zewu-jun loves you dearly. You're the only brother he has left. It might seem as though he is cutting you off right now, but when the initial sting of all this is over, when he's had time for the wounds to scab — I don't think he'll be able to make it without you."

Lan Zhan shakes his head. "He does not intend to come out of seclusion."

"Things don't always go as we intend," Wei Ying reminds him. He laughs. "If nothing else, I think the guilt of having you take up the mantle of Chief Cultivator will drag him out eventually. He wouldn't subject you to that forever."

"I chose; I wasn't subjected."
It's not hard to hear the dogged, dutiful resolve underlying that serene little correction. "Yes," Wei Ying agrees, "but I like to think I understand you a little better than you're giving me credit for, Lan Zhan. You wouldn't have chosen if you didn't think you were needed. Or have you secretly been nursing ambitions to take this position all along, Hanguang-jun?"

He grins at the withering look this earns him and pats Lan Zhan's shoulder. "Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying I object. The opposite, in fact." In the aftermath of all that's happened, Wei Ying doubts anyone but Lan Zhan would be able to manage the situation satisfactorily, to repair broken foundations and set a course for the future.

"But?" Lan Zhan probes.

"...But, I suppose I am concerned the circumstances will find a way to ensnare you."

He sucks in a breath and elaborates at the questioning arch of Lan Zhan's brow. "I used to think you were the pinnacle of orthodoxy, and so I used to think you would always, always be walking the crowded road." He folds his arms behind his back and glances at the ever-purpling skyline. "Leading it, even. The brightly lit road, the broad paved road." The road Wei Ying had abandoned.

He blinks away the misty reminiscence and looks Lan Zhan in the eye. "But I now know I misjudged. You aren't orthodox at all, Lan Zhan. You just have too much integrity. So much I wonder how you contain it all."

Or when he will burn out.

Lan Zhan is like a star; a scintillating white-blue star, consuming itself to bathe the lowly earth in his radiance, to grant ground-crawlers their bearings. Lodestar in a moonless, clouded sky. Sunbeam stretching its fingers into the darkest, dankest corners of the world.

Wei Ying is tired, so tired, and still Lan Zhan glows. It's a wonder he's stood by Lan Zhan for so long feeling only the soft halo of lamplight, and not some smothering, blinding thing.

"En," says Lan Zhan, as though in approval, and for a silly second Wei Ying worries he's been waxing poetic out loud.

"Don't 'en' me, it makes you sound boastful," he chides, forcing his heart to slow. "Isn't the Lan Sect supposed to enshrine modesty as a fundamental virtue?"

"En."

He groans. "Oh, fine then, be that way. My point is that I worry. Just a little bit. I don't — and I know you'll think I'm being presumptuous, underestimating you — but in my defence, events as of late prove we can never be wary enough. I don't want this to settle your life for you. To consume you, and hurt you, and — keep you away."

Away from freedom, when the time comes , he thinks, with shame. And away from me, forever.

Lan Zhan's fears are misplaced. He won't lose Wei Ying — he won't ever lose Wei Ying. But Wei Ying fears he will lose Lan Zhan, and Lan Zhan will never have had a say in it.

He glances up at Lan Zhan's long look. "Wei Ying." There's a small smile on his face, and a faint crinkle at the corners of his eyes that hints at endearment. "Fret not. I am not so fragile."

"I know," Wei Ying acknowledges, with hunched shoulders.
"If I can help it, it won't be forever."

"I know."

"It is as you said. This is what I need to do right now. There will be time, afterwards."

Wei Ying snorts. "Trust you to cut right to the chase and turn my own words on me." He pouts and twists a strand of hair around his finger in a mockery of coyness. "Since when have you been so perceptive, hmm? Exposing me like this — you must feel so proud."

"No," Lan Zhan says softly. It's hard to tell in the dim light, but the apple of his throat seems to bob, and after an expectant silence, cool fingers touch the back of Wei Ying's hand. "I feel as you do. There is no shame."

The touch is a regular comfort by now. Wei Ying feels the knots in his chest unwind, and decides to indulge his inner three-year-old. "It's not shameful. It's embarrassing."

"How so?"

"How so?!" Wei Ying blinks. "Lan Zhan, you can't seriously be telling me you find stickiness an attractive trait?"

"Is it stickiness, to merely desire another's companionship?"

"It—." Wei Ying twists his mouth. "I used to think it would be cumbersome, like this."

"And now?" Lan Zhan asks patiently.

Wei Ying is absolutely not prepared for another heart-to-heart tonight. The moon is glinting ominously from its dark canvas now. He has packing to do and wine to drink.

"Now things have changed," Wei Ying says flippantly. He continues before Lan Zhan can continue to pick at him. "Lan Zhan, please, let's not make this about me. It feels like it's always about me. This is supposed to be about you. I know I've passed some unwarranted judgment, but you should know — whatever you choose to do, for however long — I'm on your side. Even when I can't be there in person, I'm on your side."

Lan Zhan looks at him consideringly. "It's not unwarranted."

"Thank you," Wei Ying says, feeling the old, deep fondness stretch its roots. "But listen," he continues, taking Lan Zhan's hand to ingrain the seriousness of his words. "If you need me, I want you to call me. I know how you are, you're stubborn as a donkey." He jerks Lan Zhan's hand. "You have to call me, okay? You're loaded, letters and spirit messengers shouldn't be a problem for you."

"Alright," Lan Zhan replies, still regarding him in that queer, studious way. Wei Ying itches to know what he's thinking, but he'd rather not open that can of worms now.

He shivers and rubs his upper arms, nudging Lan Zhan with a shoulder. "Hey. Don't you suppose that's enough stargazing for tonight? It's getting cold. We should head inside."

Lan Zhan tilts his head towards the rooms. "Go first. I will join you in a moment."

"Does Hanguang-jun even feel the cold, or does his own freezing spiritual pressure scare off even the natural elements?"

"You should pack before it is too late."
"Oh, so eager to be rid of me now?" Wei Ying teases, walking backwards into the chambers. "Just a moment ago you were offering me indefinite accommodation here, and now look at you, rushing me off to pack! You really can't trust the word of nobility nowadays."

Unsurprisingly, he's given no response, but he can see that the mood's lifted from the loose slope of Lan Zhan's shoulders. It sets his mind at ease as he goes about gathering the smattering of possessions he's accumulated during his stay at the Cloud Recesses. By the time Lan Zhan returns, the tip of his nose reddened from the chill, and slides shut the door on the tail-ends of mountain wind and night ambience, Wei Ying is humming idly, stuffing his poorly categorised qiankun pouches into his pack.
They leave for Jiangzhou before noon the next day, Wei Ying too sleep-addled to head out any earlier. The hostess, having taken a liking to Lan Zhan, is sure to load a parcel of flatbread and dry rations into his hands as they leave, tutting over his waifish figure. She sternly instructs Wei Ying to ensure that his companion, who was kind enough to share his room with him, is properly fed. Wei Ying can barely contain his laughter.

The sun bears down on their backs as they follow the road. Wei Ying has long given up on his initial attempt at politeness, and for the last two hours has ridden on Xiao Pingguo, preferring the discomfort of the saddle to the heat of the ground. Still, watching the white hems of Lan Zhan’s robes become browned with dirt leaves him feeling contrite, and he makes the offer once again knowing it’ll be rejected.

"Hanguang-jun, are you sure you don't want a turn riding?"

Lan Zhan’s shakes his head. "I'm alright, Wei Ying."

"You said that the last ten times I asked," he mutters.

"And it was true the last ten times I said it."

Wei Ying rolls his eyes. It’s just him, it’s not as though Lan Zhan needs to maintain that impenetrable facade here. He wishes Lan Zhan would be a little more lax around him, behave a little more like an ordinary human with ordinary limits and less like a lofty immortal. "That's it," he announces. “We're getting you a horse when we get to Jiangzhou. Nothing less than the finest steed for you."

Lan Zhan angles a quizzical look at him. "There is no need."

"Oh, and what makes you think you have a say? It's for my peace of mind, not yours." Wei Ying does his best impression of a stubborn and pampered little master, drawing with glee on his memories of Jin Ling. “I'm the one stuck travelling with you for days, having to watch you dirty your soles and shoulder your own pack while I ride. I'd offer to hold onto it for you, but this Royal Majesty—" he slaps lightly at Xiao Pingguo’s flank, prompting an irritated toss of its head "—would throw a fit if I made it carry so much as another grain of sand. So all I'm left with is feeling bad."

"If it bothers you, you could simply not ride," Lan Zhan points out.

"Ah, see!" Wei Ying crows, “You do want to ride! You should just be honest and say so. Don't be so tough on yourself, Lan Zhan."

"I do not want to ride."

"Mm, convincing," Wei Ying says, feeling very pleased with himself. He attempts a stern, long-suffering tone that brooks no argument, giddy at the thought of what he has in mind. “Start thinking of names; we're getting you that horse even if you refuse to ride it. I'll pay for it myself if I have to, and it'll eat up at least a quarter of last year's savings — mercenary work doesn't pay too handsomely, you know? And then you'll be stuck with penniless old me and a riderless horse.
lagging behind you, and we'll all be miserable."

In his periphery, Lan Zhan’s lips curve into a faint smile.

"I'm telling you, Lan Zhan, I'll do it," he presses.

Wordlessly, Lan Zhan switches the pack slung over his shoulder with a lighter one Wei Ying has loaded onto Xiao Pingguo. There now, you've taken my pack and don’t have to feel so uneasy about riding, he seems to be saying. "We'll see."

"Yes, we will," Wei Ying returns, for lack of a better response.

"What kind of work?" Lan Zhan asks.

"What?"

"You said you do mercenary work."

"Oh, that." Wei Ying shifts into a more relaxed position in his saddle and twirls his dizi absent-mindedly. "It's nothing too glamorous. I mostly take on the cultivators' equivalent of odd jobs."

There’s no shortage of work that local sects turn a blind eye to or make a right mess out of, particularly in remote, underdeveloped villages or when a proper operation is deemed too cumbersome. Wei Ying has found himself a nice balance between the mindlessness of easier jobs and the challenge of more complicated ventures. It helps that constant travel and a weaker cultivation state frequently leave him on his toes, exposed to the vagaries of nature and having to devise quick solutions with limited resources. He’s certainly never bored.

"The assignment at Yichuan is basically unwanted work," Wei Ying elaborates. "Supposedly the client brought in a number of professionals from the local sects who couldn't get the job done, so he's turned to rogue cultivators for help. I was requested earlier this year, actually, but he was due to travel at the time so we scheduled another date for the investigation."

Lan Zhan looks at Wei Ying. "You said there were spirit sightings?"

Wei Ying smirks. "Apparently there's a ghost on his property that's keeping people out of the plot and the forest it's on. Tears into anyone who strays too close, and devotes its nights to an eerie wailing routine."

"A regular haunting, then."

"Uh-huh. But with the mess the previous contractors have no doubt made of things, I’m not expecting a run-of-the-mill exorcism to solve it. I checked up on the resident cultivators, and they...let’s say they were wanting." He snorts. "You'd think someone seeking a cheap solution would consider twice before repeating the same mistake, but idiots will be idiots. Good thing I came by, eh?"

Lan Zhan ignores the question. "How much?"

"My fee?" Wei Ying infers.

"Mm."

"Not much, but if I like the place enough I'll waive the fee and ask him to give me the property at a discount instead. He's looking to sell once the exorcism is done." It'd still be a hefty sum, but Wei
Ying thinks it would be worth it. “I skirted the forest the last time I was there, and underneath all the resentful energy were some deep qi reservoirs,” he explains. Of course, his client doesn't need to know that.

Lan Zhan eyes him, absorbing this information scrupulously. "Why?" he asks.

Wei Ying twists his lips. "To have my own house, I suppose? I don't mind travelling, but I do want to have some sort of — base.” It’s something he’s thought about for some time, with great care. Wei Ying is free-spirited enough that being constantly on the move would never be objectionable. But no matter how far and wide he’d journeyed before, he’d always had somewhere to return to. Now that such places are no longer available…

It wouldn’t be bad, to build a home with his own hands, from the ground up. A room of his own, to store away all the pieces of his life he can’t carry on hand, and to enjoy them when he feels listless.

They stop by a roadside well to refill their flasks, the earthy coolness of the freshwater a relief in the stale, windless midday air. Lan Zhan assesses him as he takes deep draughts and splashes water across his heat-flushed cheeks. "Why Yichuan?" he presses.

Wei Ying chuckles, flicking wet hair out of his eyes. Even now, Lan Zhan is looking for some deeper meaning behind Wei Ying’s self-indulgence. "Because I like it!" he says, accepting the towel Lan Zhan hands him for his face. “There's good wine and good entertainment and a market that doesn't get boring. And it'd be convenient to have a private spot to cultivate in from time to time, but I doubt I'd be able to afford unstigmatised property."

"I see."

Wei Ying raises his eyebrows as he bends to offer Xiao Pingguo a drink. "After all your questions, you're not really giving me any definitive signals here."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Well, what would anyone like to hear, if not for the esteemed Hanguang-jun's hum of approval?" He returns the pail to its hook and replaces the wooden cover atop the well, extending Xiao Pingguo’s reins to Lan Zhan hopefully.

Lan Zhan throws him an amused glance and returns to the path, looking ahead resolutely as he walks.

Wei Ying, as is often the case around Lan Zhan, feels out of his element. "What?" he grousers, tugging the donkey away from the grass to trail after Lan Zhan.

"Purchasing a steed and now property, too,” Lan Zhan says, “I think business has been better for Wei Ying than he is suggesting."

Wei Ying looks at him in astonished silence, mouth agape. Then he starts laughing, loud and free. "Lan Zhan, I can't catch a break with you anymore, ah? Teasing your less fortunate friend like this is against the noblemen’s code of honour, you know?"

He laughs harder when Lan Zhan makes no attempt to refute him, a smile in his eyes. His heart feels light, as though it’s grown wings and ascended to the clouds. He tugs again at Xiao Pingguo’s reins until he’s next to Lan Zhan, sharing his smile, brushing against his shoulder.
Their first order of business upon reaching Jiangzhou ten days later is to visit the town’s stables. Oddly enough, Wei Ying doesn’t need to cajole Lan Zhan into accompanying him; he comes along readily when Wei Ying announces their destination.

It’s all he gets as a warning.

As a stable hand takes Xiao Pingguo to its stall for the night, Wei Ying asks about purchasing a horse. The boy at the front desk makes a sceptical expression, ogling the worn fabric of his garments.

“I should inform you that we only accept lump sum payments,” he sniffs.

Then his gaze lands on Lan Zhan behind him, and his eyes widen and cheeks flush and he stumbles to guide them to the stable master. It’s insulting.

“This is insulting,” Wei Ying says.

“When I buy something, I expect it to be of the highest quality,” Lan Zhan intones.

The stable master is a stout, middle-aged man with a balding head and stringy beard. Wei Ying doesn’t like the crafty look about him, but the horses for sale are clearly all doted upon and kept in good condition. At least the man takes pride in his work.

But with the strong, spirited steeds of the Jiang House as his standard, Wei Ying is unimpressed by these ordinary horses, no matter how well they are raised. And knowing the elegant breeds kept in the Cloud Recesses, he is certain Lan Zhan is even more unimpressed. He offers no contribution as Wei Ying is led into each stall to pet and coo over the horses, following along dispassionately.

Wei Ying is aware that this is no place to search for a ride as fine as those Lan Zhan must be accustomed to, but if he’s giving Lan Zhan a gift, he wants him to appreciate it. At last, noticing the look of growing disappointment on Wei Ying’s face, the stable master leans forward conspiratorially.

“It seems none of our mounts are to your liking?”

“No, no, that’s not it at all,” Wei Ying assures him. “They're splendid for their kind; just not what I’m looking for.”

The man rubs his hands, smiling. “That being the case, there is a particular mare we keep that I might show you…”

Wei Ying wrinkles his nose in suspicion. “It isn’t kept with the others?”

The stable master’s smile deepens, making deep grooves on his face. “Ah, this one is a special horse. Very dear to me. I guarantee that you’ll like it, but I don’t keep it out here in these stalls. Not just anyone could appreciate it.”

Wei Ying quirks an eyebrow. “Will I have to pass some secret test to be deemed worthy of riding it?”

“Nothing like that,” the man chuckles. “It’s only a matter of price.”

Of course it is. Wei Ying smiles. “It must be very special, then.”
“Would you like to have a look?”

Wei Ying is not expecting anything to come of it, but it can’t hurt to check what the fuss is about. He glances at Lan Zhan in question.

Lan Zhan inclines his head.

“Then, show us the way, please,” Wei Ying says.

The stable master takes them further back, past a grass enclosure to a large, independent stall standing on its own. This stall is kept more lavishly than the others, with large windows and curtains for insulation, the hay sumptuous and the floor kept soft. Inside stands a tall, lithe mare. Its coat is a sleek blue-grey, its mane and tail thick and dark like coal. Its legs appear strong and sturdy, bringing to memory long, wild rides through endless plains, hair bouncing with each gallop and streaming in the wind.

The horse observes Wei Ying with calm, watchful eyes as he approaches.

“Gorgeous, no?” the stable master says behind him. He sounds impossibly fond, as though he’s talking about a beloved child.

“Yes,” Wei Ying says. As the stable master recites his sales pitch, Wei Ying looks at Lan Zhan, who appears mildly interested but will not stoop to trying out a horse at a public stables. Fondly exasperated, he arranges to try out the mare in his stead. If the horse is a good fit for Wei Ying, who is notoriously incompetent with beasts, then surely it’ll do for Lan Zhan.

The horse is, indeed, a good fit for Wei Ying. Wei Ying thinks it would be a good fit for most riders; sweet-natured and intelligent, quiet but having what Wei Ying suspects will show as a playful streak with greater intimacy. Physically it is young and robust, responding well to commands, happy to trot and happier to canter.

“It’s lovely,” he praises, slightly breathless as he dismounts. “Makes me wonder if it’s hiding any surprises, not having a buyer already.”

“Sir!” the man blusters. "Do you suggest I would allow such a thing in one of my animals? And worse still, leave you in the dark about it?"

“One can never be too careful,” Wei Ying shrugs. It’s better to find out sooner rather than later, but he doubts he’d change his mind in any case. His heart is set.

“How much are you asking for it?”

The stable master smiles toothily. He names a sum that has Wei Ying’s brows flying to his hairline.

It’s a beautiful horse, temperate and well-trained, but it hardly has the pedigree and finesse to warrant that much. Probably why no one has snatched it up yet. He observes the hard glint in the stable master’s eyes, the way he clasps his hands in front of him and directs that permanent smile towards Wei Ying, and groans internally. This will be a pain to haggle for.

And then the matter is taken out of his hands altogether. Lan Zhan fishes out a fat pouchful of gold from his sleeve and hands it to the stable master.

“Will this do?”
The man looks at him warily. He has the gall to open the pouch and make a pompous show of examining the ingots, picking a few to bite into. Satisfied, he nods. “Yes, thank you, this should do. Will you be taking the horse now, or should I hold on to it until later?”

“Wait—” Wei Ying protests.

“Later,” Lan Zhan says. He places a hand at the small of Wei Ying’s back. “Then we will take our leave.”

“No—” Wei Ying tries.

The stable master cuts in with an opportunistic clear of his throat. “Since you’ve purchased a horse, it’s only right to attain the correct riding gear. We also run a tack shop, if I could interest you…?” he trails off suggestively.

Lan Zhan responds without looking at him, already half-turned away. “Gather what we may need. We’ll collect it tomorrow.”

“Of course, of course,” the man nods. “You can trust that I will select only the best of our inventory. But I’m afraid it won’t be covered by this.” He jiggles Lan Zhan’s pouch of gold.

Before Lan Zhan can move, Wei Ying snatches out a purse of silver from his robes and thrusts it aggressively at the stable master. “Will this do?” he imitates coldly.

Lan Zhan startles while the man takes the purse with cautious hands and and checks its contents before nodding meekly. “Yes, thank you, sir,” he says, voice finally quavering as it should. He shuffles his feet. “Actually, it's rather in exc—”

“Tomorrow, then,” Wei Ying says. Then he grabs Lan Zhan by the wrist and storms out of the establishment, past the open-mouthed grooms and the whimpering boy at the counter.

He carries on like this for a while, weaving past the throngs of people along the market streets, Lan Zhan unresisting, until he finds a quiet alleyway for them to step into. He stops and rounds on Lan Zhan. “What was that about?” he asks.

Lan Zhan looks up from straightening his cuffs with an air of infuriating patience. “I won’t have you buying me a horse, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying seethes. “If you were so opposed to it you could have just told me more firmly! You didn’t have to go and buy me a horse! I don’t even need a horse!”

“I will ride it,” Lan Zhan says calmly.

“But will you keep it?” Wei Ying demands.

Lan Zhan doesn’t respond. Wei Ying nods, smiling bitterly. “So you bought me a horse because I wanted to gift it to you for riding,” he says. “Very good.”

“Is it so intolerable?” Lan Zhan asks.

Aggravated, he snarls, “You aren’t my benefactor, Lan Zhan!”

“No,” Lan Zhan says. “But am I not a friend?”

Wei Ying closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, a hand on his hip. He takes a deep breath, then another. When he’s feeling calmer, he answers, “Being my friend doesn’t mean you
have to cater to my every whim.”

“I know.” Lan Zhan’s gaze is clear and steady.

Wei Ying sighs. Alright. He can work with this. “Lan Zhan, look. I don’t mind being spoiled by you if you want to spoil me. I’ll admit I even like it. But you have to let me do things for you too. I’m not keeping a horse you bought for me because I wanted to buy it for you.”

“I did let you.”

“You’re not seriously comparing the price of the tack to the price of the horse, are you?”

Lan Zhan says nothing for a moment, lashes descending in thought. Then he looks up, ostensibly having arrived at a solution. “Joint ownership,” he suggests.

Wei Ying stares at him, wondering if he’s being serious. He is.

He throws his hands up. “You’re impossible,” he huffs, but it’s missing any edge. He glances at Lan Zhan’s wrist, feeling belatedly guilty about having pulled him so harshly. “Does it hurt?”

Lan Zhan stares at him incredulously.

Wei Ying scoffs. “It would serve you right if it did,” he says. "Well, now that you've gone and spent money on it, you should at least think of a name for the horse. Unless you want it to be another Think For Yourself?"

"I've thought of a name already," Lan Zhan says.

"Oh?" Wei Ying perks up. He’d asked repeatedly after the names of Lan Zhan’s rabbits, but Lan Zhan had somehow circumvented his way out of answering every time. Between Jiang Cheng’s ghastly Feifei and Xiao Ai and Moli, and his own Xiao Pingguo, Wei Ying is sorely lacking in acquaintance with well-named animals. “What is it?”

"Yinfeng," Lan Zhan says, specifying the characters he has chosen. [2] He waits attentively for Wei Ying’s response.

"Yinfeng," Wei Ying repeats, sounding it out. It’s nothing he can have a laugh about, but it's pleasing. Noble. "I like it. Now our Xiao Pingguo will have a classy Xiao Yinfeng to keep it company." He takes Lan Zhan’s hand. “Come with me. There’s an inn here that serves great food; I’ll book us a room and we can go out on the town.” He tugs playfully, and Lan Zhan, unresisting, follows.

Chapter End Notes

1 Jiangzhou: historically, the area within today's Yuzhong District in Chonqing Municipality. [back]

2 The name Lan Wangji chooses for his mare is 銀風/银风/Yín fēng, with 銀/银/yín referring to 'silver' and 風/风/fēng referring to 'wind'. If this sounds nonsensical as a pet name to any native Chinese speakers, please do let me know!!! [back]
“It’s gotten late,” Wei Ying declares as he pushes their bags onto a cot. Their earlier spat has been all but forgotten after an evening of sampling savoury pastries and exclusive rice wines. Now, in the airy room they’ve taken at the inn, with weak moonlight slatting through the windows and the muffled buzz of local nightlife, he feels happily indolent. “You get cosy; I’ll get us dinner and a drink?”

Lan Zhan, who is in the middle of rummaging through his pack for something, nods without turning back.

“And let it be my treat for once,” Wei Ying adds. “After that stunt you pulled at the stables, don’t think I’m budging on this.”

A muscle in Lan Zhan’s jaw twitches as though he’s about to protest, but ultimately he accedes. “No alcohol,” he says.

“I’ll only order for me; I haven’t nearly had my fill today. Don’t worry, not a drop of wine for you.”

Lan Zhan shakes his head and reaches into his pack, brandishing a pair of white, round-bottomed flasks with silk flowers attached to their corks.

Wei Ying stares. “...Oh,” he says. He can almost smell the dainty fragrance of that cherished liquor already. “You brought those with you?”

“Yes.” The flasks are placed on the dresser, and they sit their looking fine and plump and mouthwateringly white.

“Wait,” Wei Ying says. “You had them on you the whole time?”

Lan Zhan nods.

“Then why are you only bringing them out now?” Wei Ying asks suspiciously.

“It escaped my memory,” Lan Zhan says, and carries on with his search.

“Escaped your memory?” Wei Ying splutters, resisting the urge to stare with his mouth open, or to pinch himself or maybe pinch Lan Zhan, perhaps shake him by the shoulders in hopes of dropping some sense for this cartoonish behaviour out of him. “Somehow I doubt that!”

Lan Zhan apparently deems further explanation as unneeded. Having found what he was looking
for, he heads to the low table by the brazier with a small pouch in hand and begins puttering about with the tea set.

“Okay...?” Wei Ying gestures over his shoulder with a thumb, deciding there’s no point in staying flummoxed. “Well. I’m going to go order dinner. Have fun brewing tea.”

“How is it? Mild enough?” Wei Ying waves his hand at Lan Zhan’s plate. “I asked for dishes I thought you’d like.”

When they’d travelled together before, Wei Ying hadn’t paid much mind to Lan Zhan’s dietary habits, his attention flittering too erratically from intrigue to intrigue to dwell on trivial details. But now, after two years of separation and constant loneliness, Wei Ying is hungry for any piece of Lan Zhan he can get. He’s picked up on things like this, like Lan Zhan not being able to stomach spicy foods. Like his aversion to meat, and his preference for light flavours, and his unexpected and very endearing sweet tooth.

Wei Ying himself doesn’t feel especially passionate about vegetables, but he’d really wanted Lan Zhan to eat his fill tonight, and the cook at the inn used to work at a monastery before his marriage. Dinner comprises braised spring bamboo shoots, calabash soup, stewed root vegetables topped with mustard greens, and rice mixed with soybeans, all flavoured with delicate seasonal herbs.

Lan Zhan places a large piece of bamboo shoot into Wei Ying’s bowl, his chopsticks soundless against the porcelain. “You try.”

Wei Ying accepts, raising the piece to his mouth with curiosity. The taste is pleasant, soft and sweet with caramelisation, and satisfying to chew. “It’s good,” he praises.

Lan Zhan smiles faintly and returns to his meal.

Wei Ying has had too much to drink.

Wei Ying is vaguely aware of this, though it wouldn’t be immediately apparent to the average observer. He’d had sips of wine from every vendor on this side of the town throughout the evening, and he’d drained the flasks of Emperor’s Smile Lan Zhan has brought so graciously with him, and now he’s having more to drink. Typically this wouldn’t be a problem; Wei Ying has drunk his own weight in alcohol and suffered little consequence before, but given enough to drink the impulses he keeps a tenuous grip on are bound to slip out, even for him. The street wine had perhaps been rather too potent, and Lan Zhan had poured the Emperor’s Smile for him, and he’d looked so content finishing the dinner Wei Ying had chosen for him, and now Wei Ying is feeling flushed and buzzed and like someone has pried apart his ribcage to squeeze the core of him.

If dinner is not late, Lan Zhan will usually meditate or read or write before sleeping. But tonight he accompanies Wei Ying, pouring him water and advising him to pace himself. His hair is down, combed flat in preparation for sleep, and he observes Wei Ying with an unbearably doting look in
his eyes, as though he thinks Wei Ying is too distracted to notice.

He always thinks Wei Ying is too distracted to notice. Wei Ying wants to poke a hole through that false security. "What is it?" he asks.

Lan Zhan fixes his gaze on the stream of liquid as he pours himself tea. A faint crease mars his brow. "Which?"

"Not which, you." Wei Ying tips his flask at him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" Lan Zhan asks, raising his cup to his mouth.

He’s clearly prevaricating. Wei Ying watches him drink, feeling his thoughts hone in on this as a wave of deep-seated frustration rolls through his bloodstream. "I've noticed it before, too, when you thought I wasn’t paying attention," he continues, too consumed by burning, hungering resentment to care where this will go. “I wish you wouldn’t." He says it glumly, under his breath, but he knows the space between them is tight enough that Lan Zhan will hear it.

He's sorry about it the moment Lan Zhan's fingers twitch around his cup, his mouth quivering and the shutter of his lashes broadcasting his obvious hurt.

Wei Ying sighs. "Don't be like that. Ask me why."

"...Why do you wish I wouldn’t?" Lan Zhan indulges him, but his lips are pressed together and he is visibly miffed by this rude and gratuitous interruption to their after-dinner peace.

The answer comes out too easily, too readily, from Wei Ying’s liquor-loosened tongue. That bitter little morsel tucked into the back of his jaw, sandwiched between his need to protect this thing he has with Lan Zhan and his need for more. "Because it gives me the wrong idea,” he says. “Because it makes me want things from you that I know I can't have."

Dark eyes snap up to Wei Ying’s. Lan Zhan's breath hitches, and when he speaks, his voice is thick, heavy with honesty. "There is no such thing," he says.

Wei Ying smiles ruefully, knocking back the rest of the liquor. "See, there you go again, making grand gestures. You don't even know what I'm talking about."

"Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan says firmly, “there is no such thing."

"Really." Wei Ying cocks a brow, setting the flask down hard enough that he's probably left a crack in the ceramic. Lan Zhan is uncowed, meeting his gaze without blinking.

He huffs and shakes his head, grimacing at the mess of their entanglement. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep,” he says. “What if I really were to ask for something outrageous? Something impossible?"

"Such as?"

The flames curl in Wei Ying’s stomach, swirl around the cavity of his chest. Wei Ying lets his gaze grow heated. "What if I asked you for forever?"

"You don’t need to ask for that,” Lan Zhan says. “You have it already."

"Not like that."

"Then like what?"
On second thought, Wei Ying doesn’t want to elaborate further. This is a ludicrous exercise already; his meaning should be clear enough given the circumstances. He tries another approach. Something more sensational. "What if I asked you for a kiss?"

Lan Zhan freezes mid-sip. He places his teacup down with the smallest slosh of liquid over its rim. The backs of his fingers, glistening with spilled tea, taunt Wei Ying.

Wei Ying laughs, and if it’s a little mean, a little barbed, it’s for the best, for both of them. "You see what I mean?" he shrugs. "You need to be more careful. If you go around looking at other people the way you look at me, they’ll ask you for a lot more than kisses."

He’s taken it to this point, and still nothing about Lan Zhan suggests any discomfiture, except perhaps for the slipping of his grip around his cup. He keeps himself on such a tight leash. This is it, then. "Feeling insulted?" Wei Ying asks.

This prompts a funny little jerk out of Lan Zhan. He lets his hand fall from the cup and folds it with his other on his lap. He levels a long, thoughtful look at Wei Ying, before his features return to placidity. "If you truly want that,” he says, “I am willing."

"...A kiss?" He scoffs at Lan Zhan’s expectant gaze. “You don't have to humour me to try and prove yourself."

The corners of Lan Zhan’s mouth turn down. "I’m not humouring you."

Wei Ying fumbles for words. "You— Do you even realise what you're agreeing to?" He can hear his pulse drumming through him, his breath shallowing and shortening. He doesn’t know if what he’s feeling is exhilaration or anger. “Do you understand what it means for you? For your reputation? You know me, Lan Zhan,” he forces himself to smirk, “I’m the Yiling Laozu. Give me an inch and I'll take a mile."

[1]

But Lan Zhan is resolute, and growing more confident. "Wei Ying. If you want it, then I want it too. What comes after can be dealt with in due time."

He can feel his head spinning, and he wonders briefly if this is some vile fever dream come to dash his short-lived joy. It can’t possibly be that Lan Zhan actually wants this. Wei Ying has poked and prodded and pinched in every way possible, and Lan Zhan has never responded with anything but varying degrees of irritation. He has to be doing it because he’s given his word. Impossible, infuriating, obstinate man! What will he not stop at, for Wei Ying’s sake? What will he not do, to satiate the bottomless well of Wei Ying’s hunger, to keep the promises Wei Ying wouldn’t think to hold him accountable for?

— Where is the cold and distant Second Jade of the Lan Sect, wrapped up smartly in his robes and his rules and regarding Wei Ying with disdain? Who is this person, who has apparently become so humbled by Wei Ying that he would sacrifice his honour on Wei Ying’s whim?

(He knows, he knows that that isn’t who Lan Zhan is, was never who Lan Zhan was. But he wishes desperately that Lan Zhan would keep some part of that token stuffy young master act with him, because Wei Ying’s seams are wearing thin at the change in atmosphere, and soon he won’t be able to keep anything in at all.)

"Is that so?" he murmurs darkly, feeling the last of his control splinter. “If I kiss you right now, you won't protest?"
"My only protest is with how frequently you make me repeat myself," Lan Zhan says smoothly.

Wei Ying returns his steady gaze, nodding curtly at last. He shifts on his knees until he sits in front of Lan Zhan, attention dropping to his soft mouth and back up to his deep, gleaming eyes. "Then don't mind if I do."

And he takes him by the chin and kisses him. Steals a little something from the heavens, and relishes it.

And then Lan Zhan’s lips soften further, warm to Wei Ying's own, and Lan Zhan leans into him and kisses back.

Wei Ying’s eyes fly open and he breaks away, his pulse thundering and cheeks hot. He takes in the powdery redness creeping up Lan Zhan’s neck, barely visible in the golden lamplight, the way his pupils are blown and he’s blinking as though to steady himself, the way his body still leans a little towards Wei Ying as though dissatisfied by the separation.

"...You do want this," Wei Ying marvels.

Lan Zhan inhales deeply and straightens himself. "Were you testing me?" he asks calmly.

The guilt flushes Wei Ying’s cheeks even hotter. He begins to pull back in embarrassment, but Lan Zhan stops him with a hand on his knee; reaches with his other hand for his nape and leans forward to kiss the corner of Wei Ying’s mouth. A dry fleeting peck, light as dragon’s beard candy, and it has butterflies bursting in Wei Ying’s lungs.

Lan Zhan looks up at him questioningly, lips an inch away from his, and at Wei Ying’s dazed nod draws closer to kiss him again, harder and deeper and with feeling.

He’s panting softly when they part, his lips sheened and his throat bobbing.

“And do you, Wei Ying?” he asks, sounding far too composed for someone who is so plainly ruffled.

Wei Ying laughs, welcoming the sweet stinging behind his eyes. “I respect you too much to have asked you for the sake of it,” he says. He crawls closer to Lan Zhan, close enough that their legs are cramped together and their noses are touching, and kisses him again, and again, and again, like he’s drinking the sweetest water, the most fragrant wine. His hands can never stay idle for too long, and they eventually make their way up Lan Zhan’s thighs, trace the slope of his shoulders and the taut lines of his neck, slide downward to push apart the folds of his collar.

It’s as far as he gets before Lan Zhan nips his bottom lip in reproof and gently extricates himself from the cage of Wei Ying’s limbs.

"Is that as far as I can go?" Wei Ying asks breathlessly. He won’t be able to bear it, if Lan Zhan says yes. Lan Zhan is irresistible like this, the pale pink blooming under his skin made tangy by the light of lamp fire, eyes hazy and lids hooded, his lips swelling and scarlet from kisses. The rise and fall of his chest, visible under the stiff lapels of his clothes, rouses a new and urgent itch in Wei Ying fingers.

"For tonight," Lan Zhan says, evening out the crinkles in his robe until he is once more the perfect image of the untouchable Hanguang-jun.

"And if I want more?"
Lan Zhan’s lips curl up. Wei Ying wants to keep him like that forever, pleased and assured and so, so beautiful.

"Ask again when you aren't drunk."

"I'm not drunk," Wei Ying says, “Just tipsy."

"Ask again when you aren't tipsy," Lan Zhan amends.

He barks out a low laugh, painfully, soberly aware of how deplorable his conduct has been. "I don't know if I'd dare." He stares intently at his hands.

Lan Zhan touches his cheek, tilting his face so he will meet his eyes. There’s no judgment there, no skittishness or disappointment — only tenderness, and the lazy dregs of arousal.

"You always dare," he says. "I'll count on you for it."

Chapter End Notes

1 Give me an inch and I'll take a mile: This is what I understand to be the English equivalent of the Chinese idiom 得寸进尺/得寸进尺/dé cùn jìn chǐ, which translates to "given a cun (Chinese inch), wants a chi (Chinese foot)." [back]
Wei Ying wakes with a pounding headache, his throat dry and scratchy. He's roused by the clattering humdrum of the day’s business outside their room, but mercifully there is no strong sunlight to further debilitate him. The area around his cot is cool and shaded, the bed curtains drawn and a linen sheet stretched across the bedside window. Someone has taken care to leave a sachet of dried patchouli and sandalwood by his pillow, to soothe his grogginess. Someone being, without a doubt, Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan, who he had kissed the night before. More than once. Unconscionably.

He sits up violently, wincing as the sudden movement impels a wave of dizziness across his temples.

Last night, it had been Lan Zhan who had carried him to his cot, tucked him in and wiped his face for him. It must’ve also been him who had drawn the curtains and shuttered the window for Wei Ying. The irony of it all would almost be humorous if Wei Ying didn’t remember, with awful clarity, what he’d said to Lan Zhan under the sway of drink. And done to him. Said and done.

He wonders if there is any way to salvage things with Lan Zhan, now that he’s gone and torn down all his carefully maintained boundaries. To pretend that he hadn’t finally asked for too much, hadn’t finally revealed the pitiful underbelly of his friendship with Lan Zhan.

Probably not.

Then again, if Lan Zhan had had the state of mind to tend to Wei Ying after going through that ordeal, he might choose to offer him some grace. At any rate, Wei Ying refuses to be a coward and let things be; he’ll at least take the first step and apologise for his outburst.

He rises from the cot gingerly, swallowing down the sick feeling bubbling in his mouth, and peeks through the curtains. Lan Zhan is sitting by the desk at the opposite wall of their room, reading what looks like an unbound manuscript. The lazy smoke from an incense burner wafts around him. He must’ve sensed Wei Ying’s waking, but makes no move to greet him.

Off to a poor start, then. Well. Best to get out with it.

Wei Ying shuffles towards Lan Zhan and sits carefully by his arm. "Lan Zhan…” he tries. He doesn’t know what to say next.

Lan Zhan closes his book and pours out a cup of water from the nearby pitcher. He pushes the cup
towards Wei Ying. If he’s angry, he’s gotten a lot better at hiding it.

"Wei Ying. How do you feel?"

Oh heavens, he’s still feeling courteous enough to ask after him? Wei Ying’s humiliation triples as he sips his water. “As well as you’d expect, after how much I drank. Thank you for the curtains and herbs, by the way, they helped,” he says. He sets down the cup. “We need to talk.”

“What about?”

Wei Ying's gaze falls downward and he wrings his fingers. "I wanted to apologise for yesterday."

"For?"

"You know what," Wei Ying mutters, feeling the shame eat at his face. “For getting so moody, and then for pressuring you into — into kissing me…” he trails off, but Lan Zhan doesn’t say anything, and he doubts he can look at him right now, so he blunders on. "I wasn't thinking clearly and I took it too far. I hope it won't change things between us." He cringes at the triteness of that, but in his defence this isn’t a situation he’s had to deal with before, and for once he doesn’t know which words to choose.

A long pause follows. Wei Ying doesn’t know what to make of the way Lan Zhan bears himself, so sedate and undisturbed. It might have been a stupid idea to bring the topic up at all.

"What do you remember of yesterday?" Lan Zhan asks.

Wei Ying bites his lip. "I remember most of what I did,” he admits. “I really am sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"You don't know what came over you." He talks as though he's got a fish bone stuck in his throat. "So you wouldn't have done it if not for drinking."

Wei Ying scowls and looks up, affronted. "Of course I wouldn't!" He clicks his tongue in annoyance. "Look, I know I can be pretty shameless, but even I have the sense to not overstep in these matters with you. It was — an indiscretion."

"An indiscretion."

"Yes,” he stresses. “I’m sorry. I won't let it happen again."

Lan Zhan’s face closes off entirely. "I see," he says. His voice is frosty.

"Why does it seem like you get more upset with every word I say?” Wei Ying despairs. "I'm doing my best to apologise here, I swear I’ll be more self-aware from now on!"

"How considerate." Lan Zhan’s mouth twists into a grimace. “I don't think I've ever heard you apologise so sincerely."

Wei Ying tries to rein in his indignation and remind himself that he set out to humbly accept the blame. It doesn’t entirely work. "You make it sound like you don't want me to apologise," he says.

Lan Zhan’s nostrils flare and he makes to rise and walk off. Wei Ying hastily pulls him to a stop by his dangling sleeve. “Wait! Lan Zhan, wait,” he pleads, his mind racing and heart pounding as he tries to piece together the signs, hear the things that have slipped between the words they’ve exchanged. Think. Think! "...Lan Zhan,” he begins tentatively. “You — Do you...not want me to
apologise?"

His friend says nothing, the set of his jaw stony and implacable.

Wei Ying tries again, more boldly. "You...were fine with what I did last night?"

The look Lan Zhan throws him could kill a man. "I am continually astounded by the selectiveness of your memory," he fumes.

Wei Ying shuts his mouth. For Lan Zhan to outright snap at him like this, at this point in their acquaintance — Wei Ying must have really messed up, this time.

"Did I not tell you that I was willing?" Lan Zhan demands.

Wei Ying winces. "I thought you were...sparing me some face?" he attempts weakly.

"I made it clear that I was not."

In some far-off corner of Wei Ying’s mind, the corner that’s processed everything that’s happening and will later take pleasure in reminding Wei Ying how much of a buffoon he is, the thought occurs that it seems, nowadays, Wei Ying takes two steps back for every step Lan Zhan takes forward. Evidently, their roles have reversed in more ways than one.

Wei Ying thinks back more carefully to the previous night, sifting past the moments framed most vividly by dread and hysteria and allowing himself to remember the entirety of the happenings.

_You do want this._

— _And do you, Wei Ying?_

..._I don’t know if I’d dare._

—_You always dare..._


Lan Zhan watches him with wary eyes. His tone is more exasperated than irate when he replies, "You truly never remember such things."

There aren’t any words Wei Ying can muster up in response to that.

"Well?" Lan Zhan exhales, tugging at the sleeve in his grasp. “Are you done?”

Wei Ying can’t be done with this. He can’t possibly let it end like this. He swallows, then rises and lets go of Lan Zhan’s sleeve, taking his hand instead to coax him into sitting back down. “Lan Zhan, sit. Please.”

Lan Zhan’s lips thin, but he does as Wei Ying asks. Wei Ying clasps both hands over Lan Zhan’s. “I spoke too quickly,” he says. “I should have waited until I was level-headed.”

To Wei Ying's dismay, Lan Zhan does not look cajoled in the slightest. "I'm sorry,” Wei Ying
rambles on. “I've been too consumed by my own feelings about all this, and I haven't been listening
to you well enough.” He sighs, glancing down woefully. "Same as always, I guess."

Lan Zhan’s hand twitches under his. "Do you regret it?"

"I regret how it happened. But I confess I don't regret kissing you." Wei Ying smiles. "Thinking
back, I said something to the same effect last night, too."

"Then why apologise now?"

"Anyone in my position would do the same!” Wei Ying reasons. “It’s not a great feeling, waking
up to the possibility that I’d effectively cornered you into kissing me. I couldn’t fathom that you’d
truly want it too. I’ve spent,” his voice trembles and he pushes the storm of emotions as far back as
he can, because he needs to say this, needs Lan Zhan to know, “a long time, wanting and wanting
while thinking you’d never want the same."

"Wanting — me," Lan Zhan says haltingly, the intonation sliding up in a request for something
more precise. As though he is testing the word for its give; as though his awareness of what Wei
Ying's desire entails could still be mired in uncertainty after last night. He clears his throat.

"...Wanting you,” Wei Ying affirms, his lungs finally, finally releasing the air they’ve been
holding in for years. “Wanting your everything; wanting everything with you.” It is so liberating, to
put it out there at last, without fear of reproach.

Lan Zhan wets his lips. "Since?"

"I can't say," Wei Ying demurs, cheeks growing hot.

"Can't or won't?"

"Both."

Lan Zhan slips his hands out from under Wei Ying’s and takes his wrist. "Tell me."

"No,” Wei Ying persists. “I really don't know specifically when, and it’s too embarrassing
anyway."

"It's not embarrassing," Lan Zhan asserts.

"Why not?"

"It's the same for me."

He’s really too sweet, Wei Ying thinks. "You don't have to say that to make me feel better."

Lan Zhan gives him a stern look. "Will you stop assuming you know how I feel better than I do?"
He rubs his thumb in concentric circles against Wei Ying’s wrist, watching it as he contemplates
his next words. Quietly, he confesses, "I've wanted you too. For longer than I can remember.” He
looks up at Wei Ying. “Longer than I could understand."

So that’s what he’d meant, then, when he’d said, “If you want it, I want it too.” Wei Ying had
mistaken it for some sort of discomfiting subservience, but this—.

I’ve wanted you too.

It’s the balm Wei Ying’s heart has needed for so long. Longer than his revival, longer than his
disownment, longer than his first fall into sure death.

I’ve wanted you too.

He’s wanted him back, for all that time. Wei Ying hadn’t yearned in vain.

“Your taste in men is atrocious,” he finally manages, choking out a laugh.

“Never.”

He’s so insistent, so earnest as Wei Ying looks at him through wet eyes. And so soon after Wei Ying has upset him. Wei Ying takes in a shuddering breath. “You didn’t say anything.”

Lan Zhan directs a miffed look at him, communicating exactly what he thinks of the intelligence of that remark. "Nor you," he counters.

“Maybe not exactly,” Wei Ying allows, “but I gave you a lot of hints. I figured you were either not interested in men, or not interested in me.”

"What hints?"

Wei Ying rolls his eyes. "Lan Zhan, I was flirting with you all the time! I chased you around whenever I had the chance, tested the waters whenever it was convenient! It was pretty mortifying, what with everyone apparently picking up on it."

"Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan says, with the air of one who has resigned himself to a lifetime of oversteeped tea, “you would flirt with your own reflection."

"Be honest, it’s a dashing reflection." Wei Ying bats his lashes.

“...”

He coughs. "Alright, I like to flirt, but I’m never as persistent as I was with you. It's not my fault you were oblivious."

"I was not oblivious," Lan Zhan argues, “I thought you were — playing.”

Playing what? Wei Ying thinks hysterically. Playing what? "I couldn’t very well court you directly!” he defends himself. “Your admirers would have strung me up by the ankles, if I gave the sheltered Second Jade even more reason to shut himself away. And afterwards — I didn't want to spring that on you when the world knew me as the Yiling Laozu. That would have been — unfair.”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. "You should have asked sooner."

"I did, though,” Wei Ying says softly. “I asked what I was to you. And I told you what you were to me, I said you were my zhiji for life."

"Your confidant?" Lan Zhan furrows his brow. “How was I to know that meant—?"

Wei Ying makes a noise of frustration. "No, not just any old confidant; I meant it as — as my most trusted, most intimate friend. The person who would know me, for life.” He bites his lip. "Fine, so it was ambiguous. But I meant it like that. I still mean it like that."

"Most intimate," Lan Zhan repeats, as he seems to have picked up a habit of doing this morning.

"Yes." Wei Ying swallows. "Or was I getting ahead of myself?"
"No." Lan Zhan’s thumb presses hard where it rests on Wei Ying’s pulse. "I thought that had only been what I’d wanted to hear, so it could not be true," he says.

Wei Ying laughs wetly. He clasps Lan Zhan’s hands, revels in the newly discovered fact that Lan Zhan welcomes it as something intimate, that Wei Ying doesn’t have to be careful so it won’t reveal his affections. "We were both fools," he concludes, lacing their fingers together one by one and wondering at the sight of it.

Lan Zhan squeezes his fingers with his own. "Wei Ying," he asks, an imploring note to his words. "Do you truly believe me?"

Lan Zhan has signalled to him countless times the nature of his feelings for Wei Ying, and each time Wei Ying has failed to understand him. It twinges at his chest, that it took something like this — this teeth-grinding theatrics — for him to stop and listen.

Wei Ying breathes in deeply and smiles at Lan Zhan. "You could never lie to me." He brings Lan Zhan’s hands up to his mouth. "I believe you." He kisses his knuckles. "I'm in love with you."

"Love," Lan Zhan says, the word sacred in his mouth.

"Mmhm," Wei Ying says, wallowing in the renewed wonder that brings to Lan Zhan. It's as though the utterance has a power of its own. "Love. I don't want there to be space for any more misunderstanding, now that we've come this far."

Lan Zhan’s hands clench so tightly his knuckles show bonily through the creamy skin. "Love," he murmurs to himself. He licks his lower lip, the last of his guardedness melting away as his eyes fill with relief; with fulfilment and what Wei Ying knows, from his own feeling at the moment, must be euphoria. "I, as well," Lan Zhan says, speaking clearly to impress the gravity of his words. "Wei Ying — I am also in love with you."

Wei Ying’s cheeks ache from how much he is smiling, but it’s a gratifying ache. "Good!" he says. "I'll make sure you never have reason to regret it. I promise."

Lan Zhan shakes his head. "You don’t need to promise."

"Why is that?"

"There has not been any other." With some abashment, he says, "If I have it my way, there will never be any other."

Wei Ying’s mouth goes dry. Right. He is definitely not going to cry.

"...Last night," he clears his throat to smoothen his voice, "you also said to ask you later, if I wanted more."

Lan Zhan’s eyes widen. "You remember this?"

"I remember the important things," Wei Ying quips, feeling emboldened. He ignores the vertiginous arch of Lan Zhan’s brow and leans forward. "...So? Can I?"

"Can you what?"

Wei Ying purrs in his mind, knowing he’s won their little back-and-forth. "Can I kiss you?" he asks. He lets go of a hand to gently touch Lan’s cheek with the tips of his fingers, mirroring Lan Zhan’s gesture from last night.
"Touch you like this?" he asks, lowering his voice. He drops his hand to a shoulder, moving closer and brushing his fingers down the length of Lan Zhan’s arm, then up the length of his torso. “And like this?”

He watches through his lashes, crowing internally with victory as Lan Zhan’s neck and ears flush — so much more visible in the daylight, the light sensitivity is absolutely worth it — and he leans into the touch, his mouth parting. A hand comes up to pry Wei Ying’s hand off his lapels, curls around his forearm in that oh-so-familiar way, and a kiss is pressed to Wei Ying’s inner wrist as Lan Zhan dares him with his eyes.

“Try?”

Wei Ying quakes with the force of his desire. He cradles Lan Zhan’s face between his hands, closes the last of the suffocating distance between them, and kisses him, kisses into him, deep and slow.

He pulls back with wet lips, with his tongue tingling on the underside. "Again?"

"I’ve told you,” Lan Zhan says, eyes fixed on Wei Ying’s mouth, “If you want it, it is yours.”

Wei Ying blushes furiously. "You have to stop saying things like that,” he groans. “I'll get too greedy.”

Lan Zhan pulls him in for another kiss, sucking playfully on his lower lip and sending heat rushing through him. He looks him straight in the eye. “No such thing,” he reminds him.

Impossible, he’s utterly impossible. Wei Ying can’t speak, the weight of his feelings too heavy to siphon into words. He spreads his fingers over Lan Zhan’s heart and watches it move with the rise and fall of Lan Zhan's breathing, steadying himself. “Okay,” he says, looking back up. “Okay. But for you, too. I’m not — I’m a little slow to pick up on these things. So you have to tell me, if you want something. I want to give you everything you could ever want.”

Lan Zhan’s lashes flutter. He colours across his cheeks and looks away, disentangling himself from Wei Ying to pour himself some water.


Lan Zhan stays silent, his fingers trembling almost imperceptibly as he places the pitcher down on the table.

“Oh, is that how it is?” Wei Ying grins. “You can make all the honeyed promises you want, but when I do it there's a problem?” He scoots forward and snatches the cup of water from Lan Zhan. “Lan-er, you know I won’t stop teasing you about this now, no?” he sing-songs. “Who knew you could be so cute.”

Lan Zhan grasps at the cup, but it’s in vain; Wei Ying sits on the balls of his feet and raises it above his head. “Ah, ah, don’t be like that. I can’t call you cute? After I’ve been thinking about how cute you are for years now?” He sets the cup down at the far end of the desk and tugs Lan Zhan’s jaw towards him, taking pleasure in the naked furiosity on his face. Ah, he’s missed this.

Lan Zhan glares. “Wei Ying, you—!”

“Shh, shh, don’t be mad,” Wei Ying coaxes. He drags Lan Zhan’s outstretched hand into his lap and smooths out the curl of his fingers. “I what, hm? I’m too brazen?” He chuckles. “You haven’t seen the half of it. You’ll have a lifetime to enjoy it, now that you’ve given me the yes. I won’t let
you forget it.” He presses a quick, teasing peck to Lan Zhan’s lips.

Lan Zhan bites his lips in retaliation, hard.

Wei Ying squawks. “Ow! Lan Zhan, that hurt!” He presses his hands to his mouth to check for blood.

“As it should,” Lan Zhan says primly.

“I’m complimenting you and I should suffer a bite in return?!”

Scathingly, Lan Zhan says, “Are you complimenting me or throwing my dignity to the wind? Calling a grown man ‘cute’; impertinent!”

“Yes, that’s right, I’m impertinent!” Wei Ying retorts hotly, “I’ll call you cute if I want to. I’ll call you cute and beautiful and handsome and every forsakenly sickeningly syrupy thing under the sun. If it takes being bitten to get to do that, so be it!” He affects a melodramatic sigh. “They say to love is to suffer, after all.”

Lan Zhan stops listening halfway through and reaches out to wipe Wei Ying’s mouth with his thumb. Wei Ying is clearly not bleeding, but he is startlingly gentle nonetheless.

“So you’re alright with being called cute now?” Wei Ying asks, butting into the touch with his chin. The barely-there pressure of Lan Zhan’s thumb makes his lips buzz as he speaks.

Lan Zhan presses down in warning. “We’ll see.” He moves away when he is satisfied that there is no injury. “Pace yourself.”

“I can’t.” Wei Ying works past the recurring tightness in his throat. “You don’t know what it’s been like for me. How much there is in me. You’ve opened the floodgates; I can’t hold it back.”

“I do know,” Lan Zhan says, significantly. Then he exhaled, gathering himself and straightening his robes.

“Lan Zhan?”

“Take a bath,” Lan Zhan orders.

Wei Ying blinks in disorientation. “What?” he asks. He sniffs himself and wrinkles his nose. “Ugh, yes, I reek. You should have told me earlier.” The sour taste inside his mouth, now that he can register it, makes him pull a face. “Lan Zhan, I kissed you with booze breath!”

“Several times. Yesterday as well.” Lan Zhan says helpfully, already flipping to the page on which he left the book. “But you should bathe now, to cool down.”

Wei Ying laughs. “I’ll bathe, but I don’t think this is the right time to be cooling down, Wangji-didi. We’ve lost so much time already! If anything, things should be heating up.”

“Cooling down.”


“No,” Lan Zhan replies, eyes shifting over the columns of writing. “We will need preparation. And privacy.”

“Preparation?” Wei Ying parrots. He frowns. “But I’m bathing now. There are things we can do
that don’t need any other preparation.” His voice turns sly. “Unless you have something particular in mind?”

“Yes — privacy,” Lan Zhan says.

“Silencing spell,” Wei Ying parries.

“It would still be daylight.”

“I don’t really mind,” Wei Ying shrugs. “But what you’re saying is, all is well if I start something at night?”

Stolidly, Lan Zhan says nothing.

Wei Ying shakes with mirth. “Lan Zhan, you seem to be very at ease with all this. You have a plan of action and everything.” He pokes Lan Zhan’s arm. “Is this the same didi who can’t take being called cute? The same young master who’d never seen pictures of men being intimate together before?”

“Things change.”

Wei Ying arches a brow and nods profoundly. “So it seems.” He melts at the little sideways glance that earns him. “I like it,” he adds.

Lan Zhan huffs and jerks his head towards the adjoining bath chamber. “Bathe,” he reiterates. “I’ll have the hot water brought up.”

“You had them heat it up already? Wonderful!” Wei Ying pastes on his most lecherous grin. “Would Lan-er care to join me then…?”

“Lan-er bathed before you woke,” Lan Zhan informs him, cutting his sorry attempt at enticement neatly in half.

“There’s no need to make excuses, Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying says with amusement. “You could just say no; I won’t take offence.”

Lan Zhan turns a page of his book, attention turned firmly on reading. “Ask earlier next time.”

Chapter End Notes

1 That is, ‘Chinese patchouli’, 藿香/huò xiāng, scientific name Agastache rugosa. To my knowledge the combination of this herb with sandalwood is not generally prescribed by practitioners of Chinese medicine for hangover relief, but the essential oils do have a soothing & clarifying effect. [back]
Wei Ying takes longer in the bath than he intends to. It’s a habit he’s developed over the course of his travels, lounging in the tub chewing willow bark until the water goes tepid and his toes and fingers prune — the heat is always a luxury compared to bathing outdoors when he camps, wading through icy streams in the early hours and hoping the sun will shed enough light on his back to warm his skin. He isn’t like Lan Zhan, acclimatised to freezing temperatures by dint of his time spent in the Cold Pool. And it’s particularly appreciated today, the steam and gentle fragrance of honeylocust soothing away the worst of his hangover.

He drenches himself in cold water afterwards, towels off and slips haphazardly into his robes, eager to return to their room. Lan Zhan is still reading his book at the desk, picture-perfect, but a tray has been placed by his elbow, with what looks like a bowl of black rice congee with simmered fruit dotted through like flowers and a plateful of steaming white bite-sized mantou.

Wei Ying’s stomach rumbles. He walks to the desk, heedless of the water he is dripping on the floor as he wrings his hair dry, and leans over Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “That looks like the same poem you were on when I left.”

He giggles when Lan Zhan doesn’t reply, only the deeper indentation his fingers make on the paper giving him away. “Lan Zhan, could it be that you were too distracted to focus on what you were reading?”

Again, he’s given no response. “So you were?” he persists. “And what was it that distracted you? Thinking about kissing me?”

Lan Zhan closes the book and puts it down, signalling that Wei Ying should eat. Wei Ying grins and kneels behind Lan Zhan instead, wrapping his arms around Lan Zhan’s shoulders and revelling in the way Lan Zhan’s body tenses. The towel must be making a damp spot on Lan Zhan’s robes, but Wei Ying is remorseless.

He reaches over Lan Zhan’s arm to pluck a mantou from the tray, popping it into his mouth. Humming with delight at the cloudy-soft texture, he speaks into Lan Zhan’s ear mid-chew. “To think that a simple wanderer could bring the eminent Hanguang-jun to such a level.” Swallow. “Thinking of naughty things when he should be reviewing his lady friend’s manuscript, and sneaking out wine from Gusu when he should never be within an arm’s reach of a bottle of liquor…ah!” He jerks as he remembers his own surprise for Lan Zhan. “Speaking of bringing me wine — I have something to give you, too.”

Lan Zhan turns his head to him in question. Wei Ying smacks a kiss on his cheek. “Wait a little.” He pulls off and sprints to his cot, poking around in his pack until he finds the qiankun pouch he had forgotten about completely. Unsealing it, he examines its contents cursorily. The camphor wood box is still gleaming with varnish, and the silk pouch smells as fragrant as the day he’d received it. Satisfied, Wei Ying returns with them to Lan Zhan’s desk, resuming his old spot next to Lan Zhan and placing them in front of him. He doesn’t bother to keep the excitement off of his face.

“These are?” Lan Zhan asks.
“Gifts that I picked up for you.” Wei Ying nods at them. “Open them?”

Lan Zhan opens the drawstring silk pouch and holds it in the palm of his hand to take a whiff. “Tea?”

“Yep,” Wei Ying says around another mantou. “Silver needle and jasmine. You’ve probably no shortage of fine tea at the Cloud Recesses, but the woman I got this from makes exceptionally subtle blends and manages her own tea garden, so I thought you might want to try it.” He’d made her acquaintance through a job request, and when she’d expressed her relief at being able to harvest the first flush of the season without delay, he’d thought immediately of Lan Zhan and requested a bag of her best white.

“It smells pleasant,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying dusts his hands and reaches for the bowl of congee, digging into it eagerly. “Open the other one.”

Lan Zhan pulls the bag closed and turns the box with careful fingers so its latch faces him. He touches the floral carvings decorating the lid. “Good craftsmanship,” he remarks.

“Isn’t it?”

He beams with pride at the widening of Lan Zhan’s eyes. “This is your work?”

Wei Ying, with his innate artistic streak, had spent many lazy afternoons at the Lotus Cove carving makeshift toys and figurines for the Jiang siblings. The skill had only been refined during the years he’d spent inventing at the Burial Mounds. “It is.” He grins mischievously and waggles his eyebrows. “You could say I’m good with my hands.”

Lan Zhan’s lips quirk with humour as he undoes the latch and lifts the cover of the box. Inside, cushioned in perfumed ivory-white silk, sits an exquisite headdress. The base is a solid ring of metal, its edges rimmed with vitrified teal bands. The space between is engraved with an intricate vegetal pattern. At the front of the display tube sit three adjacent, tapering hexagonal screens branching out like petals, the mesh a lace-like filigree replicating the engravings on the base. The back, similarly a metalwork screen, runs along the base from behind like an upturned collar, tapering into the front panes. A simple silver stick-pin runs through the base, capped by a pearl-inlaid, bright blue lotus from which dangle two glass beads in the shades of peacock plumes.

Lan Zhan looks up at Wei Ying. “You like it?” Wei Ying prompts.

“What is this?”

“A hair ornament, of course! It can’t be so poorly made it’s unrecognisable?”

Lan Zhan lifts the headdress with reverent hands, as though he is afraid he’ll break it. “It isn't poorly made,” he says, tracing the filigree delicately, admiring the colourful pinhead.

Wei Ying waits for a reaction. “Then?”

Lan Zhan sets the headdress down. He gives Wei Ying a look of intense disapproval. “This is too excessive,” he says.

Wei Ying’s eyebrows shoot up. “I don’t know; it's not as ornate as some of the crowns I’ve seen
you wear.”

“Not how it looks.”

He slurps down a mouthful of congee. “What, then?” His eyes widen with realisation. “You mean the price?” He laughs as Lan Zhan twists his mouth uncomfortably. “You don’t really have room to talk, after the horse incident. And you’ve squandered away a lot of silver on me beyond that.”

“That is different,” Lan Zhan insists.

Wei Ying snorts. “I know. You’re rich, it’s your moral obligation to redistribute your wealth.” He grins at Lan Zhan, tongue-in-cheek. “Seriously, don’t worry about how much I spent on it. For one thing, I can spend my money however I like, and I’ll spend it on you if I so choose.”

“Wei Ying—”

“—But,” Wei Ying holds up a hand, “you really don’t need to torment yourself over it. I didn’t starve myself to buy this for you. I didn’t even buy it.”

Lan Zhan’s eyes drop to the crown, re-examining it. His lips part. “...You forged this?”

Wei Ying smiles. "Mmhmm. Refined it using my own qi.”

The way he stares in speechless — awe? It’s probably as close to awe as Lan Zhan can get — leaves Wei Ying feeling extremely flustered. He hurries to brush it aside. “Anyhow, it’s not really a big deal; it’s nothing to be shocked at. You already know I’m good at working with metal, maybe even too good—”

“Even so,” Lan Zhan says. His throat bobs as he picks the headdress up again. “It’s beautiful.”

Wei Ying flushes at the praise. He’s glad Lan Zhan likes it so much. The little side project had given him a lot of grief, from procuring the necessary tools and materials to finding appropriate venues for forging it to the agonising loneliness that came over him every time he took it out to work on it.

“This is...?” Lan Zhan asks, tapping the base.

“White copper.”[1]

“And the embellishments?”

“Glazed ceramic for the bands, turquoise and pearl for the lotus. The beads are plain glass.”

“So you did starve yourself.”

“I didn’t!” Wei Ying laughs. “Glass and ceramic are affordable, and I went diving for the pearl. The metal and turquoise were rewards from a jewel merchant.” He chuckles some more. “But really, you’ve become too good at making fun of me. I’ll need to up my game.”

“I had a good teacher,” Lan Zhan says distractedly. He pulls out the pin to better appreciate the decorations, brushes the lotus petals, before he returns the headdress carefully to its box.

“So?” Wei Ying beams, giddy with satisfaction. “You like it?”

“Very much.”
“That’s good.”

“Thank you,” Lan Zhan says, somber in that ridiculously formal way of his.

Wei Ying bemoans having asked the question. Now he’s blushing again, and he can’t meet Lan Zhan’s gaze. “There’s no need to make a ceremony out of it,” he mutters.

“No,” Lan Zhan says. Deliberately, he repeats, “Thank you.”

“Oh, have it your way then; you’re welcome,” Wei Ying relents. “Why don’t you try it on now? Let me see how it looks on you.”

Lan Zhan stays quiet, so Wei Ying retracts swiftly, thinking he’s put him in awkward position. “But if it’ll be a bother then forget—”

“Alright.”

“— it...What? Alright?” He watches, dumbfounded, as Lan Zhan raises his hands to undo the ribbon tying his hair, removing the ornament over his bun to unravel it methodically. His hair-tie slides to the ground behind him, and the forehead band and ornament are set aside with a soft clink. As his hair is loosened, it cascades down his shoulders and back, thick and dark like water under the new moon.

“In my bag, there is a comb.”

“Yes,” Wei Ying says, entranced by the long, languid fall of his hair.

“Will you get it for me?” Lan Zhan asks, ever-patient.

Wei Ying jolts into attention. “Oh! Yes! Of course.” He scrambles to his feet, rushing to retrieve the half-moon comb and a few hair pins.

Lan Zhan gathers his hair over his shoulder, upturning his palm for the comb. Wei Ying shakes his head. “Let me?”

“...Very well,” Lan Zhan allows.

Wei Ying shuffles on his knees to sit behind Lan Zhan, pulling his hair back and taking a few locks to start combing from the bottom. It won’t need much detangling, but Wei Ying enjoys the soft, smooth tickle of hair slipping between his fingers. “I’m really good with hair, you know,” he offers, running the comb upwards gradually. “I know it doesn’t look like it, from how I wear mine, but I had a lot of practice with Jiang Cheng and Shijie growing up.”

Lan Zhan’s head dips in a minute nod. “Nothing too ridiculous,” he cautions.

Wei Ying smiles. “I wouldn’t dare, Hanguang-jun.”

When he’s done straightening out Lan Zhan’s hair, he pulls the hair from the upper half of his scalp into a thick, taut bun, securing the new headdress and pin onto it.

“There.” He brushes a few stray hairs into place and adjusts Lan Zhan’s fringes as best he can from the side, then scooches back to get a better look at him.

“Well?”

The questioning tilt of Lan Zhan’s head sends the glass beads swaying, glinting as sunbeams strike
them. With his bangs loose at the front, and his hair up in that colourful, mesh-like headdress, and his forehead strangely empty without his band, he looks... “Nice,” Wei Ying says, his voice coming out papery. “You look — very nice.”

The tips of Lan Zhan’s ears go pink. “Good,” he says.

Wei Ying gestures towards the wall mirror. “You should see for yourself.”

“I shall, later.”

Perplexing as ever! Wei Ying pouts. “You don’t want to see now?”

Without a smidgeon of embarrassment, Lan Zhan says, “If you think it looks nice, it is enough for me.”

Wei Ying gapes. And they say he’s shameless! “Lan Zhan,” he chides, "you’re cute, but that’s stupid. You’re setting yourself up to be pranked, you know.”

Lan Zhan places the ornament he’d previously been wearing into the camphor wood box and shuts the lid, his movements businesslike. Matter-of-factly, he says, “You will prank me whether I set myself up or not.”

“Yes, but—”

“Then better to save you some trouble, no?” Lan Zhan cuts in, his eyes dancing.

What on earth — where is this playfulness coming from? “I — guess?” Wei Ying stammers.

Lan Zhan nods with finality. He stacks the manuscript he hadn’t been reading and the tea pouch on the box, then picks them up and stands.

“Wait, wait!” he exclaims. Lan Zhan is moving far too briskly for Wei Ying to keep up with his new oddities. “What are you doing?”

“Packing,” Lan Zhan says.

“Ah?” Wei Ying flounders. “Why?”

Lan Zhan frowns. “You’ve bathed. Should we not leave?”

Wei Ying is feeling gravely wounded. There is a nourishing meal right in front of him and it is about to be taken away! “What about eating?” he objects.

Lan Zhan’s gaze slides to the long-forgotten mantou and congee. The rice has begun to set by now. “Have it reheated,” he directs, sounding doubtful about what appeal the food retains. “Finish quickly.”

“I feel like you’re in more of a rush to get to Yichuan than I am. Oh, is that it?” Wei Ying deduces teasingly, "You’re trying to set the example? Even when following my lead? How sly, Hanguang-jun.”

“We shouldn’t keep your client waiting,” Lan Zhan says, ever the consummate professional.

Wei Ying’s eyes crinkle at the display of earnestness. “You’re right,” he concurs. Standing as well, he brushes off his robes and reconsiders what he’s been bursting to ask Lan Zhan since exiting the bath chamber, his pulse racing. He decides to take a chance, damn the consequences.
Still picking off invisible particles from his clothes, he says, “You’d really make a great cultivation partner, you know? You’re so proactive, so meticulous. I could have you take care of all the pomp and paperwork. Knowing you, it’s something you’d enjoy.” He peeks furtively at Lan Zhan, gauging his response.

There is no response. Lan Zhan walks to his cot, economically gathering his things into his pack.

“Hey!” Wei Ying exclaims, “Lan Zhan, you have nothing to say about that?”

Finished packing, Lan Zhan picks up the tray of cold breakfast and walks to the door. “Ask properly next time,” he advises. Not sparing even a final backward glance, he leaves the room.

The sun has lost its glare and the symptoms of Wei Ying’s hangover largely attenuated by the time they depart for Enshi City. Despite Wei Ying’s assurances that he is perfectly fit now, thank you, Lan Zhan stops by a parasol vendor and invites Wei Ying to take his pick. Somewhat put out at being treated like a precious little flower, Wei Ying hauls Lan Zhan in the direction of the stables, where he demonstrates his masculinity by intimidating the stable hands and checking Yinfeng’s equipment with over-the-top shrewdness.

Lan Zhan keeps his word and rides Yinfeng beside Wei Ying, with Xiao Pingguo setting the pace as if it’s its birthright. Xiao Pingguo does not have a temperament that could ever be described as agreeable, but it responds dismissively enough to Yinfeng’s presence to not raise any flags, and moreso when it realises Yinfeng is not interested in establishing dominance — not interested in much besides Lan Zhan at all, in fact. It’s an improvement over its fraught relationship with Lan Zhan’s rabbits.

They stop under the shade of a willow tree for lunch. Wei Ying polishes off his food long before Lan Zhan is done, so he tends to the beasts while Lan Zhan eats. He finds the two of them grazing at the thick grass some distance away from a cluster of lilac bushes. Feeling mischievous, he plucks several blooms and braids them crudely into Yinfeng’s mane, patting it contentedly when it tolerates him without so much as a flick of its tail.

“Look at Yinfeng, such a sweetheart,” he calls. “Not like some other four-legged beasts I know.”

Xiao Pingguo shoots him a dirty look and snorts, then goes pointedly back to grazing on its high-end grass. With petty satisfaction, Wei Ying sneaks Yinfeng an apple from Xiao Pingguo’s reserve.

When they resume their walk’s pace, Wei Ying muses, “Maybe I should make you a crown of lilacs to match, eh, Lan Zhan?” Lan Zhan hadn’t batted an eyelid at the darling hairstyle Wei Ying had given Yinfeng, only stroking its mane in approval when it greeted him with a happy whinny and butted its muzzle into his hand. The quick rapport Lan Zhan had built with the mare had robbed Wei Ying of the opportunity to have any fun with them, but it’s an acceptable sacrifice — Wei Ying can also appreciate the way Lan Zhan’s initial indifference gives way to gentle, soothing commands, a steady hand; even the occasional affectionate petting. Wei Ying would never have the patience to spoil an animal so thoroughly. The way that Lan Zhan’s rabbits practically sprout from the man makes much more sense now — any creature would be besotted with such a caring master.
“No need,” Lan Zhan says.

“Why? Afraid I’ll call you cute again?”

“Flowers should be left to thrive where they grow.”

Wei Ying lowers his voice into something more suggestive. “Mm, too bad I’ve a nasty habit of plucking pretty flowers wherever I see them.” He flutters his eyelashes. “How would Lan er-gongzi discipline this lowly cultivator for his crimes, in accordance with the sect rules?”

“Cane his fingers,” Lan Zhan says. “If repeated, bind them to his palms for three days.”

“Huh?!” Wei Ying yells, flirting all but forgotten. “Lan Zhan, you won’t spare a shred of mercy even for me?! For your special someone?! You’d really do that to me?!”

“You should also remember: infidelity is not tolerated in the Cloud Recesses.”

“We aren’t even in the Cloud Recesses!” Wei Ying sputters. “And more importantly, infidelity, what? When have I ever — oh.” He cuts himself off, halting Xiao Pingguo on instinct, and cackles. “Is this about ‘plucking flowers’? Ah, I can’t believe you took that seriously!” He presses an arm to his stomach and grips tightly onto Xiao Pingguo’s reins to keep his balance as he doubles over with laughter. “Lan Zhan,” he says between breaths, “since you obviously like it so much, should I get you a pot of vinegar the next time I drink?”

Lan Zhan’s features come together into something akin to annoyance. “Laugh any harder and you’ll cough up a lung,” he says.

Wei Ying wipes his tears and slaps a hand against Xiao Pingguo’s neck, devolving into another fit of giggles. It’s only when Lan Zhan begins moving ahead and Xiao Pingguo threatens to kick Wei Ying off that he forces himself to stop.

As the sun rides further westward, a cool breeze picks up, sending the occasional leaf or stray blade of grass their way. Wei Ying plays on Chenqing for some time, with the crescendoing cricket-song and the clopping of hooves on dirt-rock as an accompaniment. It’s peaceful, this gloom and the seclusion and Lan Zhan’s constant, concrete presence. He paints such a picture like this, white-robed and black-haired, sitting painfully straight on his dark, svelte mount. The afternoon light catches on his shining headdress, scattering as pink-gold rays just the way Wei Ying had imagined when he’d forged it.

At one point, Wei Ying notices that the look in Lan Zhan’s eyes has grown rather distant and contemplative. He tucks the flute into his waistband and rides a little closer to Lan Zhan, being careful not to startle Yinfeng. “Lan Zhan, what are you thinking?”

Easily, Lan Zhan says, “Thinking that Wei Ying is very slow.”

“Slow?!” Wei Ying blusters. “If I go any faster on Xiao Pingguo, the lazy thing would buck me off!”

“No that.”

“Not riding? Then what do you mean by slow?” He smacks away an errant mosquito. “You can’t mean I’m slow-witted?”

Lan Zhan answers with a hum of agreement.
Wei Ying tosses his head, assuming a lecturing tone. “Firstly, that is just slanderous. And secondly, even if it were true, which I emphasise it is not, it’s a horrible thing to say to the man who is passionately in love with you. I’m hurt, Lan Zhan.”

“Hurt or not, it is true.”

“True how?” he gripes.

“I, too, gave hints.”

Hints? What is Lan Zhan on about?

“What hints?” he asks, scouring his brain. The rhythmic up-and-down of his saddle hones his concentration, and after a moment, it occurs to Wei Ying that he had said something to the same effect at the Jiangzhou inn, in a rather different context. Is Lan Zhan still thinking about that now, half a day later? “You mean hints about how you felt?” he asks.

“Mn.”

“That can’t be right,” Wei Ying says. “I don’t recall you ever flirting with me.”

“I flirted,” Lan Zhan says. “But there are other ways also, to show affection for the one you are passionately in love with.”

He turns that over in his mind in silence, until he can collect what it is that Lan Zhan is making oblique reference to. Finally, haltingly, he confesses, “I thought you were like that because that was just who you were. A virtuous and kind-hearted person, and a loyal friend.”

In front of him, Lan Zhan makes a low huffing noise. “As I said. Slow,” he reiterates. Overhead, a bird of prey screeches its sympathy as it soars across the sky.

“You can’t call me slow for not picking up on that!” Wei Ying cries, feeling inexplicably defensive. “It was reasonable! No one else suspected it, either!”

His arguments are brutally refuted. “Not true; there were others who knew.”

“Who?!” he demands. Who knew and didn't see fit to tell him?

“Your martial siblings, I believe,” Lan Zhan says. “Xiongzhang and Shufu, too.”

Wei Ying files away the tidbit about Jiang Cheng and Shijie to fumble over later, his attention drawn by the others Lan Zhan had named. A hot pulse of anger crashes through him, and in its wake it leaves behind a desolate, harrowing cold. He grits his teeth, unable to keep the sharpness out of his voice. “Your uncle knew how you felt and still—”

He cuts himself off before he can broach that topic, digging his nails into his palms to rein in his fury. It only gets harder to hold back when he realises he shouldn't be asking how the man could have acted so brutally despite knowing how Lan Zhan felt. No doubt it had factored into his reasoning.

“Still?” Lan Zhan prompts.

Wei Ying scowls, his lips pinched. “Nevermind.”

Wordlessly, Lan Zhan brings Yinfeng to a stop. He turns in his saddle and leans into Wei Ying’s space. “Wei Ying?” he asks with concern.
“It’s not important right now, I swear,” Wei Ying says. His chest aches at the vaguely frantic fretfulness wearing on Lan Zhan’s brow, on the moue of his mouth. In a moment, he’ll be insisting they stop for the night and checking Wei Ying’s forehead for a fever.

Wei Ying reaches into that ache and pulls out a smile for Lan Zhan. “Rather than worry about mistakes from the past, why don’t we focus on the present, hm? Enjoy the journey.” He slips Chenqing out of his waistband again, spinning it thoughtlessly. Spurring Xiao Pingguo forward, he waves at Lan Zhan to follow. “Come, tell me, what should I play next? What would Lan er-gongzi like to hear?”

Lan Zhan’s stares after him with obvious discontentment, but he does not push. “Why not what you were playing when I came to you?” he suggests.

“Ah, yes,” Wei Ying smiles fondly, “‘Think For Yourself’?”

“That isn’t its name,” Lan Zhan perseveres.

“Well, it’s what I’ll be calling it until you tell me its actual name. And don’t give me that drivel about having told me before. It doesn’t count if I can’t remember it happening.”

“It will be drivel or nothing, for you.”

“Stingy,” Wei Ying mutters resentfully. He brings up something else, now that it seems like a good time for it; another melon seed of awkward truth for Lan Zhan to nibble on. “You know, I must have exhausted the heavens themselves with how often I played your piece. I’m surprised I wasn’t smitten by some god who got fed up at all my mopey fluting about.” Gravely, he adds, “I fancy it was my roguish vagabond charm that kept their tempers at bay.”

Lan Zhan has his input as well. “I fancy that might have had the opposite effect.”

Wei Ying gives him a searching look. “You won’t ask me why my fluting was mopey?”

Lan Zhan replies, “You won’t tell me?”

“Thwarted again!” Wei Ying laments, his cheeks hurting from the uncontrollable spread of his grin. “Very well, Hanguang-jun, I shall reveal my deep, dark secret to you.”

He waits until Lan Zhan turns to him in his seat again, the fading light around them making him tingly with the urge to share this. “I dedicated a lot of time after I left Gusu to missing you,” he admits, feeling, happily enough, not an iota of the shame he normally associates with this kind of grossly candid revelation. “Whenever it became too much, I’d play your song. But always I’d only miss you more, after.” He laughs at himself. “As though I were reminiscing over a keepsake. Very maidenly of me, no?”

Lan Zhan neither affirms, nor refutes this. When Wei Ying looks at him, his eyes are a richly vibrant, deep brown, like earth after the summer rainfall. “Our song,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“It isn’t my song alone,” Lan Zhan says. He appears to vacillate, before elaborating, “I composed it for us. For you.” And then, Wei Ying’s momentary short-circuiting seems to inspire him to divulge the last of it. “Wangxian,” he says, with a breathy little laugh at Wei Ying’s bedazzlement. “Its name, since you are so curious to know.”

It takes some time for Wei Ying’s voice to return to him. “Wangxian,” he enunciates, when he
finally can. *Forgetting envies.* A song of love and of deepest promise. A song composed for him, bestowed with a portmanteau of their names.

Wei Ying’s soul thrums with sweetness. He smiles to himself.

“Is it amusing?” Lan Zhan asks, sounding offended, the precious thing.

“It’s adorable,” Wei Ying teases. “But mostly it makes me want to kiss you breathless.”

“Not here—”

“Not here, I know, not where any old passerby can see me debauching the venerable Hanguang-jun,” Wei Ying interrupts. “But I expect a full demonstration of what was going through your mind while composing it, when we get to Enshi City. Or if you’re interested, tonight, actually.” He smirks with overblown salaciousness, hoping he looks every bit the jester he’s feeling he is.

“Certainly not debauchery,” Lan Zhan finds the need to inform him.

Wei Ying’s smirk widens. “Yes, yes, certainly not. I’m sure you weren’t moved by spring dreams of the regular kind. You must have had the loftiest of thoughts about me. Only the loftiest fantasies, for our Hanguang-jun.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan admonishes.

“Oh, alright, I’ll stop.” But he can’t wipe the grin off his face, and his cheeks are rosy with joy, and when he looks at Lan Zhan he’s smiling at him, too, that tiny, soft smile that arrests Wei Ying’s heart.

*Wangxian,* Wei Ying thinks. He lifts Chenqing to his lips and begins to play.

Chapter End Notes

1 White copper: an alloy of copper, nickel, and often also zinc; called 白銅/白铜/bái tóng.[back]

2 Enshi City: based on modern-day Enshi City in Enshi Prefecture, Hubei Province.[back]
At Enshi City, Wei Ying finds a caretaker for Yinfeng and Xiao Pingguo while Lan Zhan secures them their lodgings. Wei Ying is very enthusiastic about finally having a proper bed, the last twelve nights having been spent camping on their bedrolls or relying on the kindness of villagers and townspeople, when they were in proximity, for a roof. And while Wei Ying is not fussy about how he sleeps, and their bedrolls are more than sufficient for a thorough bout of kissing and fondling, they aren’t ideal for him to take his time with Lan Zhan the way he wants to. As for the other option — they haven’t reached the point where Wei Ying can proposition Lan Zhan for sex in the closet-sized spare room of some kind stranger’s house. All in due time, though.

Their room is large when he gets to it, with decadent translucent curtains and a large double bed laden with a thick quilt and bouncy cushions. The thought of Lan Zhan, with his notoriously austere tastes, going out and splurging on an ostentatious room in what is clearly an expectation of their first night together leaves Wei Ying feeling gooey with affection. Being himself, he must of course bully Lan Zhan about this.

He isn’t given the chance to, unfortunately; when Lan Zhan spots him he promptly shoos him off to wash and take his dinner while he goes out on some errand he refuses to state the details of. Wei Ying is baffled by the sudden brusqueness, but it doesn’t feel like it’s been caused by an unknown transgression, and the sense of anticipation makes him carefree, so he does as asked. Washed and full and with his mouth smelling pleasantly of a mild cleansing tea, he flips through some of that poetry from Lan Zhan’s coterie circle until he returns, and then while Lan Zhan spends a suspiciously long time in the bath chamber.

He’s face-down half-asleep on the bed, his nose squashed into a book, when the mattress dips with added weight and a hand comes to rest on his shoulder.

“Wei Ying?”

“Mmmh? Hmm, yes, I’m not asleep,” Wei Ying says, as much to himself as Lan Zhan. He blinks his eyes open, scrunching his nose at his awkward position and slipping the book out from under his face to toss it onto the floor. Sitting up, he stifles a yawn and realises that night has already fallen. Fat candles have been lit in their stands, and the bed curtains are drawn. He senses the low hum of qi around their room — silencing wards have been put up.

Twisting around, he finds Lan Zhan sitting on the edge of the bed, watching him with mirthful eyes. His hair is completely loose, though he’s still wearing his forehead ribbon; sleek and taking on a golden outline in the candlelight. A few locks are draped artfully over his shoulder, drawing attention to his swan-like neck, which is free from all its usual collars. There’s a muted pink flush to his skin — he must’ve just left the bath chamber — and he’s. Only wearing trousers and his pure white tunic, the snug sash emphasising his trim waist.

“Hi,” Wei Ying breathes.
Lan Zhan’s mouth curves with a smile. “Shall we prepare for sleep?” he says.

“Out of the question.” Wei Ying sits up on his knees and rests a hand in the nook at Lan Zhan’s elbow. “I’ve been waiting too long for some space to ourselves.” He squeezes Lan Zhan’s arm and shuffles closer to him, until Lan Zhan must feel his breath on his face. “If you’d told me you were taking a room like this, I would have pitched in, too…”

“Maybe next time,” Lan Zhan says, his attention on Wei Ying’s lips.

Wei Ying smiles a cat's smile and drags Lan Zhan in to kiss him.

It doesn't take long for their chaste, dry kisses to become hard and wet. They've spent several nights kissing each other senseless, and are familiar with each other's mouths. Wei Ying already knows how restless licking the roof of Lan Zhan's mouth makes him, and Lan Zhan does not hesitate to use his teeth, now that he's learnt how it drags noises out of Wei Ying.

Wei Ying is pushed down roughly into the cushions as Lan Zhan presses increasingly longer, deeper kisses into his mouth, leaving it bruised and sensitive. He shifts towards the middle of the bed, settling his hands on Lan Zhan's hips and dragging him bodily so that he's straddling Wei Ying's legs as he leans on his forearms to caress Wei Ying's face, to kiss Wei Ying's brow and cheekbone and the sharpness of Wei Ying's jaw. Wei Ying is unreserved with his sighs, breaths heavy and panting, hands fisting in Lan Zhan's hair. He runs them down Lan Zhan's back to trace his spine through the satiny fabric and arches his neck for more.

He tugs the sash of Lan Zhan's robe loose and slips his fingers under the material to feel the tight skin and supple muscle of that strong, beautiful body. His hands trace and scratch and pull as Lan Zhan sucks throbbing marks onto his jugular, stretches the collar of his robe aside and nips at his clavicle, then soothes the delightful sting with ardent kisses.

Wei Ying can't keep his hips from bucking up when Lan Zhan labours over a sensitive spot at the juncture between his neck and ear; has to suck in air to steady himself. Already half hard, he can feel his blood rising and heart thundering, and as he brushes against Lan Zhan’s own arousal he sighs, tugging at a lock of his hair to coax him up.

“Lan Zhan,” he says, “Up, darling, up. I want to see you.”

Lan Zhan groans against the underside of Wei Ying’s chin, pecks briefly at his lips again before finally sitting up. Beads of perspiration dot his brow, and his hair is utterly dishevelled, falling over his face and chest. Like vines, some of it has sneaked in under his loosened robe. His lips glisten like pomegranate seeds, the whites of his teeth a bright contrast as he pants.

He shifts so that he’s sitting further back on Wei Ying’s legs, below his knees, and yanks at Wei Ying’s robes. “Off,” Lan Zhan says, and a frisson of heat shoots up Wei Ying’s spine at the undercurrent of a command. He lifts himself up using his core strength, wrestles gracelessly out of his robes and undergarment, Lan Zhan easing off his legs and helping him pull them out from under his hips. “You too,” Wei Ying whispers, patting the fabric over Lan Zhan’s chest. “Come on, show me, show me.”

Lan Zhan unwraps his belt, the folds of his tunic coming apart. Wei Ying has a breath’s time to appreciate the hard, shadowy lines of his torso before Lan Zhan is scooting further back, snapping the waistband of Wei Ying’s trousers against his stomach. “These also.”

Wei Ying laughs, hands moving obediently to untie the string holding his trousers up and shimmying them down to his thighs. “You’re so impatient.”
Ignoring this, Lan Zhan busies himself with Wei Ying’s trousers, pulling off his socks and slippers to drag the pants down his ankles and pile them atop his fallen robes. His breath catches when he looks up; he reaches out a hand to stroke the underside of Wei Ying’s cock with feather-light fingertips, pupils blowing when it twitches against them. Leaning closer, he wraps his hand around it and strokes it lightly, his tongue peeking out to wet his lips at Wei Ying’s soft cry, at the jolt of his thighs and the upward curve of his body as he seeks more contact.

Satisfied, he gives Wei Ying a slow, lingering squeeze, a promise for more, and crawls upwards until he is once again crouched over Wei Ying’s chest. Wei Ying’s hands come up to frame his face. He nuzzles against Lan Zhan’s forehead band, tweaks the tip of his nose. “Such a tease,” he murmurs.

Lan Zhan nips his chin in retaliation. “Impatient or a tease, which is it?” he asks, and Wei Ying laughs, his chest feeling weightless.

“I don’t mind either,” he says honestly. “Just keep touching me like that, keep kissing me, you’re so good…”

Moving from the centre of his chest down to his navel, Lan Zhan trails a line of gentle wet kisses down Wei Ying’s torso. The dig of his nails into the muscle at Wei Ying’s abdomen and the tease of his teeth against Wei Ying’s stomach are a sharp contrast, forcing gasps out of Wei Ying, hungry rolls of his hips. Lan Zhan comes back up, sucks at Wei Ying’s throat, welcomes the knotting of Wei Ying's fingers against his scalp. Meeting his gaze directly, he brings his mouth to Wei Ying's raised chest to kiss a nipple sensitised by the balmy air of the room.

Wei Ying's moans grow unabashed at the attention Lan Zhan lavishes on him. His nipples are sucked and grazed by teeth, cooled by the press of smiles into them whenever his voice rises too much or he pulls too hard at Lan Zhan's hair. There's hair tickling his arms, and fingers caressing over his chest as the hand holding his hips down finally relents and he's allowed to buck up as shamelessly as he wants. Wei Ying has hardened completely; he's leaking against Lan Zhan's navel, against the thin trail of dusky hair there, and the thought of that wetness on Lan Zhan's skin, mussed into his body hair, has Wei Ying groaning in his throat, his hands pushing urgently at Lan Zhan's head, down and off from his stinging chest.

Lan Zhan goes down obediently. Once he has moved to the foot of the bed, he taps Wei Ying's thighs. "Open."

"As Wangji-didi wishes," Wei Ying teases. He makes a show of biting his lip and spreading his legs, knees folding up and heels flat against the mattress. Trailing a hand down the jut of his hipbone, he watches with hooded eyes as Lan Zhan follows the motion past his pelvis, follows the skating of his fingers down his inner thigh.

Lan Zhan slides forward promptly, resituating himself on his stomach between Wei Ying's legs. He grips Wei Ying's fingers, bringing their seduction to a stop, his breath hot on Wei Ying's flushed and standing cock. A hand weaves around one of Wei Ying's thighs and he releases Wei Ying's fingers to stroke along the crease of the other and tug playfully at his pubic hair. "Stay," he says.

And then Lan Zhan is lowering his head, sucking violent kisses onto the tender skin between Wei Ying's thighs, and finally, finally getting his hand around Wei Ying again. His thumb circles the dark head, gathers the clear fluid dripping there and rubs it down the length of his shaft, pressing briefly against the ridge under the head on its way. Wei Ying shudders, tries to thrust into the touch, but the fingers of Lan Zhan’s left hand tap warningly where they rest on his thigh. He looks up at Wei Ying, gaze firm. “Stay,” he repeats himself.
“A little hard to—” Wei Ying breaks off with a shout as Lan Zhan’s palm curls around him, sword-callused and wet with Wei Ying’s slick. It squeezes just on the edge of too tight before the pressure eases into something smooth and delicious. “What the fuck,” Wei Ying says on an exhale, dragging another cushion one-handedly to shove under his neck so he can see better. Lan Zhan’s bottom lip has been sucked into his mouth, his eyes are fixed on his hand, and Wei Ying is mesmerised. “You can’t do that and tell me not to move.”

“Be good.” It’s an offhand response. It only drives Wei Ying further out of his mind.

Unaffected, Lan Zhan continues to pleasure him, drawing weak, frustrated noises out of him until the friction starts getting too much and Wei Ying’s traitorous hips twitch away. He stops, drags his eyes away from their focus to look up, and Wei Ying groans and fists his hands into the quilt.

“No, no, don’t stop,” he protests. “You can keep going, I’m fine.”

Lan Zhan shushes him soothingly, kisses the skin of his taint, and the arm curled around Wei Ying’s thigh slides off. “Keep it up,” Lan Zhan reminds him. And then — and then he cups a hand to his mouth, and his jaw moves as he gathers his spit into it, and then the thumb and index fingers of his left hand are holding Wei Ying down by the base while he smears it over his head and shaft with the right, and it’s so indecent. His lips are still shining with spit in the low light, and there’s still a string of it extending from his mouth. Lan Zhan wipes his chin against his shoulder, irritated by the tickle of it, and moves his hand a little faster. He plays with the slit on the upturn, presses down occasionally into the root with his left palm while his thumb passes over Wei Ying’s sack.

Wei Ying’s hands move to his thighs, claw into the flesh there to help ground himself and keep them up like Lan Zhan has asked him to. It’s so good, and the way Lan Zhan is unashamed in the way he’s pleasing Wei Ying is unbelievably erotic. “Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying gasps, unable to look away from the sight. “What’s all this now, ah? Do you practice a lot with yourself?”

Lan Zhan’s nails press fleetingly into his base in retaliation. Wei Ying hisses, closes his eyes and knocks his head back to come down from the way that sends lightning firing through his scalp, but he’s relentless. He licks his lips, cranes his neck so Lan Zhan can’t avoid looking at him, and says, “You should show me some time. Show me how you touch yourself, hm? It must be quite the sight, with all your prudish sect rules.”

Lan Zhan grits his teeth, his hand stuttering. “Keep quiet.”

But Wei Ying has just started having his fun. “Keep quiet?” he asks, pitching his voice to a tone of injury. “You want me to keep quiet, even when we’re like this? Even with the silencing spell? Why, is it because food is eaten and not spoken, sex is also fucked out and not— Lan Zhan!” He yells as Lan Zhan’s right hand slips off his cock, his left switching to a curled grip around the base while his head moves forward with viper-like speed to, to take Wei Ying into his mouth.

Wei Ying cries out, beating a fist into his thigh at the overwhelming sensation of liquid-soft heat around him. Lan Zhan’s free hand slithers forward, reaches across Wei Ying’s hips to hold him down and unfurl Wei Ying’s fist, locking their fingers together. His eyes, so dark, so pretty and hungry, stare at him, waiting for him to calm down as much as he can, before he squeezes Wei Ying’s hand and starts moving his head.

It’s so much, and even though it’s a little sloppy and Lan Zhan can’t take more than half of him in, even though there’s the edge of teeth, Wei Ying is going to come embarrassingly soon. His body has been too keyed up by all the foreplay, and the fact that Lan Zhan could want to do these things with him, has clearly given it prolonged thought and planned it out for tonight, has Wei Ying intoxicated.
“Teeth,” he mumbles, his other hand sliding into Lan Zhan’s hair to gather it up, so that he can see his face. Lan Zhan’s cheeks are hollowed and flushed with exertion, his lips shockingly red around Wei Ying, and he looks up at Wei Ying from beneath his lashes and gives the tiniest blink of acknowledgment before he wraps his lips over his teeth and resumes sucking, taking as much as he can and teasing the rest with his fingers. Spit leaks from his mouth, making Wei Ying obscenely slippery. Wei Ying can’t stop from thrusting against the lock of Lan Zhan’s arm when he starts rubbing his tongue along the underside, once, twice, the noise of amusement Lan Zhan makes only incensing him further.

His hand shifts from Lan Zhan’s head to his own hair, tearing at it to maintain some semblance of restraint. It doesn’t take much after that. Lan Zhan sucks him hard, presses his tip to the roof of his mouth, a little sigh of pleasure escaping him when Wei Ying’s head brushes the sensitive spot there. He untangles his fingers from Wei Ying’s hand and brings it down to tug his balls, pushes the knuckles into his taint, and Wei Ying jerks and tries to pull him away as he feels the imminent orgasm. “Move, I’m coming, move,” he urges, swatting at Lan Zhan’s head.

Lan Zhan hums around him, draws back and presses wet, open-mouthed kisses down his shaft, coaxing at his slit. Wei Ying comes with a harsh, high-pitched cry, right then, while Lan Zhan’s nose is still brushing his cock.

It’s effervescent. He feels like his brain has whitened out and melted and is fizzing. His teeth clench and his legs go limp and flop onto the mattress, utterly boneless.

Lan Zhan soothes him as he spasms through the aftershocks, his fingers barely touching Wei Ying, shifting his head so he can press kisses like fluttering dragonfly wings to Wei Ying’s groin, his thighs, his stomach. When he finally has the presence of mind to look down again, Lan Zhan is rubbing his palms gently over his hipbones, and there’s — there’s come on his face, across his cheek. Lan Zhan notices his eyes fixating on that spot, and he wipes it away neatly with a finger, rubs it onto the quilt and bunches the silk up to wipe the come off Wei Ying too. With what is irrevocably a smirk on his face he crawls back up to Wei Ying, resting between his legs to look down at him, his eyes swimming with fondness and self-satisfaction.

“Well?” he asks, waiting for Wei Ying’s panting to wind down. “How was it?

Wei Ying’s answering glare is entirely defanged by the way all his muscles, including the ones on his face, seem to have gone slack. “How was it?” he mocks, rolling his eyes. At the insistent wrinkle of Lan Zhan’s brow, he sighs and pulls him down by the nape of his neck, kisses him long and deep until Lan Zhan makes a low, throaty sound. Ending it the way Lan Zhan likes to, with a vengeful little bite, he pats Lan Zhan’s cheek.

“What do you think, Wangji-didi?” he asks, his ego stretching its joints at the way Lan Zhan watches his mouth. “Or maybe I should say ‘-gege’, with how you lorded me around into coming. I think my brain’s pouring out of my ears.”

“Nonsense,” Lan Zhan says, but he sounds supremely happy about it. He shifts onto his elbows so that he’s putting less pressure on Wei Ying, the rolling of his shoulders causing the open undershirt to slip off his back. Wei Ying recognises it for the indication of discomfort that it is — Lan Zhan’s yet to even take his bottoms off, after all — but he’s sidetracked by the material gathering around Lan Zhan’s forearms, leaving his upper body entirely naked for Wei Ying to feast his eyes on.

With the cloth out of the way and his hair pushed aside, the brand scar near Lan Zhan’s heart is no longer hidden, and Wei Ying can see the tail-ends of scars from those accursed lashings licking around the sides of his torso, down from his shoulders to his hips. He wants to enjoy the hard, sharp relief of muscle in front of him, the angular expanse of Lan Zhan’s shoulders, the corded
grace of his arms — all belied by the billowing, gauzy layers of his robes during the daytime — but he can’t, because for a moment, those scars are all he can see.

Lan Zhan catches him staring and stiffens, begins to shrug back into his undershirt, but Wei Ying isn’t having it. He presses back into the mattress, uses the momentum to spring up and turn them over so that Lan Zhan lands, looking like a large startled cat, on a nest of pillows and his own fanned-out hair, and Wei Ying looms over him.

“Don’t hide from me,” Wei Ying tells him. “Don’t ever hide from me.” He lets the please go unsaid, lets it be heard in the waver of his voice and the tremble of his chest instead. He kisses Lan Zhan slowly, tenderly, tongue curling with Lan Zhan’s, his palm cradling his face, trying to say all the things he knows — all the thank yous and sorrys — through that kiss. There’s still a hint of anxiety in his eyes when Wei Ying comes up for air, and so he resolves that today will not be the day that he brings up the past.

Rather, he nuzzles into Lan Zhan’s neck, leaves a few playful marks there before he drops kisses down his chest and stops to pluck at Lan Zhan’s nipples. His hand brushes against the raised edges of that burn mark, against a whip-scar that creeps around Lan Zhan’s bicep, and he pushes down the grief, the mounting thirst for revenge. Digging out the seldom-seen Wei-gege within him he says, in his kindest, sternest voice, “You have to tell me someday, okay?”

The look of relief Lan Zhan gives him squeezes his heart. He wills his darker thoughts away and focuses on pleasing Lan Zhan, on getting as many noises out of him as he can. It’s a difficult task; as yet Lan Zhan’s only vocalisations of pleasure are in his heaving breath and occasional grunts. Wei Ying blows a raspberry next to one of his nipples, just because he can; traces them with his tongue and puffs cool breath over them, leaves love bites over Lan Zhan’s collarbones to overshadow the marks others have left on him. Though Lan Zhan’s body jerks at the sensations, and his jaw clenches harder and the sweep of his hands down Wei Ying’s arms and shoulders grows more and more needy, he nonetheless remains relatively quiet.

Wei Ying decides that the only way he’ll get what he wants is by working with Lan Zhan’s more...substantial parts. He rearranges their legs so he can press a thigh to his groin, tremendously gratified by the hardness he feels there, the slight dampness of the trouser fabric against his skin.

Lan Zhan’s hips buck into the contact reflexively. His eyes widen and his body freezes and he refuses to meet Wei Ying’s gaze, cheeks flushed with shame. “You don’t have to—”

“Mm, shush,” Wei Ying cuts him off, slotting his thigh more solidly in place. “You’re getting an orgasm from me tonight, Hanguang-jun.” He softens his tone, strokes a hand down Lan Zhan’s side. “Hm? You’ll let me?”

The question only brings more blood rushing to Lan Zhan’s cheeks, but at least he appears mollified and is looking at Wei Ying again, so he guides Lan Zhan’s hips into motion until Lan Zhan is voluntarily rutting into the pressure in search of relief, in time with Wei Ying’s crooned encouragements. The clench of his abdominal muscles as he grinds against Wei Ying is ridiculously sensuous. Wei Ying rakes his nails down Lan Zhan’s stomach, dreadful lewd words escaping him before he can stop them.

“Look at you, built like a tiger. You look so gorgeous writhing like this. Makes me want to rub up against your stomach.”

Lan Zhan makes a punched out noise at that, his eyes squeezing shut, and Wei Ying presses his thigh harder into Lan Zhan’s erection, lets his mouth run freely. “Do you like the sound of that? You want me to ride against your stomach? Rut against you till I come on you? I bet it’d feel good,
it’d feel so good, everything about you feels amazing—”

“Wei Ying!” His name on Lan Zhan’s tongue sounds deliciously distressed. The grip he has on Wei Ying’s wrist is hard enough that it hurts to the bone.

“What?” Wei Ying chuckles, drunk on love. “Too much?”

Lan Zhan tosses his head from side to side. “No,” he breathes, and the sound is low and raspy and it would make Wei Ying hard if he hadn’t just come. “Don’t— I’ll finish if you continue.”

How sweet; Lan Zhan is so sweet. Wei Ying plays at nonchalance, raises an eyebrow. “You don’t want to finish yet?”

“Not like this.”

And so bold! Wei Ying has a lot of excitement to look forward to, perhaps even enough to overpower him, if tonight is any indication. “How do you want to finish?” he asks.

“You know,” Lan Zhan says reproachfully, and Wei Ying is tempted to feign ignorance just to get the words out of him when Lan Zhan’s grip slides tentatively to his fingers.

He says quietly, “There’s oil on the stand.”

Wei Ying’s gaze flicks to the bedside stand, where, as promised, there sits an innocuous-looking phial of liquid alongside a washbasin with two towels slung over its rim.

Preparation, indeed.

He clears his throat, losing the heart to tease Lan Zhan. “Right.” He leaps off the bed, uncaring of his state of undress, and nabs the oil while Lan Zhan sits up against the bedhead and removes his trousers and socks.

The first thought that crosses his mind when he sees it is, It’s substantial alright.

He kneels stupidly by the bed, one knee bent on the mattress. Even Lan Zhan's cock is pretty, what the fuck. Wei Ying himself is nothing to scoff at, and he thinks he’s pretty blessed as far these things go, but cocks don’t have any business looking as neat and perfect for fucking as Lan Zhan’s does. It stands tall and girthy, curved slightly towards the tip. Wei Ying can hardly contain himself at the thought of the way it would make him stretch.

“I want you in me,” he blurts out loud, and then blushes on hearing himself. It’s nothing compared to the scandalised look Lan Zhan shoots him.

“Oh, please,” Wei Ying snorts, clambering onto the bed and between Lan Zhan’s legs. “Don’t tell me you don’t want it too.”

“Yes, not now, I know, you want me in you now. Don’t worry, I want that too,” Wei Ying placates him. “I want everything,” he winks.

Placing his hands on Lan Zhan’s calves, Wei Ying pulls at his legs. “This will be easier if you lie down.”

Lan Zhan complies wordlessly, sliding down the mattress until he’s lying again, head propped up by the cushions. His throat bobs as he swallows. The tops of his cheekbones have taken on a
permanent peachy colour.

“Someone’s excited,” Wei Ying remarks, not unkindly. He massages Lan Zhan’s thighs, smiling at him. “Pass me those pillows, lovely.”

He motions at Lan Zhan to lift his hips and positions the pillows beneath them. “Comfortable?”

“Get on with it,” Lan Zhan huffs.

“I’m ravishing one of the elusive Twin Jades of Gusu; you don’t think I should pamper him?”

“There’s no need.”

“Oh? You like it rough?”

“Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying heaves a melodramatic sigh. “Since you won’t use your words to tell me what you like, you’ll just have to put up with what I give you.” Mimicking Lan Zhan’s earlier gesture, he taps at his thigh. “Open.”

“They already are,” Lan Zhan says. If it were anyone else, this would qualify as petulance.

“Wider,” Wei Ying grins lecherously. “I can’t see where I’m supposed to put my fingers if you keep yourself closed up like that.”

With a heatless glare, Lan Zhan bends his knees and parts his legs further, until his cheeks are spread and Wei Ying can see the bud-like furl of his hole.

“Mmm,” Wei Ying hums. “Thank you.” He runs his hands down the juncture of Lan Zhan’s groin and thighs, combs his hands into the thatch of his pubic hair. A clean hint of veins shows through the skin of Lan Zhan’s shaft. Wei Ying stares longingly at it, at the heavy balls and straining head, and looks back up at Lan Zhan.

“You’re really sure you don’t want me to touch you?” He pouts.

Lan Zhan, bless the man, takes him seriously. A smidgeon of conflict passes over his face, creases forming at his brow that Wei Ying instantly wants to smooth out. He opens his mouth, hesitating before he suggests, weakly, “Later?”

Wei Ying can’t not act spoilt in the face of that. “Later when?” he juts his bottom lip out further.

Lan Zhan wets his lips. “After this?” he offers, taking on a tone of slight desperation.

How can Wei Ying deny him? His pout vanishes and he only just holds himself back from pinching Lan Zhan’s cheek. “I’m just teasing you, Lan Zhan. I’ll keep my word — what sane man wouldn’t, with you in his bed inviting him so eagerly?”

He giggles at the groan that slips out of Lan Zhan then, the way his eyes close and his nostrils flare as though he’s imagining the act right that moment. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you,” he coos disgustingly, just to see Lan Zhan roll his eyes. He uncorks the phial and pours the oil into his palm, some of it spilling onto the quilt cover. It’s warmed from its nearness to one of the candleholders and is giving off a faintly sweet and nutty fragrance. “Got this while you were out today, did you?” Wei Ying questions. “I’ve never smelt it on you before.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says, gaze fixed on his hand. Wei Ying smiles and brings his palm to Lan Zhan’s
opening, deposits most of the liquid there and swiftly spreads it around so that the space between
his cheeks, the entirety of his crease, is shimmering with oil. He smooths the muscle there until it’s
warm under his fingers and palm, pliant once the tension has been kneaded away. Then, with his
other hand holding back one of Lan Zhan’s long, toned legs, he moves his slick fingers in slow,
undulating spirals that close in on the opening.

By now Lan Zhan has begun clenching unconsciously, the narrow ring of muscle fluttering with
expectation. His skin is damp with sweat, his breathing audible, shallow inhales and exhales as he
follows Wei Ying’s movements oh-so-watchfully, small spikes of breath whenever Wei Ying
presses against a good spot or glances across his hole.

When he feels Lan Zhan has unwound enough for it, Wei Ying asks, “Ready for a finger?”

“Hurry up,” Lan Zhan says, and Wei Ying has to suppress the carnal reflex to draw it out even
more than he already has, keep Lan Zhan asking and pleading for him. It’s maddening, that he can
want to push the limits even now, even after all Lan Zhan’s given him freely. He turns his head and
kisses the knee nearest to him, reaches for the phial to lubricate his fingers thoroughly once again,
and then, after coaxing Lan Zhan’s hole into giving by teasing circles onto it, slips the tip of his
index finger in.

At last, Lan Zhan lets out a long, deep, rumbling moan. His head is turned to the side, hair sticking
to the moist skin of his neck, strewn over his mouth and chin. He has an arm slung over his eyes,
as if he can’t bear to let Wei Ying see him. It’s endearing, and a little disappointing, but Wei Ying
decides to leave him be.

He pushes his finger in further, in slow, patient increments. The muscles are silky against his
touch, already somewhat slick with the oil he had dribbled earlier against Lan Zhan, and Lan Zhan
is throbbing around him, sucking his finger in further. The mere thought of that heat and pressure
wrapped around his cock instead forces Wei Ying to squeeze himself, to keep from getting erect
again.

(He’s thought about coming more than once tonight, about taking Lan Zhan apart many, many
more times tonight, but he thinks — he wants to prolong this. Keep this night as a vivid picture in
his mind, and not as a rush of too much; too much excitement and too much frenzy. They’ve
forever for such things, and when he does get around to carrying out that particular fantasy, Wei
Ying will be sure to make it a memory of its own, too. He doesn’t need Lan Zhan accusing him of
a faulty memory on even the sex.)

When Wei Ying’s finger has been taken in to its last knuckle, he lets it sit there and waits for Lan
Zhan to adjust — waits until Lan Zhan signals him with an expression that is equal parts relaxed
and restless. Then he starts moving it about, pressing around against Lan Zhan’s walls and in and
out to soften him and loosen him and make him wet. Make him easy. Lan Zhan's lips are firmly
sealed, little guttural noises coming from his throat. His hips are rolling in tiny motions against
Wei Ying’s finger; and when he gasps on a particularly hard inward push it’s to say, “Wei Ying,
Wei Ying—!”

So Wei Ying complies, and slicks another finger, and pushes that in, too. Uses it to rub Lan Zhan’s
muscles weak with pressure and pleasure, to scissor and stretch his rim so it’ll fit another finger,
maybe another, maybe even—.

As he’s thrusting his fingers in an upward beckoning gesture, he rubs against a vaguely swollen
spot on the anterior wall of the passage. The moment his fingertips graze over it Lan Zhan lets out
what can only be an aborted shout, a loud, deep sound that trails off into a luxurious moan.
“Got you,” Wei Ying murmurs. “I’ve got you now, Lan Zhan.” With single-minded focus, he aims consistently for that spot, testing out different movements. He tries giving it soft; giving it hard; tapping at a steady, frantic pace; massaging slowly over it; pressing up into it and rotating his fingers in circular motions. The way Lan Zhan lets out a stream of *nn, nn* sounds, his hips pushing every so often into Wei Ying’s palm as he experiments, makes him preen. And then, when Wei Ying locks his palm against his taint, keeps his fingers sunken in to the hilt while their tips press out a slow, deep, excruciating rhythm against his prostate, he hears fabric rip, and he finally tears his gaze away from his fingers to look up, sees where Lan Zhan’s managed to tear open the silken quilt cover with the twist of his fingers, stuffing threaded between them.

(He’ll probably leave behind a small fortune in compensation.)

And his lips, Lan Zhan’s biting them to stifle his noises, Wei Ying’s noises. Wei Ying bites down on his own lip instinctively, eases the pressure of his fingers inside and caresses over Lan Zhan’s stomach with his free hand.

“Lan Zhan,” he calls in a low voice. “Don’t bite your lips, Lan Zhan. You’ll chafe them. It’s just me, it’s okay to let me hear you, isn’t it?”

Lan Zhan says nothing, only presses his arm more determinedly over his eyes, and his hips give a shivering thrust into Wei Ying’s fingers that has him biting his lips harder.

Gingerly, one at a time, Wei Ying slips out his fingers and wriggles up Lan Zhan’s torso to brush his clean thumb over Lan Zhan’s jaw. “Hey,” he whispers. His eyes catch on the bright red rivulet meandering down Lan Zhan’s chin and he clucks disapprovingly. “Ah, look at that, you’ve bitten them to the blood. You’re so stubborn.” He taps his thumb against the corner of Lan Zhan’s mouth. “Let me see.”

With some reluctance, Lan Zhan frees his lower lip. Wei Ying presses on its underside to examine the cut. “Good,” he exhales. “It’s not too deep.” He scrubs his oily hand on the covers and leans over the side of the bed to wet a towel from the basin, squeezing it of excess water and returning to hover over Lan Zhan. “Open your mouth.”

At this, Lan Zhan’s arm slides off his face and he furrows his brows at Wei Ying. His eyes are reddened from holding himself back. “Wei Ying, it’s fine.”

“I know it’s fine.” Wei Ying says. “Let me take care of it anyway.” He presses down again so Lan Zhan’s lips part, blotting the injured lip. When the bleeding’s slowed, he leans back and takes in the sight.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Wei Ying chuckles. “Just that this is a good look on you.” He points to his own mouth. “Your lips are darker. Like you’ve used rouge. It looks good.”

“Wipe it off,” Lan Zhan says.

“You don’t like it?” Wei Ying pretends to be surprised. “I like it. I should buy some proper rouge for you; what do you say, Lan Zhan?”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan scolds. He snatches the washcloth away from Wei Ying and dabs at his own lips until the light stain fades, and then some. “Don’t fool around.”

“I’m not!” Wei Ying insists. “It really would look good on you!”
“Then you wear it first.”

Wei Ying thinks on it for a blink’s worth of time. The image of the two of them with their hair washed shiny and smooth, free of pins and ribbons, and their faces powdered and eyebrows pencilled and perfumed and embroidered courtesans’ robes draped over their otherwise unclothed shoulders, kissing each other silly with lips painted a rich carmine — he likes it. He likes it very much.

“That’s fine, I’ll wear it whenever you like.” He aims a sly look at Lan Zhan as he takes the towel from him and puts it aside. “Though I doubt I’ll look as pretty as you.”

A streak of pink diffuses across the apples of Lan Zhan’s cheeks. “Stop.”

Wei Ying pecks at the corner of his mouth. “I’ll stop, but you stop stifling yourself too, alright? There’s no shame in making noise.” He kisses Lan Zhan’s neck and looks into his eyes. “I like knowing when you feel good.”

“Shameless,” Lan Zhan says, like it’s an endearment.

“With you? Always.” He smooths a hand down Lan Zhan’s arm. At some point during Wei Ying’s dedicated attentions he’d wrested the sleeves off his wrists altogether, and the fabric now pools beneath him. “Especially when you’re like this,” Wei Ying lets his voice take on a lower register. Like this, with his hair unbound, a midnight halo around his head. Like this, with his robes off and framing his broad shoulders. Like this, with his skin smelling of osmanthus (and Wei Ying suspects that must’ve been what the extended bath had been about), and the honey-wine candlelight washing over it. “You came like this with that effect in mind, no?” He grazes his teeth over the bump at Lan Zhan’s throat.

“With sleep in mind.”

“Only sleep? Not being taken to bed?”

Lan Zhan grasps Wei Ying’s chin between his fingers, tilts it down for a quick press of lips. “One can be expected to follow the other, can it not?”

Wei Ying laughs and shakes his head. “I love you.” Throwing caution to the wind, he gives into the temptation to pinch Lan Zhan’s cheek and laughs again as his hand is batted away. “You’ve been so patient,” he praises. “You want to come now?”

“Now would be good,” Lan Zhan says archly.

“Think you can take another finger?”

“Naturally,” he replies, sounding mildly offended.

Wei Ying grins. “Okay, you asked for it.” He scoots down to his old place between Lan Zhan’s legs, pats around on the quilt for the oil. Lan Zhan’s erection looks painful, fit to burst. Internally praising him for not showing the faintest sign of impatience on his face, Wei Ying resumes his task with gusto. Warm the oil, slick his fingers, push them in one, two, three. The fit is tighter, the pressure more titillating. Lan Zhan is again letting out low, nasal moans, still muffled by the way his hips are angling without restraint into Wei Ying’s fingers, and then Wei Ying digs his palm
into his taint and flicks mercilessly against his prostate and finally touches him, hot like a brand and making his hand slip as he strokes him tight and fast, and Lan Zhan comes, oh-so-beautifully. He comes in a long stream, with a harsh cry, hands scrabbling down to keep Wei Ying’s palm against him and hips giving a last few spasmodic thrusts onto Wei Ying’s fingers. There’s come over his chest and on the underside of his chin and Wei Ying wants to lick it.

He waits patiently for Lan Zhan’s trembling to die down, before very gently removing his fingers from Lan Zhan’s hole. It’s still palpitating, looking decisively wider than before he’d started. Wei Ying swallows and looks away, looks instead at Lan Zhan’s face to check in with him.

He smiles when Lan Zhan’s hazy eyes refocus and Lan Zhan returns his gaze. “Good orgasm?”

Lan Zhan does nothing but pant softly for a while, lost in Wei Ying’s eyes. He extends a hand. “Come here,” he says.

Wei Ying takes his hand and lets himself be pulled up for a kiss, a kiss to his lips and a kiss to his hairline and a kiss to the space between his eyebrows. Lan Zhan’s arms encircle him, move in slow, languorous lines over the muscles of his scapula, down to the dimples at his lower back. Sated, he appears lazier and more blissful than Wei Ying has ever imagined him, looking at Wei Ying like he’s the only thing that exists in that moment. The long lines of his eyes are soft and relaxed. The silver emblem on his forehead band glints at Wei Ying, the ribbon itself lopsided from being toyed with but never removed during their passions.

“You can touch me now,” Lan Zhan murmurs, and Wei Ying wonders if Lan Zhan has been reading his thoughts.

But then he notices Lan Zhan’s coquettish downward gaze, and bursts out a laugh. “I kind of already did, when I got you to come.”

Lan Zhan smiles. “As you wanted to,” he clarifies.

It’s tempting, but Wei Ying wants to savour Lan Zhan like this a while more. “You’re probably too sensitive at the moment,” he says. “I can wait, we’ve got the rest of the night.” He pauses, skims his gaze over Lan Zhan’s elongated, lax body. “I’m cleaning you up, alright? You must feel icky.”

“Do as you like,” Lan Zhan says, still watching him.

Wei Ying grabs the second towel from the basin, uses it to wash Lan Zhan’s skin clean of the come and sweat and the remnants of oil. When he’s done, he gives himself a rub-down, too, then slings the washcloth haphazardly into the basin and flops down onto the bed beside Lan Zhan, arms folded behind his head.

Lan Zhan turns onto his side and wordlessly extricates a hand from under Wei Ying’s head. He tangles their fingers together and pulls until Wei Ying is right next to him, with barely enough space to breathe between them. Wei Ying can see his pulse jumping in his neck. “Stay close,” he says.

“Clingy, clingy,” Wei Ying tuts.

“With you, always.”
Wei Ying falls asleep to the sound of Lan Zhan’s heartbeat, held in Lan Zhan’s arms with their fingers still entangled. He sleeps soundly, for longer than he usually can nowadays. When he rouses, sunlight is dappling through the windows and past the bed curtains, and he can hear the shouts of street vendors and the small din made by carts and carriages on cobblestone.

The momentary tripping of Lan Zhan’s pulse tells him Lan Zhan is awake, too, and must have been for some time. He’d had the forethought to dress them in their underrobes some time during the night, and to drag the quilt over their shoulders. Feeling playful, Wei Ying snuggles deeper into his chest. “Good morning,” he says against the fabric. Lan Zhan still smells like peaches from his bath, and of sex and sweat. It’s a good smell. It’s right.

“Good morning,” Lan Zhan replies, and Wei Ying can hear it vibrate through his sternum. Under the quilt, Lan Zhan’s toes brush where they rest along Wei Ying’s calves. He presses his lips into Wei Ying’s hair.

Wei Ying chuckles. “That’s cute.” He slips the belt of Lan Zhan’s robe out of its loose fastening and walks his fingers over his chest, settling his hand over his heart. Through the robe, he kisses the skin beneath where his fingers are splayed. “You’re so warm. I wonder how I could have ever thought you were an ice prince.”

They lie like that for some time, the sun warming their faces and the space beneath the quilt gradually becoming more stifling. Occasionally, Lan Zhan will stroke his back, adding to the viscous creeping of heat through Wei Ying’s limbs, the sultry flow of blood to his morning hardness.

Deciding he’s had enough of lying still in rumination, Wei Ying begins teasing a nipple with his nails. When it’s pebbled, he gives it a pinch, but to no avail — Lan Zhan’s face betrays nothing.

He pinches again, and this time Lan Zhan twitches. “Don’t.”

Wei Ying sniffs. “Oh, I see. Now that you’ve had me once, you’re bored of me? I should have known. Men are all fickle.”

Needlessly, Lan Zhan explains, “You’ll be too tired on the road.”

“No, if you do the work,” Wei Ying counters. Knowing exactly what’s coming, he taunts, “Or are you not up to it?”

Incensed, Lan Zhan digs his nails into Wei Ying’s back, taking in a sharp breath. “Who isn’t up to

for i am made of songs for you.
He demands. Disentwining their fingers and legs, he shoves Wei Ying aside, glowering as he snatches up the phial of oil from the folds of the quilt.

Wei Ying kicks the quilt off his waist and shrugs out of his underrobe, grinning with triumph. He attempts to help Lan Zhan undress as he manoeuvres himself, but Lan Zhan bats his hands away. “Keep still,” he snaps, forcefully rolling Wei Ying until he lies flat on his back.

Wei Ying takes it and loves it, breathless and amused and just really turned on. He goads him further. “You know, I noticed this last night, but you’re a bossy young master in bed, aren’t you?”

Lan Zhan’s glare intensifies. “Hardly a young master.”

“But Lan Zhan, weren’t you opposed to sex in the morning? When I asked last time you cried privacy, even though we could have put up silencing wards—”

“Quiet,” Lan Zhan fumes, and in one smooth movement straddles Wei Ying’s hips. He looks down at Wei Ying’s cock, fully erect and already starting to drip, and raises a delicate eyebrow. “You don’t need much stimulation,” he remarks.

“With you in my lap? Of course I wouldn’t.” Wei Ying wets his lips. “And you’re hardly one to talk.” He nods at the steady filling of Lan Zhan’s own length. Saliva pools in his mouth with how he wants it on his tongue, wants to give it space in his throat and have it grow thick there. He’d never gotten his chance, last night.

“I’ll still need this,” Lan Zhan retorts, pouring the oil into his palm and stoppering the phial before carelessly dropping it onto the bed. He rises to his knees and twists his arms behind him, under his open robe, and that’s when it finally dawns on Wei Ying that Lan Zhan is planning on fingering himself right there.

“Oh. Wow,” he says. “Wow, Lan Zhan, you— you’re really doing this? I don’t mind doing it for you again, you know, I like doing it; I love doing it.” He attempts to sit up, to at least hold Lan Zhan steady and support his legs and maybe suck him off while he works, but Lan Zhan shakes his head warningly. “Watch,” he says, right hand parting his cheeks while his left probes around.

“Nngh,” Wei Ying manages. He’s watching but he wants to — he wants to see; this view is erotic in itself, Lan Zhan erect with his underrobe hanging open and his chest thrust out, preparing himself under his robe; but. What must it look like, from the other side, what a picture it must make, Lan Zhan taking himself on his own fingers, spreading himself to take Wei Ying— “Lan Zhan, you’ll ruin me.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan breathes, and the way he’s thrusting his finger — fingers; it seems he’s taking two now — in and out so easily, probably still relaxed from last night and with his eyes half-shuttered and his hips subconsciously arching back into it as if to chase the sensation — Wei Ying wants to pin him down and open him up himself again.

He muffles the urge with a question. “‘Yes’? ‘Yes’ as in you’re feeling good? Or ‘yes’ as in yes, you’ll ruin me?”

Wei Ying observes, wide-eyed and holding his breath, as Lan Zhan bites his lip and pushes in a third finger, shutting his eyes all the way and stilling his hips to brace himself. There’s a spontaneous tremor along his inner thigh and his fine lashes quiver where they rest on his cheeks. He breathes through the feeling and answers, mischievously, “Yes.”

Wei Ying shakes his head. “Unbelievable,” he says. He wishes he could reach out, could stroke
possessively at Lan Zhan’s waist and hips, but he holds himself back as Lan Zhan has asked him to. “What would you do if I was ruined, hm? I wouldn’t be able to fuck you if I was ruined.”

“Good,” Lan Zhan decrees, and, having collected himself, begins to thrust his fingers again.

“Good how?!”

“You’re too shameless,” he says.

“Says the one fingering himself on top of me!” Wei Ying crows.

Appropriately, Lan Zhan flushes at that. Having regained his confidence, Wei Ying continues, “I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around the fact that you’re new to this. You’re so forward.”

Lan Zhan groans in his throat, licks his lips and pulls his fingers out before uncorking the phial to drizzle oil over Wei Ying’s cock. He slicks it up, brisk and businesslike, not bothering to tease the sensitive spots as he had last night.

Impatient.

“This much, I have done before,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying does not get jealous, because that would be proprietary, and being a proprietary lover is for losers. His fingers curl in the quilt cover and he wills himself to keep his voice light. “Oh?” he says. “I’ve missed out.”

Lan Zhan’s lips twitch and he raises his head to cast a fond glance at Wei Ying before he repositions himself astride Wei Ying’s hips and slides down in an even, unbroken movement. He closes his eyes and catches his breath for all of a moment, before he looks Wei Ying in the eye and corrects him with a patient reminder. “You haven’t. There hasn’t been anyone else. In any capacity.”

For his part, Wei Ying is finding it a tad difficult to think past the constricting heat around him. His hands are fisted so firmly his nails will leave marks on his palms, his eyes squeezed shut, and it takes him a few tries to regulate his breathing again. He can feel Lan Zhan slowly adjusting to his girth, walls squeezing down and relaxing in a trial-and-error of what feels best for him.

“Wei Ying?”

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, just — give me a moment.”

He waits until he doesn’t think the barest movement of his hips will make him come instantly, and opens his eyes and relaxes his hands.

“Yes,” he tries again. “Okay, I heard you, any capacity. I just thought, because you said—” He groans as Lan Zhan contracts around him again.

“On my own,” Lan Zhan offers.

Right, okay, by himself. Wei Ying can definitely not come for a while longer, he can, he just needs to — eyes closed, deep breaths; yes, that’ll do it.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan asks, “May I move?”

Wei Ying thumps a fist against the mattress. He’s going to die. Lan Zhan will kill him without even
having drawn his sword.

A note of worry enters Lan Zhan’s voice. He raises his hips a touch from where he’s straddling Wei Ying to scan his face. “Does it hurt?”

Oh heavens, if he’s going to keep embarrassing Wei Ying like this maybe he should welcome death. Wei Ying forces himself to peel his eyes open, to look at Lan Zhan’s face, and grants him a shaky smile of reassurance. “You’re not hurting me,” he says, his voice breaking a little. “You can move. Just — you feel really good, so. Slowly?”

He finds some solace in the way the shells of Lan Zhan’s ears flare into redness. Lan Zhan nods, and then, leaning forward to support his hands on Wei Ying’s chest, begins to move.

He does move slowly, at first, and the both of them bask in the deep, unforgiving drag of Wei Ying's cock along his walls while he tests the position. In short time Lan Zhan rises and falls more fluidly as he settles into a rhythm, clamping down when he takes Wei Ying to the hilt. Heaven would burn with jealousy at the view Wei Ying is being treated to: Lan Zhan crouched over him, hair a tousled mess as he fucks Wei Ying, soft noises tripping from his parted lips. His cock is dripping slick onto Wei Ying's stomach, and the open underrobe allows the occasional glimpse at his browned, pebbled nipples. Wei Ying longs to touch, to stimulate them further, to trail his hands down Lan Zhan's chest and back and thrust his hips up so Lan Zhan can take his pleasure better. So he asks. "Lan Zhan, please, can I?"

Lan Zhan does not stop moving; does not slow down. "Not yet," he denies, though it sounds less like he's being vindictive and more like he's telling Wei Ying the wait will be worth it, so Wei Ying complies. On an inadvertent shift of his hips as Lan Zhan is coming down, Wei Ying strikes against the rounded spot he had probed out last night, and Lan Zhan gasps as he slams down, his eyes falling shut, his knees trembling on either side of Wei Ying’s hips.

"Ah, I didn’t do that on purpose—"

“It’s fine,” Lan Zhan says hoarsely. He continues, pushing mercilessly against the same spot, dropping down so hard and heavy that they’ll probably both be bruised afterwards. A few thrusts later he jerks with oversensitivity, lets out a low cry, and seats himself fully.

For a while, he retains this position, breathing harshly. Then, cautiously, he begins rocking his hips back and forth, clenching whenever he grazes his prostate and making Wei Ying throb and swell to the point of urgency.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying pleads, “Let me touch you, Lan Zhan, I won’t be able to last much longer…"

Lan Zhan’s eyes fly open. “Close?” he asks.

Wei Ying nods frantically. To his utter dismay, Lan Zhan takes this as his cue to ease off of him altogether, barely flinching at the way the head catches at his rim. He ignores Wei Ying’s whines of protest, leaning over the bed to fish around in Wei Ying’s discarded clothes and coming back up with a long, thin piece of crimson fabric — his hair sash, apparently.

Wei Ying eyes the cloth suspiciously. “What’s that for?”

“For help,” Lan Zhan says unhelpfully. He sits over Wei Ying’s knees, seemingly entirely unbothered by the way his own cock looks like it’ll only take a few well-placed strokes to find release, and holds the sash out against Wei Ying’s cock. He raises an eyebrow in question. “Is this
Wei Ying’s mouth drops open. “First you won’t let me move or touch you, and now you won’t let me come?”

Lan Zhan strokes his hands consolingly along Wei Ying’s legs. “You can move and touch me now.”

“And coming?” Wei Ying persists, sitting up on his elbows. His cock is ruddy from holding himself back; he can’t believe he’s putting up with this.


That is...actually more acceptable than Wei Ying had anticipated. But Wei Ying isn’t one to back down without a fight. “I want to come now,” he sulks.

“You can wait,” Lan Zhan returns calmly. “As I have.”

…What?

How does he just say things like that in the most inopportune contexts?!

Is Wei Ying being punished for having been dead for sixteen years? He didn’t have any control over that! And he certainly doesn’t have as much control over himself as His Eminence Hanguang-jun here!

He hams it up. “Lan Zhan, you demon, you want me to not come for sixteen years?!”

Lan Zhan pinches his thigh, looking fabulously unimpressed.

“Abuse!” Wei Ying wails. "Abuse, I say!"

“Ridiculous,” Lan Zhan tuts. “Have patience, Wei Ying.”

“I have!”

“A little more?” Lan Zhan asks, a thread of vulnerability revealed by the tension in his brows. Wei Ying can hardly be expected to keep up his act against the way those eyes beseech him.

He chews his lip, pretending to think over it, and blows a lock of hair off his face. “Alright, you can do it,” he grumbles. “But I get to choose how we continue.”

Lan Zhan dips his chin in acknowledgement, then ties the sash firmly around the base of Wei Ying’s cock. Watching the turn of his wrists as he winds the fabric, the way his fingertips linger over the red silk, Wei Ying feels as though it’s an uncanny reminder of something he’s seen or done before, perhaps even with Lan Zhan himself, but he can’t quite recall what. He says, “Wangjidi-di, you’re unexpectedly inspired, you know? Women of nobility would be appalled, if they knew what their precious Hanguang-jun was like in private.”

Lan Zhan finishes off the tie with an elegant little bow and glides up Wei Ying’s body to peck his lips. “Fortunate, then, that no woman will ever know.” He lifts a shoulder invitingly. “How do you want me?”

A shiver runs down Wei Ying’s spine, and he feels the hairs on his arm rising despite the warmth of the room. He flicks Lan Zhan’s forehead, dry-mouthed. “Have you always been like this? Surely not. Tell me, where did you learn to act like this while I was gone?”
“Like what?”

Wei Ying shakes his head and sighs. “Never mind,” he says, crawling to the foot of the bed. “Turn over. Hands and knees,” he instructs.

Lan Zhan turns, his underrobe draping enticingly over his back and the curve of his cheeks, and rests on his elbows and knees. His hair falls over his shoulders due to the sharp slant of the position, curtaining around his face. Wei Ying rubs a palm down the dip of his back, thinking carefully. He wants to touch the skin underneath, to leave bite marks over those strong shoulders as he takes him, but more than that he wants Lan Zhan to not be tense. "Do you want this on?" He tugs at the robe.

"For now."

"I can take it off soon?"

"After."

Wei Ying leers, making sure Lan Zhan can hear it even if he can't see Wei Ying's face. "Oh-ho? Is Lan er-gongzi suggesting he won't be satisfied now, and will be taking me to bed 'after' as well?"

"Lan er-gongzi," Lan Zhan says, his tone heavy with impatience, "recalls someone saying they could not last much longer, not too long ago." He cants his hips back so Wei Ying will take the hint. "Wei Ying, stop dallying."

"Alright, alright," Wei Ying laughs, getting on his knees behind Lan Zhan. "Such a young master in bed," he teases, and laughs harder when Lan Zhan grunts agitatedly at the pinch to his hipbone. He bunches the underrobe up above Lan Zhan's hips, taking a moment to appreciate the view between his legs before parting his cheeks to reveal his entrance. Wei Ying is acutely reminded of last night, of fingering Lan Zhan until his crease shone with oil and he opened up for him. He's even looser now, squeezing down on nothing and thick with lubrication.

Wei Ying inhales, then pushes in. He intends to be slow and careful about it, but Lan Zhan contracts around his head the moment it passes through his sphincter, pushing back until he's taken him all the way. Oil leaks out around Wei Ying and drenches the ribbon. The stain will be impossible to remove.

He gathers what he can of his self-control, curls his finger in a branding grip over Lan Zhan's hips and presses further in, leans over Lan Zhan's shoulder to breathe hot air into his ear and tell him, "You've had your turn, Lan Zhan; now keep your promise."

He kisses the dark pink lobe of Lan Zhan’s ear and straightens back up so he can see what he’s working with. Being of a height with Wei Ying and at the peak of physical fitness, Lan Zhan’s weight is far from insignificant, but Wei Ying has spent the past two years training intensely to reattain some of his old strength. He locks his knees onto the mattress, pulls out halfway and uses his grip on Lan Zhan to drag him back, aiming downward.

Lan Zhan makes a needy sound in his throat, resting his forehead against a cushion. Wei Ying grins. “Is that it, beautiful?” he purrs, grinding down. “Right there?”

“Yes.”

Feeling intensely smug, Wei Ying thrusts at that angle, hard and deep and without break. Lan Zhan’s skin is colouring again from the impact, and Wei Ying’s bones are going to creak resentfully at him later, but it is so worth it to see Lan Zhan stretch around him, cling onto him as
he pulls out and clamp down whenever he strikes the right spot inside. The sight of him straining just above the soaked ribbon keeping Wei Ying from coming, of Lan Zhan biting a pillow to spare his lips, is the last straw; Wei Ying refuses to endure the torment any longer.

“Lan Zhan,” he grinds out, “Please, I need it now.”

“Take it off,” Lan Zhan allows, “take it off, keep going!”

Wei Ying grits his teeth against the heat that sizzles up his spine to the back of his head and frees a sweat-dampened hand from Lan Zhan’s hips. He yanks the sash off with vigour, bends at the waist to give Lan Zhan his hand while he thrusts. The blood is rushing through him and it’s all he can hear. Lan Zhan’s knuckles are pale with how fiercely his hands are clenched, and he pulses in Wei Ying’s hand and his walls convulse and he’s coming around Wei Ying, coming so hard while Wei Ying comes in him, and again it’s a stupefying thing.

When the white’s bled out from his vision and he can feel his legs and isn’t struggling to breathe, Wei Ying squeezes gently on Lan Zhan’s hip, giving his softened length one last pump before raising his hand to his mouth and licking the come from it unthinkingly.

Lan Zhan is shuddering in the aftermath, downright silent and with his face still hidden away. Wei Ying slips out of him as delicately as he can, drags a pillow from by Lan Zhan’s head and stations it below his hips. He turns Lan Zhan around with sturdy, gentle hands, until he can rest on his back, his hips cushioned to ease the sting. He presses a string of kisses up Lan Zhan’s chest, noses at the protrusion at his throat and smiles at him. Lan Zhan’s lips look raw, but are thankfully unscathed. His cheeks are flushed with release, the crown of his head sweaty and the corners of his eyes wet. Wei Ying wonders if orgasms are always this intense for Lan Zhan.

“Hey,” he says, ignoring the twinge in his own hips. “Doing alright?”

Lan Zhan breathes deeply until his chest is no longer heaving. “Quite,” he says. His arm wraps around Wei Ying’s shoulder and he skims his lips against Wei Ying’s cheekbone. Wei Ying returns the gesture elatedly, peppering kisses over Lan Zhan’s face until he is weakly pushed away. Lan Zhan’s lips are faintly downturned in a grimace, and at first Wei Ying thinks it might be because of his overenthusiasm — but Lan Zhan’s never really minded that.

A minute shift of Lan Zhan’s waist catches his eye, and he immediately recognises the problem. He moves back between Lan Zhan’s thighs and folds them unceremoniously against his chest to bare him.

Lan Zhan is biting down on his own arm, his hips rolling into Wei Ying’s mouth to chase the
overstimulation, and it makes Wei Ying hum loudly in encouragement while the mess inside is pulled free. He mouths and kisses until all Lan Zhan’s body has left to give is Wei Ying’s own spit, the taste of come watered down by it. The sloppy, wet sensation has Lan Zhan rippling inside, vise-like around Wei Ying’s tongue. Emboldened, Wei Ying fucks him doggedly with it, pressing in longer and harder until Lan Zhan finally wrenches himself away, leaving Wei Ying's chin feeling clammy as air passes over the sticky smear of oil and saliva there.

“Wei Ying!” he hisses.

Wei Ying chuckles, wiping his jaw with the back of his hand. “Yes?” he drawls.

“Shameless!” Lan Zhan berates.

“We’ve been through this already; you know you like shameless.” He plunges a finger into him, moving it outwards in a scraping motion and inspecting it to ensure he’s done his job properly.

He locks eyes with Lan Zhan and waggles his fingers. “Something wrong?”

Lan Zhan’s lips purse, and the flush on his cheeks creeps down his jaws and blooms over his chest.

“Did you not want it?” Wei Ying asks, a splash of doubt sobering him.

Lan Zhan works his jaw. “I didn't say that.”

“So you liked it?”

“Irrelevant,” Lan Zhan bites out. He raises a tremulous hand to his forehead, unfastens the ribbon there with some force, and slips off the bed.

Wei Ying frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Bathing,” Lan Zhan says, stooping to gather his undershirt and trousers from the floor.

“But they haven't boiled the water yet.”

“No need.”

“...But I'll freeze.”

Lan Zhan pauses where he is lifting the bed curtains. “Are you joining me?”

Wei Ying is flabbergasted. Is he joining him? “Yes? Naturally?” He'd just — Lan Zhan had just kept him from moving for half of their morning episode and subsequently tied his cock up and got what was evidently a fantastic orgasm out of him (and admittedly so had Wei Ying, and he had enjoyed all of it, immensely, but that’s beside the point), and he was now going to ditch him to go take a bath?!

Fine, alright, so maybe Wei Ying had overwhelmed him a teensy bit, but what was an afterglow without cuddling?!

"Will you behave?” Lan Zhan asks, sounding sceptical.

“I always behave!”

"Is that so,” he says. He moves out of the curtains and towards the shelf where they’ve kept their
things, the daylight making his bare legs glow. “Come. No mischief.”

Wei Ying scrambles after him, making a perfunctory promise to keep that in mind. As he collects a change of clothes, he says, in as level a tone as he can through the drumming of his pulse, “Lan Zhan, I’m —. Is it that I was going too fast? Tell me truthfully; I don’t want to have done something that you didn’t want.”

Lan Zhan exhales. “If I didn’t want it, I would have told you to stop,” he says, his voice gentle. He touches Wei Ying’s elbow, his cheeks colouring again, his lashes lowering. “I didn’t mind. But it was sudden. More warning next time.”

The trace of nausea that’s been stagnating in Wei Ying’s chest recedes, and he nods heartfeltly, resolving to be more vigilant with himself in the future. He follows Lan Zhan as he pads towards the bath chamber, stopping just before they reach the door.

“Wait,” he says, feeling somehow duped. “The water…”

“Will be cold,” Lan Zhan informs him. He slides the door open and tilts his head. “Coming?”

“We could just ask the innkeeper to boil a few pots!” Wei Ying endeavours. “They’ll have to bring up the water here anyway; what harm will a slightly longer wait do?”

“Cold,” Lan Zhan says, his tone brooking no further argument, and Wei Ying trudges after him dejectedly.
my body is a house for your trust;

Chapter Notes

as promised, a summary for the last two chapters: wei ying and lan zhan arrive at enshi city, wherein they book a room at an inn and ~ enjoy a night of passion ~ during which wei ying asks lan zhan to tell him the story behind his whip scars when he is ready to do so. following this, they ~ enjoy a morning of passion ~ after which lan zhan insists they will have a cold bath to freshen up.

hoping you all ~ enjoy a light (but passionately written!) read ~ with this chapter!!! ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It turns out that an earlier-rising guest had already requested hot water about a half-shichen[1] before Lan Zhan decided to bathe, and there are a few pots of warm water to spare. Praising the heavens for rescuing him from hypothermia, Wei Ying emphatically requests they be brought up along with the regular water, dumping them into the washtub while Lan Zhan gathers the rest of their bathing paraphernalia.

Within the walls of the bath chamber, Lan Zhan strips off his clothes with efficiency, uncaring of the numerous bruises and prints mottling his skin. Then, with patient movements, he begins to tease the knots out of his hair using a thick-toothed bamboo comb. Wei Ying is made to sit down and given the same treatment once the tub has been filled.

Lan Zhan’s hands are as light as rustling leaves as he detangles Wei Ying’s hair. His fingers, so long and slender, work through the mess of it with the intermittent guiding touch, and Wei Ying’s scalp sings at the luxurious treatment. “Lan Zhan,” he says, his voice coming out drowsy, “you’re really good at this. Now I feel ashamed for having boasted before.”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Lan Zhan says, parting Wei Ying’s hair down the middle for easier washing. Drily, he adds, “You do have good hands.”

Wei Ying makes a sound of amusement. “A regular jester now, are we?” He tries to pinpoint when Lan Zhan might have developed this delightful sense of humour; if it is in any way Wei Ying’s own influence or simply one of many things he has never looked close enough to see. Tries to imagine what it might have meant for Ah-Yuan — if Lan Zhan had ever shared the same dry jokes with him, to ease the transition from the hubbub and sunny laughter of their commune in the Burial Mounds to the aggressive, hallowed quietude of the Cloud Recesses. Realistically it would only have stumped Ah-Yuan all the more, but it’s a heartwarming little image, and all of a sudden Wei Ying wants it to be, wants it to exist as a shard of his time, Lan Zhan delivering some witticism that falls on untrained and uninterested ears, and Ah-Yuan too busy fending off a small platoon of rabbits, and Wei Ying off to the side, armed with carrots and refreshments, laughing at their antics.

Lan Zhan could fill ten thousand nights with stories of Ah-Yuan’s childhood with him, and it wouldn’t be enough.

Rubbing a lock of combed hair over his nose, he asks, “Lan Zhan, did you ever do this for Ah-Yuan?”
“I did raise him to groom himself.”

“I should have expected nothing less,” Wei Ying says. He twists at his waist to look at Lan Zhan with shining eyes. “I’m glad that he had you with him.”

“I am glad that I had him,” Lan Zhan says, smiling softly. He wraps the hair caught on the comb’s teeth around a finger and drops the coil into the waste tray. Putting the comb away, he gathers his ball of soap and sits on a stool to rinse off.

“Isn’t squatting like that painful for you?” Wei Ying asks. “Let me do it. You can stand so it won’t sting.”

“No need.”

He rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to act tough in front of me, Lan Zhan. Not everyone is as well-endowed as you, but I’m not exactly puny, either. Look, see?” He waves at the general area between his legs in demonstration.

Lan Zhan’s refusal to spare him so much as an appeasing glance only makes him more bent on having his way, but before Wei Ying can continue, Lan Zhan tips his head at the empty soapbox by the washbasin. Next to it sits an unfamiliar clay jar. “Look in there,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying picks up the jar and removes its lid. Inside is a jelly-like paste, semi-transparent and smelling medicinal. He smears a glob of it between his fingers. “This is?”

“Unguent,” Lan Zhan explains, wetting his hair, “To numb pain and reduce swelling.”

He must’ve used it while Wei Ying was fetching the water — for all that they had already seen everything of each other’s, Lan Zhan does not like to openly compromise himself if he can help it. Wei Ying nods slowly. “Ohhh,” he says, pretending to be amazed. He turns the jar thoughtfully between his fingers. “And you just happened to have this on you? Or is this also from yesterday’s excursion?”

Lan Zhan’s hand stills as he lathers his hair, but he returns to the task with composure, as though nothing of import has been said.

Wei Ying hums. “Lan Zhan, there was a time when I thought it would be my privilege to educate you in bedroom matters, but I think now I should be asking you for lessons.” He replaces the jar with a cheeky clack and slinks up to Lan Zhan, slipping his hands around his shoulders to tap his fingers against his chest. “You should teach me, Lan-laoshi,” he murmurs, nosing at the back of Lan Zhan’s ear, heedless of the foam getting on his upper lip. “All the fun things you must have taught yourself. I want to hear all about it.” He scrapes his teeth against the skin there and, while Lan Zhan’s guard is lowered, snatches away his soap. It smells of ginseng root with a creamy honeylocust base, fresh and mild compared to the floral concoctions Wei Ying was raised using. Wei Ying likes it.

Lan Zhan is oddly subdued as Wei Ying directs him to behave and sit still while he washes his hair, even closing his eyes and relaxing into the rub of his fingertips over his scalp. The implicit trust and permission make his lungs feel too big for his chest. Wei Ying has always had something of a nurturing instinct, and even though he maybe isn’t a model caretaker and is forever prepared to be cossetted by Lan Zhan, there are times he wants to pamper him in turn. But he understands that some things should not be asked for too flippantly — like the things that Lan Zhan lost early in life and has spent too long learning to not need. The things that ask him not to give, but to receive. So Wei Ying appreciates this moment, and understands that it is a precious gift.
With its carefully maintained length and density, hair like theirs inevitably takes some time to clean. Lan Zhan insists on washing his own body, indicating that Wei Ying should rinse quickly if he wants to enjoy what little heat their bathwater has retained. This, of course, underestimates the sheer extent of Wei Ying’s determination to see his whim through, and in no time Wei Ying has washed his hair and scrubbed himself clean and rinsed off and is holding out an expectant hand for Lan Zhan’s washcloth so he can get his back.

As he wipes Lan Zhan’s skin, his attention falls to the whip scars spanning his back, now plainly on display. It’s the first time Wei Ying has been able to get a proper look at them since that glimpse by the Cold Pool. The scars have faded as much as they ever will, and when Wei Ying unthinkingly traces along the one that extends over Lan Zhan’s bicep, the difference in texture between it and the unmarred skin is almost negligible.

Lan Zhan has been fastidious in making sure Wei Ying never catches sight of these marks, and knowing how they were earned, Wei Ying hasn’t asked that they be shown to him. He wonders what has moved Lan Zhan into baring them so openly now.

He is drawn out of his reverie by Lan Zhan calling his name. “Yes?” he answers, rubbing circles over a knot of muscles with the washcloth.

“The water,” Lan Zhan reminds him.

“Mmhm,” Wei Ying says, “I’ll be done soon, don’t worry.” But his touch only grows softer and slower, his mind roiling in that old cocktail of wrath and remorse, and the silence stretches as he stops again at another scar that lashes across the knobs of Lan Zhan’s spine.

This time, Lan Zhan reaches around to capture his wrist. His head turns halfway to face Wei Ying. “Do they bother you?” he asks.

Wei Ying meets his eyes, unable to mask his grief. “You wouldn’t believe me if I said no.”

“Are they unsightly?”

He shakes his head.

Lan Zhan squeezes his hand, then releases it. “They have long healed.”

“I know.” Wei Ying sighs. He deliberates over his next question, considers the merits of revealing his impatience, given his own penchant for secrecy. “It’s not fair to ask this since I said someday just last night, but — will I have to wait long? For you to tell me how you got these?”

“You already know,” Lan Zhan surmises, after some time.

“I do,” Wei Ying says evenly. “I wish I didn’t have to find out from your brother, though.”

Lan Zhan’s lashes flicker. His gaze falls to the tiled flooring and his jaw shifts as though he has thoughts to share but not the words to speak them. Wei Ying hates that he put that look there.

“I know.” Wei Ying admits, “I’m hardly one to talk about hiding things.” He presses his lips to the hollow between Lan Zhan’s shoulder blades, fingers hovering above the incision there. The acerbic taste of soap on his skin feels like it’s risen from Wei Ying’s stomach. “I never realised how it could feel for the one I was hiding from.”

Lan Zhan swivels around fully in his seat, taking both of Wei Ying’s hands in his and digging into the divots of his life lines until Wei Ying meets his gaze. “I do not regret them, and neither should
you.” He sucks in a breath. “I would take them again. Every time.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” Wei Ying says. “You shouldn’t have had to.”

“You have also endured things you should not have had to,” Lan Zhan says. “Wei Ying, it is unwise to linger over these things. I will bear what I must to keep a clear conscience.” His eyes beseech Wei Ying, and Wei Ying has to clench his fists from saying something ugly about the people Lan Zhan loves. Lan Zhan sighs and swipes his thumbs along the outsides of Wei Ying’s palms. “Was it not you who said a scar or two are the adornments of a man?” he teases.

Wei Ying scoffs. “If I really said that, I was an idiot. And this is hardly a scar or two.” He rises, letting Lan Zhan’s hands drop from his, and stretches his arms. “Turn around so I can wash the soap off?”

Later, as they sit in the cooled water, Wei Ying straddles Lan Zhan’s lap and massages bath oil onto his arms and legs. The mood is quiet and pensive, with Lan Zhan’s head resting on the rim of the tub and an arm settled loosely around Wei Ying’s waist. Wei Ying’s eyes bore a hole into the brand scar on Lan Zhan’s chest. It hadn’t looked like this, so raw and permanent, under the dim light of the candles last night. It had looked less — incriminating.

He scowls, almost gouges the flesh of Lan Zhan’s pectoral with his nails before he comes to himself. “They went too far in branding you like this for sympathising with me,” he says under his breath.

Lan Zhan watches him with sluggish eyes. He takes the hand Wei Ying has fisted against his chest and presses pacifying swirls into the base of his thumb. “They did not do this.”

“Then who?”

Lan Zhan stares resolutely at their joined hands, mouth sealed shut. Wei Ying clicks his tongue and shakes off Lan Zhan’s hand, gripping his bicep with white fingers. “Lan Zhan, who?”

“Me, Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan says. “It was me.”

Wei Ying’s blood runs cold. He searches desperately for an explanation in Lan Zhan’s eyes, and finding the patient, limpid expression there, the lines of his face warp into something thunderous. The horror chokes his voice when he asks, “Why?”

“It wasn’t a conscious decision.” Lan Zhan says quietly. “When I left the Cold Pool Cave and found no sign of you around the palace at Bu Yetian, I was not in the best state of mind. I—” He breaks off and looks up at Wei Ying. Something he sees there must give him reason to continue, and when he does, his voice is firm and composed; as though he is narrating from a storybook. “I became inebriated at Caiyi Town, while returning to the Cloud Recesses. Xiongzhang tells me I visited the storage cells upon arriving and — that was when I branded myself.”

— So.

So he had mourned to the point of drinking, then.

What had he been thinking while drunk, to search for that iron and stamp it onto his chest? Had he thought to punish himself, for not preventing Wei Ying’s fall? Had he thought to take Wei Ying’s wounds and burdens upon himself, in his absence? To make some permanent mark to remember Wei Ying by?

Wei Ying outlines the scar with his fingers, memorises the shape of it by touch. He breathes out
deeply, closes his eyes to let the implications sink in. “You’re so much,” he says, flicking water at him.

"Why are you helping me?" he remembers asking, grateful but unable to comprehend Lan Zhan's actions. "Why did you do that?"

And Lan Zhan had said, "...I regret not standing by you."

And, "It should be done."

And, “We made a vow, in this place…”

When Wei Ying had asked about the scars, Zewu-jun had said, "He said that he saw you as his zhiji, and thus should have total faith in you."

He had said, "He grieved for you as he grieved for our mother." And Wei Ying had heard the unspoken truth. He ached for you.

And how. Only now does it occur to Wei Ying that the pain behind these scars might only have been a grain of rice compared to the turmoil in Lan Zhan's heart. A finger's dip into the ocean; dripping, dripping.

He feels his own heart wrench at the thought of how much Lan Zhan has carried with him, for Wei Ying. At the thought of all that hurt, and all that weight. And Wei Ying, blind, foolish Wei Ying, had never stopped to listen to the beat of that blazing heart, to hear what Lan Zhan could not say. Had misunderstood him and questioned him, time and time again, even as recently as a few days ago, as though Lan Zhan's love were the mindless, background shrill of cicadas in the summer heat. Something so familiar it became undetectable.

He loves me, Wei Ying thinks, watching the thrum of Lan Zhan’s pulse at his neck. As a fact, he knows this. Lan Zhan has already told him this, shown him this through the bounty of his touch and his care, through his endless patience and stalwart support.

But he feels it viscerally now. Feels it in his meridians and his veins, with his whole body, and the realisation consumes his mind for a long, trance-like moment. He loves me.

It's almost fearsome, to think he is loved like this — could ever be loved like this. Wei Ying has always had a heart that could swallow the universe whole, that would teeter over the precipice dividing love and war and leap blindly. He had resigned himself to the likelihood that no one would ever quite feel for him as he felt for them.

I've really met my match, he reflects. Lan Zhan, ah, Lan Zhan. See if I'll ever let go of you. I'll stick to you like melted candy. You'll never be rid of me.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying says, stroking his cheek, and he knows his eyes must look terribly, vulnerably soft, like the meat of his liver. “Do you really think I am worthy?” Do you really think I am worth it?

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says, without missing a beat. “But worthiness is inconsequential.”

He sounds so sure; as sure as when he had told Wei Ying he wanted him, as sure as when he had told Wei Ying he trusted him, and it feels as though that lone, fraying garrotte keeping Wei Ying from shoving his whole heart into Lan Zhan’s hands has snapped at last with a resonant twang, to herald a new and daring fate for him.
There aren't any words to say, in the face of that. Wei Ying can only lean forward and kiss him deeply, desperately, to try and impress upon him with his lips and tongue what he's giving away to him in this moment to keep forever. What he's wanted to give away for so long, but wasn't ready to; could only be ready to give away when he had received its equal measure.

(Though now, he wonders if it has ever been an equal exchange. Some of what Lan Zhan does for him, has done for him — it would seem no person should be worthy of.

Or perhaps the language of balances and value is simply unsuited to matters of the soul.)

When they break for air, Lan Zhan’s gaze takes some time to drift from Wei Ying’s mouth to his eyes, and Wei Ying can’t help but snicker at that, just a little. He doesn’t feel too bad about it, especially when Lan Zhan’s lips slant in humour as well.

“Think no more on it,” Lan Zhan tells him.

How chagrinning, that he's taken it upon himself to nurse Wei Ying through his grievances despite being the one to have actually borne the whipping! Pain and maltreatment are easy for Wei Ying to swallow and forgive, but he is abysmal at managing the distress of others at his own suffering. Has only ever tried for his Shijie, who refused to be fooled. He can only hope that he is able to put aside his unease and do for Lan Zhan what he is doing for Wei Ying, with tender words and affectionate touches, when inevitably it comes his turn.

Wei Ying smiles. “I doubt I can ever truly let it go. But I am rather good at compartmentalising.” He purses his lips. “If I promise not to be reckless, will you promise not to let yourself get hurt for me again?”

“No,” Lan Zhan says.

Wei Ying flaps his hand. “Oh, not for real, neither of us would keep our word on something like that. Just say yes so I can feel better, won’t you?”

“Tshan’t.”

“Mmh,” Wei Ying concedes with a shrug. “I forgot, it's not in your nature to lie.”

“Correct.”

He puffs out his cheeks and jabs at Lan Zhan’s chest. “Lan Zhan,” he says petulantly, “you’re winning all of our arguments these days. I’m going to get miserable if this carries on.”

Lan Zhan leans back and closes his eyes. “So start speaking sense,” he suggests.

“Ha!” Wei Ying snorts. He flicks water at him again, but this time Lan Zhan rolls his head to dodge it, posture still slack. Wei Ying laughs at the miss, then settles squarely on his thighs and uncaps the bottle of oil to continue the massage. He needs to rub the oil far too many times between his palms to dissipate its greasiness, and the water is chilly and Wei Ying can’t feel his toes. But Lan Zhan’s embrace is his throne, and Lan Zhan’s heartbeat pulses warmth through his chest. It's as though he's burrowed into it, and it's engulfing him, cocooning him, for as long as he might need it.
1 Half-shichen: Between 1 hour and 1 hour and 12 minutes. [back]
The streets of Yunping City teem with life even as the sun slinks towards the horizon and business elsewhere begins to wind down. Leading Xiao Pingguo deftly through the waves of the street crowd, Wei Ying soon finds himself too far ahead of Lan Zhan to natter away at him effectively, and retraces his steps to where Lan Zhan is sweeping his gaze over — the goods for sale at a cosmetics stall?

He squints at him through the glare of the afternoon light. "Lan Zhan?"

Lan Zhan takes his time acknowledging him, and when he does his face is serene and he continues walking as though he wasn't caught doing something that Wei Ying would get speech-banned for even beginning to suggest he would do. It isn't just a single instance, either; as they walk the length of the market street Wei Ying spies Lan Zhan's gaze lingering on a hairpin vendor here, a perfume shop there, a stall selling bath concoctions and pumice stones — and, most notably, several more cosmetics sellers.

Wei Ying would make a dig at Lan Zhan for his newfound interest, joke about even Hanguang-jun's legendary beauty needing regular primping to maintain, but his instincts for self-preservation tell him it might come back to bite him. Trying to pry an explanation out of the man himself instead, he pokes Lan Zhan's shoulder. "Lan Zhan, what's on your mind? What are you thinking about, looking around so intently?"

"Thinking that Wei Ying should watch his step," Lan Zhan answers, steering him by the elbow to keep him from tripping over a stone dislodged from the pavement.

Xiao Pingguo shrieks crossly at the jostling around. Wei Ying pats it half-heartedly, saying to Lan Zhan, "Don't pull my leg; that's definitely not what you're thinking."

"Since you are so certain, there is no need for me to tell you." Behind Lan Zhan, Yinfeng snorts softly.

Wei Ying sticks his tongue out at both of them. Recalcitrant old bores! "I wish I had Zewu-jun's mind-reading powers," he says.

"Non-existent."

"Wrong, they absolutely exist. How else does he tell apart your ten thousand faces of apathy?"

Lan Zhan looks at him askance. "He is also fallible. If you are curious, simply ask."

"Simply ask?" Wei Ying cries. "I just did, and look what that got me!"

"An answer," Lan Zhan says crisply, the lift of his eyebrow brimming with ridicule.

"A non-answer," Wei Ying argues. "You only give me a proper answer about half the time. I'm starting to get jealous. Of your brother, at that."

"Don't."
"I can't?"

Lan Zhan smiles and shakes his head. "You can learn. Little by little."

Wei Ying opens his mouth, primed to retort, but forgets about it rather quickly once the flapping of an unmistakably purple cloak a few steps ahead catches his eye. He follows it upward to find himself looking at — Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng looks...not too different from how Wei Ying last saw him. Still carrying himself ramrod-straight, a permanent furrow etched at his brow, jaw set in that trademark scowl. A little thinner than before, perhaps, more wiry, with his cheekbones jutting out sharply enough to bring to mind his old favoured whetting stone. His robes flutter at the little gusts of wind stirred up by passersby, the vibrant Jiang purples and blues toned down to solemn shades on understated brocades.

He cuts a severe figure to most, no doubt, but to Wei Ying he looks a tad ridiculous, standing there examining jangly dog collars with such ferocity, the orange sun rendering his skin like apricot flesh. It throws him off, and for a moment he doesn’t know whether he should bound up to Jiang Cheng and throw an arm over his shoulder and jeer at him the way his muscle memory tells him to, or convince himself he never saw him and take a side street away from trouble.

He's leaning towards the latter, already reaching for Lan Zhan's hand, when Jiang Cheng looks up from the display table and glances arbitrarily at something behind Wei Ying, and then startles as Wei Ying registers in his periphery and their gazes lock. His eyes widen with recognition.

Wei Ying curls his fingers, sighs internally and nudges Lan Zhan. "Look," he murmurs, signalling with his eyes. The way Lan Zhan's gaze instantly hardens has laughter curling in his chest, easing the subconscious tension in his shoulders. He hands Xiao Pingguo's lead to Lan Zhan. "Stay here, I'm going to go talk to him."

Lan Zhan gives him a cautioning look.

"Relax; it'll be fine, it's not like he's going to bite me." Wei Ying pauses for effect. "That honour is yours, if you want it." He cackles at Lan Zhan's suitably abashed expression and sprints towards Jiang Cheng.

"Jiang Cheng!" he calls. "Fancy meeting you here!"

Jiang Cheng says nothing for a good few moments, a carefully neutral expression settling over his face. "Wei Wuxian," he nods in greeting. He tilts his head to look past Wei Ying's shoulder. "You're with him again?"

"Only as of late," Wei Ying clarifies. "We met up not too long ago."

"Oh?" Jiang Cheng snipes, a snidely innocuous uptick to his tone. "Is that why he left his post?"

"He resigned on someone else’s suggestion, actually."

"...I see," he says, not deigning to look ashamed. He seems to run out of conversation topics then, opening and closing his mouth a few times before pressing his lips together and sliding his attention back to the dog collars.

Wei Ying repositions himself to the side of the stall, leaning with one hand on the tablecloth by the corner Jiang Cheng is standing at to avoid obstructing the stream of pedestrians. "So…" he dawdles, “how have things been, at the Lotus Pier? And with Jin Ling?"
“Fine,” Jiang Cheng says, fingers brushing over a hideously aubergine pendant.

"Ah."

"Jin Ling asks about you often."

With that not-so-secretly sticky personality of his, it isn’t entirely unexpected that Jin Ling would ask after Wei Wing, but it’s gratifying to hear nonetheless. "Does he?" Wei Ying smiles, thinking about what he has on him that he can send with Jiang Cheng for his nephew.

Jiang Cheng clicks his tongue in vexation, his brows coming together. "I don’t know why he bothers. It isn’t as though I have some way of knowing what you're up to. Or of contacting you to ask." He says it with a long-standing sort of peevishness, like time has sanded the jagged edges of the rift between them, and the monsoon of his fury and regret and mourning has mellowed to a light clammy shower.

*He’s almost endearing, sometimes,* Wei Ying thinks. "If you needed me for something—"

"I didn’t," Jiang Cheng cuts in, quick and curt. He glances up at Wei Ying and relents the barest amount at the expression of injury there. "But you should send word to Jin Ling. You owe it to him."

"I know," Wei Ying says. He scans the crowd. "Is he here at Yunping too?"

Jiang Cheng shoots him a baleful glare. "What do you take me for, his nanny? He's grown now. He can’t trail after me everywhere; he has his own matters to take care of."

"Uh-huh," Wei Ying says, tactfully choosing not to mention Jiang Cheng’s even-when-you’re-thirty-I’ll-still-be-disciplining-you approach to childrearing.

"He's been spoilt rotten by the Jins," Jiang Cheng carries on, apparently under the impression that he himself has had no hand in it. "Even now he's roaming around with some miscreant from the Lan Sect, disregarding his duties as a sect leader. You'd think I taught him nothing."

Wei Ying nods with feigned sympathy. "What a shame." He pauses to wonder which member of the Lan Sect Jin Ling would have become acquainted well enough with to night hunt together. "Does the miscreant he's with go by the name Sizhui or Jingyi by any chance?" he ventures. "Lan Sizhui or Lan Jingyi?"

"How should I know?" Jiang Cheng gripes. "Why would the names of the Lan Sect's disciples be of any significance to me?"

Wei Ying doesn’t give his answer much thought. "You could try to remember Sizhui, at least. Think of him as like a nephew."

"Nephew?!” Jiang Cheng splutters, his eyes bulging with disbelief. The woman minding the table squeaks, jerking in surprise, and a few heads turn their way. Jiang Cheng flicks his gaze behind them to Lan Zhan. "And what," he scoffs, lowering his voice. "Am I to call him my brother-in-law, too?"

Wei Ying prays desperately for patience. "If you want," he shrugs. "But Sizhui is a son to me with or without Lan Zhan." He changes the subject before Jiang Cheng, who looks like he’s swallowed a particularly sour and acrid lemon, can continue to attract more embarrassment. "So? Why are you in Yunping?"
"I don’t answer to you!" Jiang Cheng fumes, unwilling to let the offence slide.

Wei Ying sighs, wincing apologetically at the stall owner. "I'm just curious. When have I ever made you answer to me?"

Jiang Cheng harrumphs. After some delay, and to Wei Ying and the woman's relief, he moves away from the table without making a purchase, crossing his arms and leaning against the trunk of a tree planted along the outer fence of a nearby fabric shop. "I'm not here for any special reason," he says, exhaling as he calms himself. "Just returning home from Gusu."

"From Gusu?" Wei Ying shuffles into the shade with him. "Were you there on cultivator business?"

"Something like that." He rolls his eyes at the intrigued quirk of Wei Ying’s brow. "His Excellency Lan-zongzhu wants to reform the current chain of authority," he drones, waving his hand as though Wei Ying is demanding some cumbersome chore of him. "Decentralise control, and other such high-minded things. We held a conference on arranging a High Cultivators' Council to supplant the position of supreme leadership."

Decentralise control, Wei Ying thinks wryly, dwelling on some of the cultivators he’s come into contact with while roaming. Skilled cultivators, perhaps unpolished in their arts but easily with more promise than most born with silver spoons in their mouths, who by consequence of their peasant backgrounds would be forever destined to live from one meagre, petty assignment to another with only their swords and the clothes on their backs to their names, never entitled to work above their stations or to a word in the cultivation politics that might concern them. Unless Zewu-jun finds a way to decentralise wealth and status as well, that's unlikely to ever take effect.

But these aren’t things he can discuss in good faith with Jiang Cheng. "Oh?" he says. "How would that work?"

"Undecided as of yet. Right now it looks as though nominees from the allied sects will be electing a prime representative between themselves and setting up office on neutral grounds."

"Huh." Well, he supposes it can be considered an improvement over installing a new Chief Cultivator every few decades, for the allied sects if no one else. "I hope it works out."

"Why do you care?" Jiang Cheng demands, narrowing his eyes at him. "You're a rogue cultivator now. It's not as though you'll let authority confine you in any way, regardless."

"There are people I care about whose lives are confined by authority, so I can't just turn a blind eye to the state of things." Wei Ying taps his nose, mouth pursed in concentration. "But I'm surprised this has come up now, in peacetime. Zewu-jun is a decent enough person, but he's not usually been one to challenge convention."

"It wasn't his idea. The proposal was made a year ago, by your Lan Wangji."

Wei Ying tamps down on the thread of possessive satisfaction that unspools low in his stomach at your Lan Wangji, and laughs. "By Lan Zhan? Impossible. He’d never survive the sort of pointlessly extended debate running a council would involve."

Jiang Cheng’s lips twitch upwards. "Probably good that he won't be running it, then."

Wei Ying snorts in agreement, and for a moment, it feels as though this thing between them has finally healed to the point that they can banter again, can share silly inside jokes just between the two of them and have fun at the expense of others again, as easy as skipping stones. But then the
awkward silence enshrouds them once more, and the shouting of peddlers and the tapping of boots seem to flood his ears, and Wei Ying deflates.

"...Will you…” Jiang Cheng hesitates. "Will you be stopping by the Pier?"

Wei Ying clears his throat. "Ah, probably not. We aren't here to stay for long either. Just resting on our way to Yichuan."

“I see,” Jiang Cheng says.

Wei Ying clears his throat again and pretends to check the sun’s position. "Well. I should — I should probably go now. The stables will close soon and we need to book a room…"

"Right."

"It was nice to see you again."

"Was it?" Jiang Cheng asks. Wei Ying stiffens, and Jiang Cheng continues mildly, "You left without a word, last time.” His eyes are flat and unrevealing. Having said his piece, his posture relaxes against the tree as he leans further back into it, chin tilted upwards in expectation.

"I didn't know what to say," Wei Ying justifies.

Jiang Cheng nods, never looking away from him. “A sign that there's nothing to say between us anymore, maybe."

Wei Ying exhales deeply. He reminds himself of the lesson their shared history has taught him; that honesty is his best bet with Jiang Cheng. "...That's not the case for me, at least," he says. "There will always be things for me to say to you. I just don't know where to start. Or what — what the rules are, now."

"As if you've ever let the rules stop you."

'I've learned differently," Wei Ying admits, with more than a little self-deprecation.

Jiang Cheng snorts. He basks in Wei Ying’s discomfort, looking him up and down critically, then jerks his head in Lan Zhan’s direction. “Is this how you’ll be spending your life now? Wandering about hanging off of him?"

Wei Ying cranes his neck around to find Lan Zhan observing the two of them stoically, a staying palm on Yinfeng and Xiao Pingguo’s lead lax in his other hand. On an impulse, Wei Ying waves at him and blows him a kiss, taking pleasure in the deer-eyed look of alarm it gets him.

“Maybe,” he says, turning back to Jiang Cheng with his spirits lifted. “I don’t know.”

"You won't marry and settle down?"

"Do you think I'd want to marry and settle down?"


Wei Yink blinks, forgetting how to work his lungs for a breath or two, his heart doing somersaults in his throat. He searches Jiang Cheng’s face for any sign of scorn, but there’s nothing there except for a clean, knowing sense of anticipation.

"...I don't know,” Wei Ying repeats slowly, tensing his shoulders. Of the few marriages between
men that Wei Ying has been witness to, several have mimicked the traditions between men and women, with one joining the other’s household to take on the station of lord’s wife or first consort. Or else the union has been accompanied by the ticking of a countdown until the time comes to marry for heirs. Be it with men or women, the notion of such an arrangement in his life has never sat well with Wei Ying. “I’m not really interested in taking Lan Zhan as a consort,” he says. “Nor him me, I suspect. I don’t think marriage is — for us.”

Even if they were to eschew the formalities of marriage altogether, and simply announce themselves cultivation partners, Lan Zhan would be permanently smeared for cavorting with a demonic cultivator. He expects Jiang Cheng to side-eye him for his train of thought, hold it up as another example of Wei Ying’s incurable contrarianism. But he doesn’t. "Why so discouraged, Wei Wuxian? Are you not a font of ideas for turning the tides? Write me if you find a way to go about your absurd dream union," he orders. Then he frowns and adds, "Or if you don’t. You know where to address your letters."

He straightens and brushes off his spotless robes, turning to leave.

"And the rules?" Wei Ying asks, pulse spiking, voice coming out like it’s been scraped by horsehair bristles.

"Ignore them," Jiang Cheng says, offering him a small smile. "We’ll make new ones." His eyes flick behind Wei Ying. "You should go. Your keeper looks ready to skin me."

Wei Ying chuckles. "Nonsense, Jiang Cheng; he actually sympathises with you. Like, this much, probably." Wei Ying pinches a thumb and index finger together. "He’s just a little protective."

"Ugh,” Jiang Cheng grimaces, “Please go be disgusting and sugary over there, with him, and not in front of me. Go.” He shoos him towards Lan Zhan, and when Wei Ying only stands rooted to his spot with a face full of insufferable glee, rocking back and forth on his heels, he throws his hands up and marches away.

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Ying calls, his hold on his laughter precarious. "Expect my letters!"

An arm is raised in acknowledgment. Wei Ying bites his cheek, then adds, "I expect happy news from you, too!"

Jiang Cheng trips over nothing. The line of his back suggests he is a blink away from marching right back and strangling Wei Ying for the age-old taunt. But ultimately he squares his shoulders and stalks off around the corner, and Wei Ying skips back to Lan Zhan with glazed eyes.

They take that evening’s tea in the courtyard of a bustling inn, in a four-seated gazebo tucked away at the corner of the sprawling garden. Potted plants and flowering vines suffuse the air around them with the perfume of spring blossoms, and the sun burnishes the grounds with its liquid ruby touch. A circle of children chase after each other over the boardwalks, barely dodging the young women loitering by the carp pond with their arms linked and heads bent close together to chat in secrecy.

The tea Lan Zhan pours has almost certainly been picked to Wei Ying’s preferences. It’s a pale pink thing, more berry infusion than tea, with granules of dried persimmon and a spicy, warm undertone. It’s his way of offering Wei Ying comfort; he’d not demanded any answers after Wei
Ying’s talk with Jiang Cheng, only dutifully passing Xiao Pingguo’s lead back and giving him a solicitous once-over before moving on. The tea drains slowly while the sun-disc sinks below the horizon, flocks of birds sweeping home like spearheads, the other boarders trickling lethargically back indoors.

As the stars blink haltingly into being against the grey-violet sky, Wei Ying finds himself too aware of his still-racing heart, the convoluted feelings that had been tidied away at the Guanyin temple churning violently upon encountering Jiang Cheng again. Feelings about belonging, and loneliness. Feelings of guilt, and betrayal. Of disappointment, and then, like whiplash, of hope, relief, elation.

The dreamy expanse of Yunmeng’s evening blows out the dust in Wei Ying’s mind, causes precious memories and sensations to resurface. Azure and lavender silks and chiffons, lazy afternoons ringing with laughter and the gurgling of lake water and the splashing of young men and women with their robes hiked up to harvest sweet lotus seeds and water chestnuts, and golden lightweight woods and the tinkling music of chimes and the rainbow canopy of kites dropping like autumn leaves, and wine relished from lotus leaves like morning dewdrops, and cosy late-night snackings, Jiang Cheng and Shijie and Wei Ying huddled around a low table to sip at steaming, savoury lotus root soup. He wishes he’d said yes, when Jiang Cheng asked him if he would visit the Pier.

Wei Ying sniffs. “Lan Zhan,” he asks sullenly. “Play something for me?”

He knows Lan Zhan won’t refuse him, even though they are in public, and dusk has fallen, when he is like this. Lan Zhan will rarely ever refuse him, although some times it takes more scheming and wheedling than others. Ultimately, Lan Zhan’s heart, so firm and stalwart, is a soft, bleeding thing for Wei Ying, and Wei Ying plans to fully appreciate it. Knows that it tugs at Lan Zhan’s strings in all the right ways, cajoles all his ruffled feathers, when he asks these things of him.

Lan Zhan pushes the tea tray closer to Wei Ying, away from the centre of the table. He summons his qin, checks the tuning of its gleaming silk strings and promptly begins to strum out a haunting, reverberating tune to match their liminal surroundings. Something unfamiliar to keep Wei Ying distracted. The white crescents of his right fingernails pluck economically against the chords, his left fingertips producing intermittent sliding sounds that texture the music. Visible through the thin fabric of his sleeves, the silhouettes of his arms shift fluidly as he plays for Wei Ying, mesmeric. Wei Ying listens and stares, and stares.

The last time they had done this — played music just for the sake of it, just to savour the melodies and the sway of each other’s company — it had been in Gusu, in a private space nestled between rocky streams gushing down the ancient, verdant mountains, in the open air. Talented musician though he is, Lan Zhan has usually preferred to use Wangji as a means to some practical end, seldom playing it merely for his own amusement. If it’ll get him to wind down some, to share a few crumbs of indulgence with Wei Ying, then Wei Ying will happily nag for more.

On a whim, he nips off a cluster of azaleas from the flowerpot behind him, reaches out and tucks it behind Lan Zhan’s ear. He leans back with his chin on his palm to wink in answer to Lan Zhan’s customary reprehensive look, to the lilt of an off-beat note, and allows the new picture to overwrite an old one.

Chapter End Notes
(1) not a footnote as such, but if you're curious about why lwj would be dishonoured if wangxian were to announce themselves cultivation partners: it's because the assumption is that cultivation partners (who presumably dual cultivate) have complementary vital energy attributes (yin/yang), with yang generally being the standard for men and yin for women who cultivate the righteous path. men who practice demonic cultivation (like the good people in cq1 believe wwx does) may have an excess of yin-attribute energy which would allow them to dual cultivate with male cultivators of the righteous path, against the standard...or so the theory goes. essentially wwx here is predicting that announcing such a union would inevitably cement his (false, in cq1) reputation as a demonic cultivator and consequently cement rumours about lwj being seduced by wwx into siding with 'evil'.
like a tempest, you breathe life into silent nights

During the ride to Yichuan, in Luoyang City, Lan Zhan is strident about avoiding any potential delays. Sick of getting his ears chewed off, Wei Ying arranges to meet with his client shortly after arriving, and very soon they are being invited to tea in his disastrously disorganised office to settle the case.

The client, Fang Changmin, is a timid man, large and fleshy and red with good living, his beard barely grown in. He is rather too sweet-faced for a landlord, and preoccupied with secondary thoughts, his gaze flicking towards Lan Zhan’s impassive face every now and then while he talks to Wei Ying as though in anticipation of punishment for some unnamed crime, or, more likely, an unwelcome increase in Wei Ying’s rate, with the former High Cultivator himself at his side.

“We’ve been having this problem on-and-off for at least twenty years now,” Fang Changmin sighs, nibbling on a glass-like teacake with sugared rose petals within. “It started while my father was still alive. We’ve tried every option available to us — calling in the bigger sects, the smaller sects, independents, Buddhists, Daoists. But at most the ghost stays quiet for a month. Then it starts all over again…”

“So you’ve told me,” Wei Ying says. “Have there been any changes in the last half a year? Have the attacks gotten more vicious? Any more deaths?”

“Still the same,” Fang Changmin shakes his head. “We can’t enter the forest; the ghost overpowers everyone we’ve taken with us. We’ve tried indicating we won’t enter the house, but it doesn’t help. The ghost won’t rest until we’ve cleared out of the forest altogether.” He sips tragically at his tea. “There have been one or two near-fatalities, but no deaths.”

Wei Ying doesn’t doubt for a second that the ghost has overpowered everyone they’ve taken with them. He does find it imbecilic that the man refuses to expend some effort in looking for a more reliable contractor, perhaps someone more obscure or costly but who would be sure to do a thorough job, and instead hopes for a miracle from some no-name cultivator. It isn’t as though it would be beyond his means. Clearly there is some rotten underlying truth that the Fangs don’t want being dug up.

At any rate, Wei Ying wouldn’t have a job if this weren’t the case, or, possibly, a home. So he holds his tongue.

“Was this house leased to anyone before the ghost sightings began?” Lan Zhan asks.

Fang Changmin nods.

“What happened to them?”

“I can’t say,” he says sadly, his shoulders drooping. He doesn’t meet their eyes. “They disappeared. They were there, a quiet and reserved young couple; good tenants who always paid their rent on time. And then one day they weren’t.” At Lan Zhan’s glare of disapproval, he hastens to add, “We’ve tried investigating, I swear! It’s just that the ghost won’t let anyone in the house. The last time someone dared, they were — slaughtered, is the best word I can think of for it.” He shivers and swallows loudly. “We’ve had to set up a barrier to keep people from walking straight into their deaths.”

Wei Ying rolls his eyes. “Alright, I’ve asked everything I need to for now. We’ll start working
tonight, if that's acceptable. And I'll have to be back if I need more information.”

“Yes, yes, of course! I've told you everything I know, but please do feel free to come by if you make any progress…”

“Many thanks,” Wei Ying says drily. "You are still planning on selling the house if the exorcism is successful, no?"

“Not the house, per se; I'm afraid it might not be inhabitable now,” Fang Changmin sighs again. “The plot, though, I can sell that. I'd rather not deal with it any longer. Though with its reputation, I doubt I'll be able to set a profitable asking price.” He raises his eyebrows. “Why, does Wei-gongzi know anyone who might be interested?”

Wei Ying smiles. “I may,” he says. “But we can discuss that later.”

Exchanging short pleasantries with the landlord, Wei Ying and Lan Zhan set off to prepare for their night hunt. It takes some searching, but Wei Ying is eventually able to find a local who is willing to divulge more information on the property’s last residents. A seller of produce, with fox-eyes and a toothy smile.

“Oh, yes, I knew them,” the man says, dusting his hands of vegetable grime. “They used to help me find my way whenever I'd get lost in the forest, as a boy. You said you wanted their names?”

“If you can recall them.”

“I can recall; I've got a good memory,” he winks. “They went by the names of Yue and Lei, I believe.” He chews his lips as he tries to remember. “Yes, Yue Wangshu and Lei Meifeng. But they came here from who-knows-where, and never took any visitors. You won't find any family records, if that's what you're searching for.”

Curiouser and curiouser. “What sort of work did the husband do around here?” Wei Ying asks.

With a quirk of an eyebrow, the man says, “They weren't really a husband-and-wife sort of couple.”


The man gives him a strange look. “They were both women,” he says slowly. “Although Yue-furen would have given most men a run for their money.” Leaning closer, he murmurs, "Between you and me, there were even rumours that Yue-furen cultivated a rather—" he pauses meaningfully, "—eccentric path, as a Daoist.”

“...Oh.” Wei Ying coughs. Both women...so they had been of the other persuasion as well? And one of them an 'eccentric' cultivator, at that — demonic, perhaps? That might explain the presence of a ghost, and Fang Changmin's reticence on matters pertaining to his tenants. Or — no, if she was a Daoist that rules out such a possibility. Which means — ah. She may have been a yang-oriented cultivator. A rare style of woman, indeed! A pity Wei Ying may never have the fortune to meet her.

Realising he has been unresponsive for too long, Wei Ying collects himself. “Right. Of course.” He feels rather than sees Lan Zhan’s judgmental stare and elbows him in the ribs. “They would have taken on cultivation work, then.”

“Whenever it was available around town,” the man says, an amused cant to his mouth. “Which
wasn’t often. My mother called on them once for a spirit possession. They charged a paltry fee.” He rubs his chin. “I doubt they lived very comfortably.”

“I see.”

“I think they grew most of what they needed. I rarely saw them at market. Lei-furen gave me a basket of radishes to take home one time.”

“Not potatoes?” Wei Ying asks, remembering an old joke.

“Not potatoes,” the man shakes his head. “Which is questionable, no? If you’re going to grow your own food, potatoes are more sensible than carrots.”

“And they taste better,” Wei Ying points out.

“And they taste better!” the man agrees, grinning at him.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan interjects. “We should get going.”

“Yes, let’s,” Wei Ying says, in very good spirits. At long last, a comrade who understands! He purchases a bundle of peaches from the man, thanking him brightly. The man throws in a few extra free of charge, and Wei Ying catches his eyes twinkling before he has to dash off after Lan Zhan, who has swept away in a flurry of lace.

By the time they enter the forest that sprawls out from the eastern outskirts of Yichuan, sleep has settled over the town like a misty sheet. Staked and barbed fences are drawn across the dirt trails meandering into the forest, with an abundance of flimsy and boldly-inked talismans emanating a pervasive sense of foreboding.

They make their way past one of these fences with relative ease, sticking close to each other as they sneak through the brush, allowing the light filtered down by the forest canopy to guide them. The expected attack does not come; nor do they hear any of the purported wailing. But an icy, clammy chill settles over their backs, as though the ghost is right behind them, watching and waiting for them to fall unwittingly into some yawning pit of doom.

Following Fang Changming’s directions, they find themselves in what must have once been a stone clearing that, after almost two decades of neglect, has become overgrown with moss and shrubbery. Slightly off-centre sit the dilapidated remains of a two-storey wood cottage and an outhouse, surrounded by weed-infested garden beds. As they near the main structure, the smell of rotting timber plastered over with mould and lichen has Wei Ying casting a quick spell to avoid inhaling anything poisonous. Several layers of wards have been put in place to keep intruders out, and forbidding signs painted across the thickly-boarded and bolted entrances.

Still there is no sign of the ghost. Only the cold sinking under their skin and the subdued rustle of forest nightlife.

Wei Ying breaks past the wards and kicks through the boarded front door easily enough, taking down some of the softened doorframe with it. The inside of the house is dingy, its furnishings in shambles. Moonbeams stream in through breaks in the clay-tile roofing and ceiling overhead, spotlighting the stagnant submersion of dust motes. The timber flooring has been eaten away in
places, baring the musty rammed earth foundation underneath, and is carpeted by rotting piles of leaf litter that has snuck through the gaps in the roof and shrinkages in the walls year after year.

What few metallic objects were kept by the couple have rusted through beyond recognition. Cobwebs and a coating of dust conceal the wood furniture where mould has yet to grow, and when Wei Ying braves a touch to a corner piece, it crumbles away like sand beneath his fingers. Only the tattered scraps of simple, woven textiles hint at the possibility of any comfort in this place, some time long ago.

It’s desolate. Wei Ying doesn’t want to stay here for a moment longer than necessary.

“Let’s try upstairs,” he says to Lan Zhan after they have searched perfunctorily through the ground floor. “See if we can find anything there. No point in lingering.” He feels Lan Zhan step closer to him, the back of his hand brushing his in a bid for comfort, and nudges back with his knuckles in answer.

“Oh, I don’t like the look of that,” he remarks, eyeing the staircase warily. The planks appear poised to collapse under the pressure of a fly’s wing.

Lan Zhan leaps onto the landing above, light as air. “Show-off,” Wei Ying teases, following after him.

The upper floor is in even greater disrepair, holes and waterlogged patches spotting the wood. More of a loft than a complete storey on its own, it takes up only half the area of the lower floor, and is cramped with desks and clothes racks and wardrobes and a double bed from which dribbles putrid stuffing. Wei Ying makes a beeline for the wardrobe by the bed while Lan Zhan investigates the study space. Although as generously covered in dust and filth as everything else in the house, the wardrobe is oddly sturdy, and indeed, when Wei Ying brushes the dust off the handles, only cool, solid cherrywood greets his fingers.

With the thickness of the dust on it, the wardrobe must have been around for as long as everything else, charmed to remain intact with the passage of time. Wei Ying’s suspicions are confirmed when the door refuses to budge under his grip, his tugs opposed by the rippling energy of a barrier.

It quickly becomes apparent that the seal is of a different character to the wards that had been set up around the house. There are several layers to it, and as Wei Ying unravels them he does not sense the practical efficiency of the average cultivator’s work, but rather a deliberate craftiness. Someone, likely one of the two women themselves, wanted to ensure that whatever is inside would not be found.

Of course, this only intrigues Wei Ying further, and in a matter of a few more tries he has the seal undone and the wardrobe opening at his touch as though hinges have just been greased. His pride as a lockpicker isn’t for nothing.

Folded inside are stacks of worn linen and coarse, workmanlike clothing, untouched by the moths and mice loitering around the house. Wei Ying rifles through the shelves out of curiosity, but ultimately finds little of interest until his fingers brush against what feels like a lacquered casket towards the back of the topmost rack.

The casket is smooth and nondescript, entirely unblemished. A thin line marks the break between the lid and the container, but when Wei Ying tries to open the box it too, like the wardrobe, remains stubbornly closed. A number of uncommon charms have been knitted together to keep it shut.
Once he manages to force it open, markedly more frustrated by theendeavour than he was with thewardrobe, he finds only a set of eight tortoiseshell fingerpicks and a sheaf of yellowed papersinside. Creases run through the entire stack where the pages have been folded and unfolded over and over again. The collection contains nothing but musical tablatures, inscribed with great care inflawless calligraphy. Pressed into the last page is a dried camellia, its petals delicate with love.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan calls from the other end of the room. His body conceals something desk-like that stands on thick legs on the floor. In his hand is a large sheet, shimmering underneath its sprinkling of grey.

Wei Ying crosses the floor with the box and papers. “You should put that away if you don’t want to get caught in a sneezing fit,” he tsks, taking the sheet from Lan Zhan and dropping it onto the ground. In contrast to the fabrics in the wardrobe, the sheet is made of thick, fluid silk. He raises an eyebrow at its essentially pristine condition. “Charmed?” he asks.

Lan Zhan nods. “As is this,” he says, indicating the thing before him.

The thing, now that Wei Ying can see it in full, is a painstakingly crafted zheng. Right away he knows that it has come from the treasure stores of some noble cultivator family. Its silk strings glitter brightly under the faint light. The paulownia wood soundboard and ivory bridges gleam as though recently polished, and its body is embellished with mother-of-pearl inlays and carvings of lilies in bloom.

“Well. Clearly at least one of them was a musician,” he says, passing the set of scores to Lan Zhan. “And it was important for them to preserve these.”

He rubs his nose as Lan Zhan scans the pages. “Which one of them do you think is the ghost?” he asks.

“It might be neither.”

“Yes, but it’s likely to be one of them, seeing as it’s been most violent when people approach the house.”

Lan Zhan shakes his head and returns the scores to Wei Ying. “That tells us little,” he says. Glancing at the zheng, he adds, “Especially if they were associated with cultivation gentry.”

“Ordinarily, yes, but there are exceptions to that rule.” He drums his fingers against his chest in reminder. “In light of what we’ve found, the odds are a little higher, don’t you think? There are things here that are being protected. And for a single ghost to have overpowered so many — I wouldn’t be surprised if it were a cultivator’s spirit.” He pauses, thinking. “But she would have had to have died somehow. We also don’t know what happened to the other woman. There have only been reports of one spirit, and this place,” he looks around pointedly, “hasn’t been inhabited for years.”

“Perhaps we should ask around further.”

“Maybe they had a fight and one of them killed the other and took off?” Wei Ying suggests, only half as a joke.

“I doubt it. No evidence to indicate as much,” Lan Zhan says. He looks thoughtfully at where the papers have been tucked away against Wei Ying’s chest. “Those pieces are most probably a formal parting gift. The one who composed it would...likely not have left in such a manner.”

Wei Ying’s eyebrows shoot up, and he sobers at the complex, uneasy expression Lan Zhan is
wearing as he thinks it through. Well then. He’s more than happy to take Lan Zhan’s word for it. Such a comment would never come lightly from him.

“Okay,” he nods. “But that still leaves—”

“Indeed. You should leave.”
and spin cyclones out of the rolling tide.

A wispy figure phases noiselessly through the roof to drop down in front of them, and at last, the ghost greets them.

It’s not what Wei Ying expected.

The figure, translucent and exerting a murky spiritual pressure, is broad-shouldered and as tall as either of them, looming even more with the added height of its headdress. Harsh lines trace the fit of its plain robes, cut from the same midnight- and powder-blue cloth Wei Ying had found in the wardrobe. Its dark hair, which extends to its knees, drifts slowly around it as kelp drifts underwater, the speckles of silver light braided throughout winking eerily at them.

Stark against the grey of the figure’s waistband rests a corporeal sword, uncommonly long, with hilt and sheath as black as onyx.

The thing about ghosts is that they can’t be stabbed into submission. Depending on the circumstances and their skillset, a cultivator might elect to use any combination of arrays and incantations and other techniques in their arsenal to appropriately suppress a ghost before sealing it away or exorcising it.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't be too difficult. If the correct measures are taken — usually an enchantment or two and erecting some sort of barrier — it's simple enough to go about the process without suffering any injury. But ordinarily, ghosts don't carry what look like physical swords around with them. Physical swords that radiate bloodlust, that would slice through any paltry traps and defences in the space of a blink.

Wei Ying feels the slightest bit chastised at how quick he had been to dismiss the previous contractors’ efforts. It looks as though their original plan might not work, if that sword is running through them before they can perform a single hand seal or produce a single note.

Behind him, Lan Zhan’s hand curls around Bichen’s hilt.

Wei Ying steels himself. “Yue Wangshu?” he hedges.

The ghost smiles thinly. It brings a handsome cruelty to its spear-sharp face. “Dead,” it says, voice husky with disuse. “As you will be, if you do not leave quickly.”

Wei Ying smiles as well. “How unfortunate,” he says. “Here I was looking forward to a nice chat over a midnight drink.”

He draws his sword and shoots forward as one with Lan Zhan, hoping to disarm the ghost.

Yue Wangshu seemingly stands still as they move, but as they close in, her blade meets theirs with astonishing force. They exchange a series of rapid blows, attacking at first from the same direction, and then, when that fails to overwhelm her, from either side in hopes of causing a misstep.

But she parries each with scant, precise flicks of her wrists, her blade singing as it arcs through the air, easily keeping up with them. With every step her motions become lighter, like the flutter of grasshopper wings over a lily pond, and the strange beads of light in her hair leave streaking afterimages that sting their vision.

Wei Ying grits his teeth. For all the lightness of her movement, the force behind that blade takes
every bit of his effort to counter. A single lapse might shatter his wrist bones. He checks in on Lan Zhan through the corner of his eye; he, too, has his brow furrowed against the strain of the fight. The floor feels as though it might give from under their feet at any moment, from all the thudding and trampling it’s taken.

“Lan Zhan!” he calls. “Out, or the house will cave in on us!”

An arc of Bichen’s sword energy is crashing through the ceiling before he’s finished, splintered clay tiles and dry leaves raining down into the loft. They make use of the cover of the dirt cloud to leap onto the roof, and from there to the ground, standing back to back, sweat cooling on their skin as they wait for their adversary.

“What do you think,” Wei Ying breathes, “Can we take her on?”

Lan Zhan’s back is stiff with tension against his. Before he can answer, Yue Wangshu materialises before him and beckons with her free hand. “Come,” she says. “Since you insist on dying here, I will send you off with a real match.”

Wei Ying laughs, springing towards her. “You sound awfully confident.”

“Should I not be?” she taunts. In Wei Ying’s grip, Suibian trembles to counter her sword with the next lock of blades.

From behind them, Lan Zhan sends a fortified qin chord snaking towards the hilt of Yue Wangshu’s sword in hopes of fishing it out of her grasp. But she sees it before even Wei Ying can and leans back in a feint to land a powerful blast of qi into Wei Ying’s sternum, throwing him into a tree while she dances out of range. The air is knocked out of him and agony sprawls hotly along his back.

As he straightens, gritting his teeth through the pain, Lan Zhan barely avoids a similar fate, the downward strike of Bichen onto the sword’s hilt meeting only foggy air when Yue Wangshu melts out of sight and rounds on him from his blind spot. The wave of energy just glances across his bicep, gashing through the layers of cloth to draw blood.

Cursing, Wei Ying dashes to his side and grips him by the forearm, fighting through the pain of breathing. “Alright, Lan Zhan?” he asks urgently.

“Of course,” Lan Zhan says, wincing.

The wound is a fraction of a knuckle’s breadth from touching bone and gapes, band-like, around his arm, spurting and raw. It’s nothing some stitches and medicine won’t heal perfectly, not with Lan Zhan’s cultivation, but Wei Ying hasn’t seen Lan Zhan bleed so heavily in — some time. Gruesome pictures flash behind his eyes, unbidden. He grimaces. “Let’s retreat.”

Lan Zhan shakes his head. Any protest Wei Ying might have is cut off when that sword comes hurtling towards them again, forcing them to swerve apart. After a few more altercations, and a cut to Wei Ying’s shoulder and what he suspects is a sprained left wrist, Wei Ying releases a fog-inducing talisman to stall for time. They regroup under the cover of the haze and he hisses out another suggestion to Lan Zhan, who should be reeling from blood loss at this point.

“Do you remember the melody from the score I showed you?”

“I do.”

“Good. Do you think you can move to a safer spot, play it on your qin? Try using it to take her by
surprise— No buts,” he adds, when Lan Zhan makes an expression that signals he’s about to object. “I’ll divert her attention for as long as I can.” He claps Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “Trust me, I’ve got this.”

Lan Zhan blinks at him witheringly, several times, insult and vexation settling over his face. He looks very much like he’s resisting an intense urge to massage his temples, and also uncannily like his older brother. “Fine,” he says tersely, and the illusion is dispelled. “Don’t hold me back.”

They separate, just in time to dodge a series of phosphorescent flames that cut through the fog to hail down upon them. Yue Wangshu descends from the sky, the picture of a blazing, vengeful spirit with her flashing eyes and whipping hair, her sword colliding into Wei Ying’s hastily raised barrier with such strength that tremors run through the earth under his feet.

The fog instantly dissipates within their vicinities. “Hiding, brave warrior?” Yue Wangshu purrs. Wei Ying valiantly draws breath to answer, “Perish the thought.” The barrier is splintering above him and will soon shatter. He dissolves it and simultaneously leaps back, grinning when the momentum brings Yue Wangshu crashing down. The shock of the impact lasts for only a blink; that fearsome sword pierces through and carves jagged wounds into the rock, and then the earth is crackling and tearing apart beneath it, exploding in a disastrous spray of rock and soil and dirt that knocks down a few young trees and sends a balcony on the old cottage sagging to the ground.

Wei Ying is blessedly unscathed thanks to the barrier he’d erected in anticipation of the explosion. He prays that Lan Zhan is unhurt and squints through the settling dust and debris to watch as Yue Wangshu yanks the sword out from its deep seat in the bedrock, at the centre of a crater of her own making. She catches his eye and throws him a belligerent glare, her spiritual pressure flaring with menace.

The ghost springs forward, aiming another barrage of fireballs at Wei Ying to occupy him while she flickers out of sight. The heat from the flames singes Wei Ying’s hair as he slices through them, eyes darting around in search of where Yue Wangshu will next show herself. He’s granted a moment’s reprieve when, just before he can think, Any time now, Lan Zhan, a series of crisp notes resounds through the clearing, unmistakably from Wangji. But the sinister ringing of Yue Wangshu’s blade follows hot on its trail. The ghost emerges without warning, close enough for Wei Ying to fear losing his nose, and lands a succession of smart, whirlwind-like strikes against Suibian. The blade crackles with lightning-like energy on each parry, sending an unpleasant zinging through Wei Ying’s sword arm.

“What’s this?” Yue Wangshu mocks, huffing a cloud of damp air and ice crystals onto Wei Ying’s face. “Your friend cultivates as a musician as well? How precious. Perhaps we could exchange pointers.”

“He is a man of many talents,” Wei Ying agrees, beginning to dread that the gambit may not, in fact, have been calculated well enough and he has not got this after all. What are they to do, in the unlikely case that the score was not dedicated to Yue Wangshu after all? Or — perhaps she can’t recognise anything of her old lover in the piece, and it is meaningless as a distraction? It’s too much to hope that Lan Zhan’s usual musical prowess will take care of things here.

He winces when an especially convoluted twist of his arm pulls at the wound on his shoulder, blood dripping stickily over his robes. It brings to attention the other blows he’s taken. After the protracted numbness, it feels as though lances are jabbing through the wounds from beneath his skin and within his lungs.
Wei Ying forces his mind to focus through the haze of pain. Snatches of speech from seasoned teachers and flashes of text from obscure manuals froth into a tumultuous whirlpool as he discards backup plans one after another. The brief lapse is enough for Yue Wangshu to fling Suibian out of Wei Ying’s grip. The sword lands far behind them with a pathetic, tinny sound, and Wei Ying feels his heart sink.

Running on nothing but instinct, he draws qi to conjure another barrier, probably the last that will hold for any meaningful span of time, in hopes of cushioning against the strike being aimed across his chest — but then, miraculously, the sound of Lan Zhan’s qin draws closer, and Wei Ying can feel the comforting wash of Lan Zhan’s presence from atop a nearby tree still swaddled in mist. Yue Wangshu’s sword swipes through empty air, missing its mark as she stops and startles, turning sharply to face the source of the music.

Her face contorts into something resembling disbelief and anguish. "Meifeng?" Wei Ying hears her say, in a voice like the rasping of dry leaves over uneven stone.

Oh, thank fuck, he thinks. Thank all the fucks. It’s working! He could have done without the delay it took for Yue Wangshu to really listen to what she was hearing, but at least not all of his plans tonight will end in failure.

The segment of the melody Lan Zhan plays is wistful and clean, the notes sending ripples of meditative energy throughout the devastated clearing much like a ceramic cup sending ripples when skinned over spring water. It transfixes Yue Wangshu for a long, nerve-wracking moment, before her frantic expression transforms into one of violent wrath as the shock wears off and the realisation that it is none other than Lan Zhan behind the strings kicks in.

Fortunately, the diversion has given Wei Ying all the opportunity he needed. A lustrous thread now gleams around the pommel of Yue Wangshu’s sword, as yet unnoticed by the ghost. Its other end is fastened off to Wei Ying’s uninjured wrist. With a flourish, Wei Ying yanks his arm as hard as he can, dragging the sword out of Yue Wangshu’s grasp and sending it hurtling in the opposite direction, propelled by a blast of qi for good measure.

“Catch, Lan Zhan!” He disconnects the thread from his end to prolong its trajectory and refuses to allow himself to fumble while he pulls out Chenqing with cold, sweaty fingers.

Yue Wangshu whirls around, facing him with slaughter in her eyes. “You dare!” she snarls, and it sounds as though the earth and sky will split in two with her rage. With Lan Zhan busy sealing the sword away lest it be snatched right out of his hands, Wei Ying has the fall of a sand grain to play the right tune before the ghost closes the gap between them and gets her hands on his throat.

He wills his breath to steady instantly, to flow in through his nose and out through his mouth like the sea lapping at shore. He presses the mouthpiece to his lips and blows.

The suppression drains what little strength he’s been clinging on to out of him. Having been slowly recuperating his old skills as a cultivator, Wei Ying has had increasingly less cause to use Chenqing in this way over the past year and a half. As such, it is potentially possibly maybe the case that he’s gotten a little rusty at manipulating resentful energy, and slightly out of touch with his otherworldly friends. But additionally, Yue Wangshu is simply too formidable, and in his bruised and battered state it is not easy for Wei Ying to maintain the temperance needed to both
shield himself from Yue Wangshu’s attacks and subdue her.

In the end, it is Lan Zhan’s success with Yue Wangshu’s sword and his quick thinking that save Wei Ying from a qi deviation. Lan Zhan draws up and powers a high-level confinement array while Yue Wangshu is locked in a stalemate with Wei Ying. Heart pounding arrhythmically, Wei Ying calls upon his last reserves of willpower to force her into the array. Thick ropes of qi wind around her spectral neck and bind her arms behind her. She is forced to her knees and anchored to the ground, as though her form is taking on mass.

Yue Wangshu’s eyes spark like white-blue coals as she goes down, and she lets out a desperate cry that rings with the pain of dragons from old folk stories, a prideful thing hunted down and pierced through the soft skin of its belly.

The array is stable enough to hold the ghost down for three nights. Wei Ying hopes it won’t come to keeping her bound like this for the full period. Already the sight of Yue Wangshu brought to such a state, watching the two of them with a stony, baleful expression, makes him queasy.

He squirms as Lan Zhan tugs more roughly than necessary while wrapping cloth around his shoulder wound. He'd been like this with the wrist compress too, brusque and ungentle, and hadn't bothered to soothe the cold burn when applying Wei Ying's dwindling supply of medicine. For his own injury, he'd allowed Wei Ying to do only the bare minimum, brushing off the attempts at fussing that he usually accommodates.

He asks coolly, "Will you need help circulating your qi?"

Wei Ying sniffs, wrinkling his nose while shoving his robes back up his shoulder. "No, thanks! With that sort of enthusiasm, I bet it would do more harm than good," he refuses airily. Shuffling close enough to Lan Zhan to knock knees with him, he drops his voice and asks, "Everything alright?"

Lan Zhan closes his eyes, working his jaw. "We can address it later." He jerks his chin towards Yue Wangshu.

Wei Ying drags his eyes over to the ghost, who has been sitting quietly on her knees and refusing to look at them after several fruitless attempts to break free from her restraints. Though there is no trace of that former smokey aura, she appears much the same as earlier.

"I didn’t want it to get to this point," Wei Ying sighs, folding his arms behind his back and walking towards her, masking his stagger with difficulty, "but with you screaming murder, I can’t be blamed for defending myself, can I?"

The ghost raises her chin. "I gave you fair warning."

“And if I’d heeded it, you would carry on terrorising anyone seeking passage through this plot or the forest around it.” He leans forward with interest. “Which leads me to wonder — why weren’t you at our throats sooner? By all accounts we should never have been able to even reach your little cottage, much less have ourselves a tour of it.”

“Apologies for the tardy reception,” she sneers.
"Why do you haunt this place?" Lan Zhan cuts in, before Wei Ying can respond in turn.

Yue Wangshu's gaze slides towards him. She appraises him, as though finally truly seeing him. "Because I enjoy watching my garden blossom on the blood of humans, and find bliss in the music of their terror," she says flippantly.

Wei Ying says, "Killing one or two people over twenty years sheds enough blood to make your garden blossom?"

"The piece you played," the ghost continues speaking to Lan Zhan, "Where did you learn it?"

"Right here, in your house."

"The tablature was found in your home," Lan Zhan clarifies, "inside a sealed casket. I played it from memory."

Yue Wangshu's eyes narrow to slits, her figure hardening with tension. "Inside a sealed casket," she says stiffly, "that was inside the sealed wardrobe, I presume?"

Lan Zhan nods warily.

Her spiritual pressure flares like tongues of fire, and the trees around them begin to moan with an ominous wind. "It was not to be opened!" she hisses, flexing against the ropes holding her immobile. "It was not to be touched, and it was not to be opened!"

"Should've done a better job of hiding it, if it was so important that no one was to touch it," Wei Ying says snidely, flapping windblown leaves and dirt out of his face. "Though to your credit, that was some charming spellwork."

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan cautions.

"Ah, yes," Yue Wangshu says, "Truly it was our own oversight, failing to anticipate such talented thieves as yourselves."

Wei Ying is injured and exhausted and his patience is wearing thin. "If you haven’t noticed," he says, "We are cultivators. Overstepping a few boundaries with the dead is part of the work we do."

The moaning grows to a muted howl, stirring the clouds above. Snake-scale patches of bluish light shift on the ground as the moon plays hide-and-seek. "She is not dead," the ghost snarls.

"Not who I was talking about, but, come to think of it, the point still stands."

"Lei Meifeng is not here," Wei Ying retorts. "She has not been here for over twenty years, for almost as long as you’ve been languishing like this, and there has been no news of her about town for all that time. You can take it out on these innocent trees and on innocent travellers as loudly as you like, but it won’t change the fact that she is missing and likely not alive."

"Wei Ying."

"Boy," Yue Wangshu says, trembling with fury, "you prattle on but know nothing. Return my sword to me and leave this place. If I must break myself free I will not be merciful."

"No need for that," Wei Ying says readily, pacing back and forth as he spins Chenqing, "I agree happily. But only after I’ve said what I need to say. Promise you will hear me out and I’ll do as you ask." He pauses and tilts his head at her in question. "And if you would kindly put an end to this,
“Arrogant cur,” she spits.

Lan Zhan doubles the ropes around her in warning. Militantly, she glowers at him.

“Indeed,” Wei Ying agrees. “Though this arrogant cur may know a few things that will interest you.” He studiously ignores Lan Zhan’s stare of confusion.

Yue Wangshu dismisses him. “You want to convince me that Meifeng is dead? I have no interest in this.”

“I do have proof,” Wei Ying offers.

“Hah,” Yue Wangshu scoffs. She locks eyes with him. “Show me your so-called proof.”

“Not without your word.”

Yue Wangshu makes a face of great distaste. “I give you my word,” she says begrudgingly, after a long while. “Remove the ropes, and show me.”

Wei Ying turns to Lan Zhan, who, as he had predicted, is decidedly unhappy with the turn things have taken. Wei Ying beams at him as reassuringly as he can, trying to communicate with his eyes that Lan Zhan should not worry because Wei Ying knows what he is doing.

Lan Zhan’s mouth pulls down at the right corner. He waves his hand with an unusual hostility, the gesture tight and abrupt. Instantly, the ropes keeping Yue Wangshu bound snap free, dissolving into powder, with only those that tie her to the array and block off her flow of power remaining.

She shifts to sit in a cross-legged position, glowing with agitation. The wind peters out, and the sky settles. Wei Ying plops down as well and holds up a hand. “Before I start,” he says, soldiering through the flinty way she looks at him, “may I ask why the casket was not meant to be touched?”

“You may not,” Yue Wangshu says. “You were the one who bargained to talk, ‘Wei Ying’. So talk.”

“Wei Wuxian, please,” he corrects, staring guilelessly at her when she raises her eyebrows at him in derision. “And I am talking. I need to know because it’s related to what I’m trying to prove. Did the box belong to both of you?”

“It belongs to Meifeng,” the ghost says. She frowns, then admits, “She keeps in it some bequeathments for me. For after she passes on.” Scornfully, she adds, “You have violated her wishes by opening it. If you truly have no ill intent, you will redo the seals before you leave.”

“Naturally I will, after I am done here.”

“Then the proof, quickly, Wei Wuxian. So that we may be done here.”

Wei Ying sighs and rolls his eyes. So much for a pleasant, mutually rewarding conversation! He feels around in his chest pocket for the qiankun pouch he’d stowed the lacquered casket away in. The outside of the pouch bears a minor bloodstain, but what is inside should be unsullied. He opens it up and removes the box, placing it between the two of them with the pouch as a cushion.

Yue Wangshu looks at the box, and then at him.
"So you thought to steal it all along," she says.

"To borrow it," Lan Zhan intercedes smoothly.

"Borrow it for what?"

"For use as evidence," Wei Ying says. "Like now, for example." He taps the lid of the box. "Have you ever examined the charms your partner placed on this casket?"

Yue Wangshu bares her teeth. "No. Meifeng asked me to leave it be until her death, and I have honoured her request."

"I don’t think it would have mattered if you tried to open it." Wei Ying shrugs. "The lowermost seal on the box was set with a time limit of until the spirit of the caster left their body. I didn’t have to break through that one."

He waits. When Yue Wangshu says nothing, he continues. "...At first I didn't find anything odd about that, seeing as you were around haunting the place. But then you seemed to be claiming it was Lei Meifeng's casket, and that she wasn't dead. So I needed to confirm."

"It is her casket," Yue Wangshu says, at last. "I have never laid a finger on it." She extends her hand to trace the seam of the box, but her fingers pass through it. Her arm retracts as though stung. "I did not agree to sit here so I could listen to lies spun out of air," she says grimly. "Your proof, Wei Wuxian."

"I've kept the charms intact," Wei Ying says. "Just chipped them in places and unwound them to open up the lid. You should still be able to see the last seal." He passes a hand over the box, and symbols and characters inscribed in multicoloured light crawl over the entire surface, as though engravings inlaid with luminous pearl are coming to life. Here and there, as professed, the symbols are distorted, the characters partially erased, the charms disconnected. But everything Yue Wangshu might need to see is visible.

Wei Ying watches Yue Wangshu study the seals with a complicated, dimming expression in her eyes. Immeasurable grief, and horror like a sword pulled slowly through the chest, and, perhaps most unbearably of all, a sliver of pride in the work of her lover.

He looks away and clears his throat. "I can't prove I'm not the one who's set the seals up this way. I'm sure you can identify traces of Lei Meifeng's qi on it, but mine are there too..." he trails off, feeling somewhat pathetic.

"You won't need to." Her words are hoarse, as though pushed through ragged airways. "I know Meifeng’s tricks." The ghost thinks in silence. "The composition is inside, then?"

"Yes!" Wei Ying says, rather too loudly in his eagerness for a change of subject. He clears his throat. "Uh. Yes." He fits the edge of his nails under the lid of the box to take them out, but Yue Wangshu shakes her head.

"No need. I know most of it by heart; the rest I'll not look at yet," she explains. "You don't know where she was last seen?"

"All we know is that she seems to have gone missing. As we thought you had," Lan Zhan says.

She nods slowly. "Then it is impossible to confirm whether her spirit is at rest. You," she points at Wei Ying. "Return the box to the wardrobe. Repair the seals."
Wei Ying chews his lip. "Will you continue to wait for her?"

"Will I continue to terrorise people who want me vanquished so they may desecrate our home, you mean?" she quips sarcastically. "I will search until I find either her spirit, or her remains. Until then her things are to remain undisturbed."

Wisely, Wei Ying refrains from pointing out the destruction they have already managed to wreak tonight.

"You are tethered to this place by resentment," Lan Zhan reminds the ghost. "Even when I lift the array, you may not be able to escape the forest."

A tired smile cracks through Yue Wangshu's face, like a fracture in brittle pottery. "Yes. I will have to deal with that first."

As Wei Ying returns the box to the qiankun pouch, he says casually, "If you want, we can help you."

Yue Wangshu tuts. "So eager to be rid of me, are you?"

"That's not it," Wei Ying shakes his head. "I can also try to arrange it so you're able to stay. Without unwanted intrusion, I mean, provided you bring no harm to ordinary passersby. But regardless of what you decide to do, we can sever the resentment keeping you imprisoned here."

She raises a haughty eyebrow. Woodenly, she says, "I don't need your pity."

Wei Ying groans internally. She is definitely being difficult with him on purpose! Definitely favouring Lan Zhan over him!

He always has terrible luck with women!

"It's not pity. I'm just thorough with my work." He tries being diplomatic. "But if I were in your position — if I was told my beloved had died, and I had no way of verifying it, no sign of their remains, no way of mourning them — I wouldn't hesitate to take another's pity, if it would bring me closer to them."

"But you are not in my position, and you cannot know what I feel."

"I am not, but I know something of what it is to be the one who is lost and mourned, and what it does to the one who is left behind." That hollow resignation in the ghost's eyes — Wei Ying hates the thought of Lan Zhan having ever worn the same expression. He feels Lan Zhan's gaze on him and is briefly overcome by the urge to hold his hand, to slip his arm around Lan Zhan's and press their palms together and feel him there, solid and warm, and let him feel Wei Ying with him.

"I would not wish such a fate on anyone," he says. "If I can help you find Lei Meifeng, I am at your disposal."

Yue Wangshu regards the two of them critically. The stiffness seeps out of her shoulders, and, apparently satisfied by what she discovers, she gives a short nod. "That being the case, I will accept your offer with thanks," she replies. "But I need time before you begin. Right now is — not optimal."

Wei Ying can understand her predicament. "There are some things we need to take care of as well in preparation for the ritual. Time in between will be good."
“It is best if you repel any wanderers from the forest until then.”

“Noted,” Lan Zhan says. He gradually deactivates the remaining functions of the array.

She nods again. "I will come to you after three nights, during the full moon. Be here, in this spot.”
The last of the ropes disperse as granules of blue light, like dust motes, and the markings of the array scintillate before being wiped away completely. Yue Wangshu stands, once again an impossibly tall and majestic figure.

Wei Ying stands as well, brushing off his robes. “Ah, yes, alright.”

"My blade?” she asks Lan Zhan. She snorts at his moment of reluctance. "Have more faith in your friend’s talents; he’s cleansed out most of the corruption. There won’t be any gardening, so soon after."

This seems to amuse Lan Zhan. His mouth twists into a wry smile as he draws the sword from the bag it has been sealed away in and presents it to Yue Wangshu. She takes it from him and sheaths it without a second glance.

Feeling the fatigue weigh down his bones again, Wei Ying exhales loudly. “Very well then, Yue-furen. I’ll be returning the casket to its shelf. We’ll see you at the agreed time.”

Yue Wangshu clicks her tongue, scowling with disdain. “Don’t call me that.”

Wei Ying blinks. “Yue—…qianbei, then?”

“Acceptable,” the ghost says. She vanishes from sight before he can blink again.
The walk back to the inn had been paved by silence. Now, as Wei Ying sutures the wound on Lan Zhan’s arm with exacting care, Lan Zhan is stony-faced and white-lipped.

Wei Ying had gathered together as many candles as he could from the corners of their room to aid his work. The menagerie of flames casts warped shadows over Lan Zhan’s sweat-spotted skin, robbing it of the uniform luster it usually takes on under lamplight. The incision is a grim and messy sight: blood oozes thinly from it onto the towels below despite the slow re-knitting of tissues through his cultivation, as though the clotting grass Wei Ying had applied earlier and the thick pressure of the now-discarded bandages have had minimal effect.

Lan Zhan is loathe to admit any pain or discomfort under the best of circumstances. Aware that he will be even less inclined to do so now, morose as he is in the wake of their night hunt, Wei Ying keeps his touch as fleeting and unobtrusive as possible. But there is little he can do to ease the burn of alcohol from cleaning the wound, or the hot prick of his needle as it passes through sensitised skin.

When the last stitch has been severed from the needle and Wei Ying is dabbing alcohol over the wound for the final time, Lan Zhan’s body finally recoils from the cloth. “It smarts?” Wei Ying clucks, rubbing his free hand up and down Lan Zhan’s thigh in sympathy. “I’m sorry. Just a bit more, hm?”

“How is your wrist?” Lan Zhan asks. He follows the motion of Wei Ying’s hands as he spreads ointment over the sutures and dresses the area with gauze.

Wei Ying crumples the bloodied towels and throws them into a pile at his feet. “Feeling pretty good,” he says honestly. The bed creaks when Lan Zhan reaches behind him for the basin and signals for Wei Ying to wash his hands while he pours clean water over them. As he scrubs his hands under the thin, bubbling trickle, Wei Ying adds, “Thanks to your excellent treatment, of course, Lan-xiansheng.”

With a conceded air of impishness, Lan Zhan says, “Doctor, teacher; Wei Ying has many hopes for who he wants me to be, it seems.” He sets the basin aside and sends a transfusion of qi into Wei Ying’s injured forearm, down the stream flowing through his wrist, while Wei Ying pats his hands dry.

“I have a few ideas on how you can start living up to my hopes,” he simpers.

“You’ve had a lot of those, tonight,” Lan Zhan remarks. “Let me see your back.”

The pain in his back has long dampened to a shallow, blunt throbbing that causes nuisance only when Wei Ying moves too abruptly. As with his sprained wrist, the injury had begun healing as
soon as he was able to get a moment of rest. Still, he turns and lets Lan Zhan have his peace of mind.

From the drift of Lan Zhan’s fingers over his skin, it seems Wei Ying has a sizeable and rather lurid bruise to show for his combat efforts. “Surface injury,” Lan Zhan assesses. “You should still see a doctor tomorrow.”

“So should you.” He faces Lan Zhan again and asks, “Which of my ideas did you take issue with, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Zhan skewers his complacency with a single look. Calmly, he says, “I don’t like being left in the dark, Wei Ying.” Given Wei Ying’s answering silence, he continues, “And I am not fragile. You must make use of my strength when we hunt.”

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying says, “your arm was spitting blood.”

“ Wei Ying, you could have lost your life,” Lan Zhan counters. “Or had a qi deviation. If you had given me a moment, I could have cauterised the wound and thought of something more dependable.”

“I — dependable?” Wei Ying echoes, voice rising with incredulity. “Under the circumstances, the only dependable thing to do would have been retreating!”

“Any other alternative that wouldn’t have exposed you to such danger.”

“Okay,” Wei Ying says. “Like what?”

“Like,” Lan Zhan says, with pointed censure, “I might have fended her off while you subdued her from in hiding. Less strain on you, and I could have set up the array earlier.”

“Keeping her occupied as some sort of meat shield while arranging a stealth set-up, all with that injury of yours? Lan Zhan, you can’t be serious.”

Not a flinch in sight. Lan Zhan’s eyes flick to the bindings around Wei Ying’s shoulder, then down to the compress on his wrist. He crooks an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, stop it,” Wei Ying huffs. “I wasn’t the one losing enough blood to fill a creek.”

“Nor I.” Wei Ying’s bristle of objection is interrupted by a minute shake of Lan Zhan’s head; adamant, insistent. “I know my body, Wei Ying. As do you. Tonight we were fortunate, but it may not always be so.”

In a slow, serendipitous instance of clarity, it dawns on Wei Ying that Lan Zhan is referring to something beyond dented pride, here. And when he consciously brings his buzzing indignation to heel, when he shuttered out the afterimages of Lan Zhan’s arm drenched in blood, the rivulets gleaming pitch-black under ghostly light, the same arm — that same arm — afterimages of white, fresh, unsullied silk now drenched in a shock of blood, the rivulets dropping poppy-red onto Wei Ying’s face, and of watching Lan Zhan struggle through the effort of serving as Wei Ying’s lifeline right after Shijie had given her life to do the same, and of letting go, of whipping his own arm backwards to keep Lan Zhan from falling with him — when Wei Ying shuttered out what he saw tonight, past and present melded into one holographic image — yes, then he can hear it.

Lan Zhan is saying, I need you to trust that you can rely on me to give you cover. I need you to trust that I will tell you if I cannot fight.
He is saying, *I need to trust that you will not put my safety above your life. I need to trust that you will not endanger yourself on impulse alone.*

Truth be told, this is not something he has given much thought to before tonight - the logistics of night-hunting with Lan Zhan; the etiquette, the rules. Rules, in particular, will always be a sore spot for Wei Ying, regardless of how well he tries to bend himself to them. Wei Ying had supposed that things would effortlessly fall into place once they started, seamlessly synchronic, as they had when the two of them were boys questing around for the fragments of the Yin Metal, or later when they were breezing through the trail Nie Huaisang had laid out for them.

But what had happened when they were younger — when they had yet to fully grow into their powers, to amass battle experience or truly wrangle with death — had been a pleasant trick of fortune. They had been naturally complementary to each other in their aptitudes, they had been competent and competitive, and without the burdens of memory or desperate, desperate love, this had taken them some distance through a few dire trials. As for what had happened afterward — well. It is hardly fair to draw a comparison between the Wei Ying of then, recently transplanted into Mo Xuanyu’s poorly-cultivated body, and the Wei Ying of today. The Wei Ying of today has formed his jindan; the Wei Ying of today has fought for two years, proudly and tirelessly and self-sufficiently, to preserve life. Now, Wei Ying need not ask Lan Zhan to endanger himself for his sake, nor stand by, feeble and fragile, as Lan Zhan is hurt.

Incidentally, he is reminded of the spare few times Jiang-shushu and Yu-furen had night-hunted together, before Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng came of age and such outings became secrets to be shared through hushed whispers. He remembers with unusual lucidity the ever-mercurial Yu-furen storming through the manor hallways, her temper at a new ugliest, the snap of her skirts sharp enough to match Zidian. He remembers the ever-benign Jiang-shushu appearing as though his face were carved from wood, his words harsh and tone cutting. He remembers — hurled accusations, not a few of them rising, though Lord and Lady would never acknowledge it, from deepest concern for each other. Of course, Yu-furen was a woman of uncommon disposition, and that marriage had not been the most blissful of unions. Still, there is a lesson to be learnt in this for Wei Ying, with his fierce independence, with his multitudes of love, and Lan Zhan is trying to put a name to it early on.

He inhales, then exhales, cycling through his thoughts to set them in order, nodding to show his acquiescence. “You’re right. I could have done more to listen to you.” Ruefully, he says, “I’ll try to curb the instinct to jump to your rescue next time.”

Lan Zhan says, with that impromptu flirtatiousness that Wei Ying has the exclusive pleasure of being privy to, “I don’t mind being rescued, now and then.” The smile he wears for Wei Ying is considerate, almost conspiratorial. “When circumstances warrant it.”

“Mm,” Wei Ying agrees. It feels vaguely as though he has had a conversation similar to this before, with some other person. Jiang Cheng, perhaps, who, taking after his mother, would have a never-ending list of quibbles to shoot off about whenever they returned from a night hunt, mostly about Wei Ying’s brashness and Wei Ying’s overconfidence and Wei Ying’s insistence on hogging all danger to himself. At least regarding his less-than-ideal pairwork, maybe Jiang Cheng had had a point.

Honesty, Wei Ying tells himself. *This is my zhiji. This is the keeper of my heart. I can tell him anything.*

He leans forward so he can thump his forehead, with conscious lightness, onto the wing of Lan Zhan’s shoulder. “I was afraid,” he admits quietly, muffled into his skin. “Irrationally afraid. I lost
control over my decisions in the moment.”

The last of the stiff, unhappy expression Lan Zhan has kept since the fight ended eases away. “I know,” Lan Zhan says, and he means, probably, that he knows the feeling itself. He strokes a hand through Wei Ying’s hair, a repetitive something to pacify the both of them. “We will work on it.”

“Mm,” Wei Ying says again. He tilts his face up, back bent forward to allow the position, and blinks owlishly at Lan Zhan from below. “Kiss,” he demands.

Lan Zhan tips his chin and drops a kiss onto his lips, dry and sweet and true.

Humming with satisfaction, Wei Ying proposes, "We can start by setting up a mental bond whenever we hunt?"

"Like in the Cave?"

He leans up, taps his lips for another kiss. "Like in the Cave."

"Whenever' is somewhat impractical," Lan Zhan says, and from his voice it would be impossible to tell how successfully Wei Ying has him preoccupied.

"For jobs like this one, then." His scent is so mild where Wei Ying noses adoringly along his jaw, like cotton flowers with the faint zing of heady, clear spirits. Wei Ying wants to soak in a barrel of whatever soap Lan Zhan prefers for his laundry, roll around in a carpet of his sun-dried clothes. "And we can have, ah, reflection sessions, or suchlike, afterwards. To work on mistakes."

Lan Zhan leans back to direct an arch look at him, taking his ear out of reach from Wei Ying's adventurous lips. "Night-hunting reports? From you?" What next? he seems to insinuate. Will the sky fall and the oceans split apart?

"Reflection. Re-flec-tion," Wei Ying chides, drawing out the syllables. Truly, Lan Zhan's greatest weapon is neither Bichen or Wangji, nor his Stare of Intimidation, but his capacity for subtle, biting, hatefully well-timed judgment. And the wicked man chooses to reserve this weapon for him alone! Wei Ying can't vouch that his poor ego will be able to weather such treatment for much longer…

"Anyway, the reports I write are fantastic! Insightful, discerning, cogent, original," he ticks off his fingers. “It’s just that paper can’t contain the breadth of my intelligence. And if it's a verbal report, then I've got you beat any day.”

Lan Zhan makes a diplomatic noise of agreement that amounts, in fact, to nothing but smug dismissal. Wei Ying knows this because Lan Zhan has learnt this noise from Wei Ying himself.

"Lan Zhan!" he whines, shoving ineffectually at his knee. Feeling vengeful, he launches a tickle attack, but Lan Zhan catches him by his fingers and pulls him into a loose embrace before he can touch him. His breath comes in warm puffs against the parting of Wei Ying’s hair, and his chest trembles with laughter under Wei Ying’s cheek.

Such being the case, Wei Ying thinks, perhaps it is not so bad to be on the receiving end of Lan Zhan's greatest weapon every once in a while.
The following day is spent arranging things for the release ritual. While Lan Zhan revisits the forest to set up the spell formation, Wei Ying invites himself to Fang Changming’s study to negotiate a deal with him. As it happens, the master of the house is absent when Wei Ying arrives. Wei Ying is led to a parlour to wait, where the lady of the house graciously entertains him (or perhaps Wei Ying entertains her) until her husband’s return.

This opportunity to scavenge for more detail is simply not to be wasted. With the aid of shameless flattery and his gifted silver tongue, Wei Ying soon makes two interesting discoveries.

One, that Yue Wangshu and Lei Meifeng had taken up residence in the cottage some twenty-seven years ago when they had arrived in town in search of shelter (from who or what, even the good missus does not know). On the condition of loyal service to the Fangs, who were plagued by night vermin, they had enjoyed refuge in the wood cottage, built newly at the time by Fang Changmin’s father Fang Liwei, for a small monthly rent.

Two, that beyond Fang Changmin’s half-baked equivocation over the disappearance of the two women is indeed a rancid truth. This takes some more digging to get out of his host, and it is only after he plays what he imagines is her second-hand guilt and reassures her he will not be informing Fang Changmin of her involvement that she divulges:

Four years into their stay at Yichuan, Yue Wangshu had apparently fallen ill to some unknown disease and become so frail that she was permanently bedridden. For a year, Yue Wangshu's health had steadily deteriorated, and seeing that no treatment would take, Lei Meifeng had paid Fang Liwei the next year’s rent in advance and set off in search of a miracle cure. It had been agreed that Fang Liwei, being on close enough terms with the women, would arrange for Yue Wangshu’s care over this time.

Fang Liwei had honoured this agreement for exactly the one year. With no word from Lei Meifeng and no sign of her return, he had chosen to cut ties and sought new tenants. Needless to say, the hauntings had begun shortly afterwards, and in the proceeding two decades Fang Liwei had passed on and Fang Changmin and his wife inherited his miseries.

“You musn’t raise this issue with my husband,” the lady pleads, tense and wide-eyed. “You are a good and trustworthy man, Wei-gongzi, so I am willing to indulge your curiosity. But this is a matter of great shame for him. Even though father-in-law was certainly within his rights, my husband...he does not like that our family has a place in this business. I hope you will be tactful and not blame him for his secrecy.”

Having heard the story, Wei Ying will not be going out of his way to protect the Fangs' interests.
As far as he is concerned, the Fangs owe a debt of greed to Yue Wangshu which they have knowingly evaded for years, and it is high time they repay it. But it is easy enough to pursue that without implicating this woman. “I can’t guarantee it won’t come up,” he says, with a touch of regret, “seeing as it has a stake in how I should deal with the ghost’s resentment. Any solution not accounting for that is doomed to fail.” This is a bald-faced lie, obviously. Yue Wangshu is halfway to unemployment as the local menace, and Wei Ying has full faith in the spellwork Lan Zhan is laying out. “But on the matter of your help, rest assured my lips are sealed.”

Thankfully, perhaps too drained from the acknowledgement of her burden to argue, or perhaps ashamed by how deftly Wei Ying has picked the truth out of her, she does not press the issue any further.

Wei Ying makes short work of sorting things out with Fang Changmin, when the man makes his unsuspecting appearance. The ghost has been contained and reasoned with, and there will be no feral attacks in the near future; however, Wei Ying informs him, it refuses to be sent off until concrete evidence of Lei Meifeng’s death is found. (Here, he settles Fang Changmin with a meaningful look and pauses for a weighty silence.) Seeing as there is nothing Wei Ying or his unparalleled consultant the brilliant Hanguang-jun himself can do about the matter in good conscience, Fang Changmin is welcome to solicit the help of a more skilled exorcist, though Wei Ying hopes he will take a forsaken woman’s losses into consideration.

Ashamed and dejected, his exuberance from the morning’s review of accounts sapped out of him by Wei Ying’s nettle-prick insinuations towards his second-hand guilt, Fang Changmin answers as he only can. If Hanguang-jun himself is unable — or unwilling — to do more, then Fang Changmin does not dare pursue the matter any further. With all now revealed, nor does he want to. Twenty years of efforts have yielded Fang Changmin nothing; Wei-gongzi may speak plainly of what he wants from this wretched landowner.

And so, a period of deliberation and a lengthy stint of paperwork later, Wei Ying prances out of the Fang estate with just enough time to squeeze in a check-up at the local physician’s before lunch, having resolved things ideally. Being that the ghost may remain on the premises indefinitely, Fang Changmin has little hope of selling the plot he is frantic to be rid of. Better then that he lease it to Wei Ying (who incidentally does not mind some otherworldly company) at a fixed minimum rate for a length of five years, following which the deed is to be conveyed to Wei Ying for good. During this time, Wei Ying may do as he likes with the place. Thus Fang Changmin can extract some tangible value from his father’s land whilst also unburdening his conscience, and, as an act of goodwill, Wei Ying will additionally excuse his fees for services rendered. An agreement is settled upon, a contract drawn up and approved, and the property, for all intents and purposes, now becomes Wei Ying’s playground.

Lunch is a slow and noisy affair, had under the shade of a porch adjoining the winehouse two streets west of their lodgings. Lan Zhan has already ordered their dishes by the time Wei Ying arrives, smelling of medicine from his trip to the apothecary, and insists on hearing the doctor’s advice before anything else. (There was never any advice to be given beyond the universal physician’s glare of reproof, and Wei Ying is healing well and with negligible pain, as Lan Zhan must be aware, but Wei Ying allows this and allows him to inspect the prescribed analgesic and asks after his injuries in return, and affection bursts under his skin like the first bite into a ripe fig.)

Their chopsticks click spiritedly against each other over the shared plate of rice vermicelli, playing footsie, and Lan Zhan, who is unrelenting in his mission to get Wei Ying fat, picks out meaty, aromatic wild mushrooms from his own portion to share with Wei Ying. The first few are accepted gladly, but Wei Ying also has a side dish of river carp to get through, deep fried and bathed with a sweet and sour chili sauce, and his name would not be Wei Ying if he left any flesh on the bones.
So he fends off Lan Zhan's generosity the fifth time it approaches.

"Tsk, tsk, this won’t do at all, Wangji-didi. Be good and eat your vegetables," he says, snipping his chopsticks with mock-sternness. The sound is lost amidst the clink of fellow patrons’ utensils.

Lan Zhan’s eyebrows cant up at him derisively. He eats the mushroom, and then, with slow and pointed movements, eats a clump of shredded turnip from the broth by his elbow as well.

“I am not the one in need of more vegetables in his diet,” Lan Zhan remarks. Without moving a single muscle on his face he manages to give the impression of surveying their respective spreads of side-dishes in demonstration. He isn’t even looking at the table — his gaze is fixed on his chopsticks, which twirl assiduously through his noodles, and there is a self-satisfied dimple low on his cheek and the coy, shadowed blot at the end of his lips twists into it.

Wei Ying downs the last of his meal with the remainder of his lychee wine, sweet and cold like water from the depths of a tubewell and carrying the musky fragrance of roses. He had hoped his first taste of liquor in Yichuan would be the earthen-yellow wines the town is hailed for, but Lan Zhan’s choice is a refreshing alternative in the arid late-springtime midday.

The sun blazes down upon them from the cloudless sky, a column of heat from ground to ceiling. They retreat to the coolness of their rooms, where Lan Zhan informs Wei Ying that the boundaries around the forest have been fortified, and he has made good headway into groundwork for the ritual. They will need to scout deeper into the forest in the following two days to finish in time. The touch of his fingers where he spreads medication over Wei Ying’s back is a fickle wind that has snuck between the window-frame through the still air, there and then gone. He declines help with redressing his own wounds, working speedily, then washes his hands and joins Wei Ying where he rests at the edge of the daybed.

Along with him he brings a bamboo bowl. Yesterday's peaches roll around in its polished hollow, fist-sized pink pearls plump with ripeness. They settle when the bowl is balanced in his lap, incandescent under the wash of noon.

Unprompted, Lan Zhan begins paring a fruit into the bowl. He cuts out a wedge against the blood-red pit, then peels it out of its fuzzy jacket and offers it to Wei Ying. "Eat."

Wei Ying, who has been watching Lan Zhan's antics through creeping somnolence, blinks and asks. "What's all this about?"

The slice inches closer to Wei Ying. Sunlight catches on the hair-thin edge of the knife where it spills moisture against Lan Zhan's thumb, catches from there on his long lashes and colours them two-toned. His eyes hold the dragging wait of sixteen, eighteen, twenty years.

— From his lounging position, Wei Ying tilts into Lan Zhan’s hand. He parts his mouth, watching Lan Zhan through his lashes. The slice of peach glides home from the blade, and Lan Zhan's thumb whispers over the pillow of his lip, tacky with sugars. Juice trails down onto his chin; Lan Zhan curls a dry knuckle over it to wipe it clean. Not once does he look away.

The knife retreats, swiping through the moment, and Lan Zhan methodically cuts out another wedge. This time Wei Ying slides his hand over Lan Zhan’s before he can be fed. “You’ve been obliging me all day,” he says. Hushed tone, so he doesn’t set Lan Zhan on alert, so Lan Zhan will initiate this again tomorrow or the day after or the day ten years after. "What's it about, lovely?"

“Something is on your mind,” Lan Zhan responds. “You have been doing your utmost to avoid talking about it.” And I have been trying to make that easy for you, goes unsaid. His hand resumes
its motion under Wei Ying’s, tendons shifting, stretching forward and moving back as he peels the golden flesh from its skin. “What happened at Fang Changmin’s manor?”

*Ridiculous man*, Wei Ying thinks, filching the peeled slice from Lan Zhan and pressing it to his downturned mouth. *Giving me the grace of your ignorance, even when I can’t hide from you what I hide from myself.* He waits until Lan Zhan accepts the fruit from him, until the tip of his tongue ghosts over Wei Ying’s fingerpads in a wordless cue of encouragement, and then withdraws to sit straight and suck the juice off his fingers.

"You know how I was hoping to relieve him of the property, right," he starts.

"Mm. All went well?"

"Yes, on that end. But —." Wei Ying struggles to find the right words, unconsciously scrunching his fingers into a ball on his thigh. "I just —. Money. I hate it."

He recoils from the word 'hate'; it denotes a sentiment too heartfelt and with too many stakes for Wei Ying’s preference. And he had enjoyed a life of privilege for many years, and never hesitated to take and spend of the bounties bestowed upon him. There is something shameful and ungrateful and hypocritical about naming the feeling 'hate'.

Were it Wei Ying’s impressions of orphanhood alone, vivid as starched tapestry against the sliding screen of his childhood, he might have set it aside altogether. He might, like a sensible man, have attributed his resentments to an unfortunate meandering of his own fate, a consequence and coincidence of inhabiting the earth that was bound to fall upon some poor fellow eventually, in accordance with the traditions of reality.

But it is not about Wei Ying alone, and try as Wei Ying might to bury the fire of his heart, lay its ancient injuries to rest — too many of the tragedies that have befallen people in Wei Ying's life have been embroiled, from their earliest hours, in the matter of money. The lack of it, the want of it, the flow of it. Thrones of jade crowning rivers of gold inscribing the fates of hundreds of thousands of people. The gilded stairway to power hatching a monster out of a man. A young girl made blind and mute while navigating the labyrinth of poverty. Wen Qing, beautiful and proud Wen Qing, cowering in rags on the street, her stomach concave with emptiness. A village of castaways living on toxic scraps to survive the greed of rulers; and oh, his Ah-Yuan, his darling boy, blinking back hungry tears, stomach growling and pelting at him even when sent to sleep to stave off the gnaw of his appetite. Even now, Yue Wangshu, a noble soul left to decay for want of money, and with her the unnumbered people who must have suffered the same, who suffer the same, people like them, people whose love cradle the world from hopeless entropy.

There are too many others, and they refuse to be buried in Wei Ying's mind. And so — something like 'hate'.

A clatter brings him back to mindfulness. Lan Zhan has set the peaches aside and is patting his hands dry on a towel. "Money?" he asks. He probably thinks Wei Ying is worried about meeting his end of the bargain with Fang Changmin. He is probably also going to offer to pitch in.

*Ridiculous, wonderful man.* Wei Ying pulls him closer on the daybed, until he sits upright with his legs crossed and Wei Ying sits perpendicular to him. The rattan creaks as they shift onto a patch of bedding away from the defiant flare of noon plunging into afternoon. Lining his palms along Lan Zhan’s, interposing their fingers, he draws reassurance from him, like qi pulled from his channels into Wei Ying's own — like sustenance drawn from a sprawling lake through a lotus root. It percolates through his hands up into his chest, collecting there until it scatters through the rest of his body. Silverfish to tributaries and nutrients to petals.
He tells him what he learnt from Fang Changmin’s wife.

The night of the full moon is dry and silent, heat radiating from the sun-baked soil but never sticking to the skin. The air feels as though it has expanded, made space within space as the heavens yawn wide awake and stare at all with one hulking gimlet eye.

No leaves rustle in the woods as they slip past Lan Zhan’s barricades. The skittering of forest life is uncanny without the background murmur of trees, and Wei Ying finds himself walking faster to the once-clearing, taking larger footsteps. His blood is starting to rise, hot in his ears, and he hopes — nothing should have happened, should have been able to happen, but he hopes —.

Yue Wangshu is there when they arrive. She stands ramrod-straight in front of the ruins of her home. The lights in her hair float and meander like jellyfish stingers, and together with her ghostly luminescence transform her into a spear from legend, brandished upwards in defiance to the gods.

There is not much to say before they begin, as Yue Wangshu is a woman of few words. There are no questions to be asked either, for every preparation has been made. The array has been drawn up impeccably in Lan Zhan's hand, stretching its diameter across the breadth of the clearing. Flags stand smartly in place, emblazoned with sigils in Wei Ying's chaotic brushwork. Talismans are plastered where they are needed, on the trees skirting the clearing and trailing out like rays into the thickness of the woods.

Perhaps Wei Ying might ask why Yue Wangshu has waited so long for Lei Meifeng, when the latter had left of her own will and failed to return on the promised date. Why she had not suspected Lei Meifeng might be dead, or might have grown tired of her. Why such a powerful cultivator would submit herself to the metamorphosis brought on by years of resentment and resistance to the natural order, and insist on guarding a place that had ceased to be hers. But Wei Ying can guess at the answers, because they are etched into his own bones.

Or he might ask where Yue Wangshu's corpse was disposed of, once she had wasted away into death. But this is not a suitable question to ask a woman, and, knowing intimately what bloodless people might do with unwanted bodies, he can guess at this answer too.

They take their positions on the spell circle; Wei Ying with Chenqing to the south, Lan Zhan with Wangji to the north, and Yue Wangshu at the centre locus. Qi surges into the circle as the two begin to play, igniting its convoluted pathways. As the clearing hums and buzzes to life, the air around them kicks into motion and sets the flags loose to the wind.

The resentment, having lain dormant since Wei Ying’s intervention three nights ago, roars to the surface once more. It materialises as barbed-edged chains looped sinisterly around Yue Wangshu’s wrists and forearms, her ankles and calves and waist and neck and face. The chains stretch deep into the forest, anchoring themselves at her frequented whereabouts. Some stretch not so far, hooking themselves into the earth and timber of the sad cottage like claws into meat.

At Wei Ying’s command, and with Lan Zhan’s support, the first of the chains breaks off — the rustiest of them all, its barbs worn to nubs by friction and its length hanging limp into the obscure distance. It crumbles away into nonexistence, linkages pulverised into dust that is flung away by the sparking updraft. Immediately another chain comes jetting forward to occupy the space left behind and snakes around Yue Wangshu’s waist, an incorporeal noose to choke an incorporeal
Mercifully, perhaps, chains smother the entire area of Yue Wangshu’s face but for her eyes — and so, if she cries out in agony, Wei Ying is saved from hearing it. The accounts of nightly wailing are no longer so amusing.

Like this, shackles are broken and replaced. Each one broken is stronger, newer than the last, and eventually, the bonds of resentment imprisoning Yue Wangshu are being cut off faster than they can claim her. But Wei Ying’s energy is flagging, and Lan Zhan’s fingers bear angry abrasions from their harsh treatment on Wangji.

“Rest,” Yue Wangshu orders, when she is finally free to speak. New chains have stopped manifesting for some time now, but the ones that remain are as hard as jadeite, and send waves of shrill, metallic screeching through Wei Ying’s mind when he tackles them.

Wei Ying shakes his head.

“Listen to me,” Yue Wangshu urges. “You’ve made good progress. Any longer and you will faint.”

“I can go for a little more.”

The music from Lan Zhan’s qin reverberates lowly on a final note, before dropping into silence. “I cannot,” he says, which is possibly the most disgraceful technical truth Wei Ying has heard from him yet. “Rest, Wei Ying.”

He rests.

By the time the last of the resentment is exorcised, dawn threatens to crack over the horizon. The air has shrunk and cooled over the night and moisture glistens white like foam on the lush ocean around them, moss turning loamy and foliage turgid as a prelude to cleansing rain. Wei Ying’s vision is spotty. He stands only with the crutch of Lan Zhan’s shoulder.

Yue Wangshu herself appears emaciated by the ordeal, the stark lines of her figure having blurred and unraveled as though unable to contain her presence. With her spirit gored so savagely overnight by infections as old and abyssal as the cosmos itself — infections that have festered for two decades — this is no surprise. But the lights in her hair glow with a jubilance brighter than ever before, glimmering like stars without need for a night canvas. When she smiles at Wei Ying, her eyes swim with warmth.

“Thank you, Wei Wuxian,” she says to Wei Ying, “and thank you as well, his beloved.” Like Lan Zhan, she has a way of making it weigh heavy, of handing the words over with excess gravity. And, as with Lan Zhan, Wei Ying can not turn it away.

Wei Ying nods. “This doesn’t mean you have to go,” he croaks out through his parched throat. “I made a deal with Fang Changmin. He has no designs on the property anymore. You can stay here for as long as you like.”

She shakes her head. “I need to go,” she says, “you understand. If you’ve made a deal with him, this land must be yours now. Don’t give it up on my account.” Then, smirking, ”But know that I
Despite his exhaustion, Wei Ying laughs. “You’re a cohabitant, qianbei. These are your haunting grounds as much as they are ours,” he retorts. “Right, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Zhan shifts his hand around Wei Ying’s back, holds him tight and close in the bracket of his arm to indicate the message has been received and the offer is appreciated and the response will come later. “Indeed,” he tells Yue Wangshu.

This grants them another smile. On a face like Yue Wangshu’s, in this hybrid light, the effect is sublime. “I’ll take my leave now, I think,” she says. Her eyes burn with conviction. “Something stirs to the west.”

The stillness of the woods deepens in register, as though the forest is holding in its breath, awaiting this parting to pass before it rouses. Wei Ying bows to her as best as he can, and Lan Zhan with him.

She nods without returning the gesture. “Take care of this place,” she entreats. “And take care of each other.”

“We will,” Lan Zhan vows.

“Farewell, Yue-qianbei. Safe travels.”

“Farewell,” the ghost says. The day breaks like egg yolk across the skyline — and then Yue Wangshu is no more.

They do not speak as the birds begin their morning calls. They do not speak as sunrise lifts the fog with its long fingers. Wei Ying shudders and slumps bodily into Lan Zhan’s shoulder. There is a tangle in his throat the size of a kiwifruit, and it is barbed and tastes of rust. His eyes are wet and his lips are cracked with salt.

“Tell me she won't be alone,” he says into Lan Zhan’s robes. “Tell me she'll find Lei Meifeng.”

Lan Zhan draws out a long and tremulous breath. “She will find her,” he promises, and with his free hand guides Wei Ying’s face so he can kiss him, chaste and soft as snowmelt. “As I found you.”

Chapter End Notes

1 Yellow wine: 黃酒/huáng jiǔ (literally, yellow wine), a grain-based category of wines that are not, in fact, always yellow, despite what I appear to imply here. [back]
Wei Ying is as useful as a sack of yams when they return to the inn, half his weight supported by Lan Zhan’s upper body. Lan Zhan has accumulated a stack of correspondence that needs urgent attending to, having devoted all of his free time over the last few weeks to Wei Ying and Wei Ying’s casework, and he hasn’t the heart to keep him from it. So he naps from morning until the cusp of sunset, rising only to down a mild stew of lamb and rice Lan Zhan has ordered for him in between.

Despite his weariness, Wei Ying’s sleep is unrestful — plagued by phantom aches staking through his limbs, by the sensation of gauzy blackness winding around his eyes like loving hands and around his mouth like a bit to toss his head back until he *looked*; *look*, Wei Wuxian, as they build their empire on the graves of the Jiangs, and *look*, as they scatter the ground dust of your people as blowballs to the sky, and watch, and see, and stay here with us in this lonely lightless place where you will never be alone, and we can slit their throats and drink from them and dance on coals over their ashes.

— Whiling away in bed with the voices of the deceased for company is not Wei Ying’s idea of a good time. He takes a bath and combs his rat-nested hair to some semblance of order, then crouches down beside Lan Zhan at the desk by the tea stove. Raising Lan Zhan’s free hand and planting a quick kiss along the webbing of his veins, he advises him to not wait on Wei Ying for dinner.

“I’m going outside,” he says. “Need some fresh air.”

Lan Zhan glances up from where he is taking notes on the manuscript he has recently finished reading. “You’re tired,” he says, slipping his hand into Wei Ying’s. “Stay. I’ll open the windows. Or work elsewhere, if you need.”

“I don’t need that,” Wei Ying says, huffing fondly. “I’m not tired anymore; just groggy. A walk will help better than anything else. Make sure you eat.”

Lan Zhan nods, tightens his grip briefly around Wei Ying’s fingers and then lets go. “Be back before—”

“— Be back before your bedtime, got it, Lan er-gongzi,” Wei Ying laughs. He pecks his cheek and dashes out.

As though the soggy morning had been nothing but an illusion, the day has warmed to crispness under sunshine. Evening simmers with low but constant heat, clouding Wei Ying’s mind while he walks further and further away from the centre of town. He finds himself, eventually, back to the fork of the track that leads into the woods, staring at one of the warning signs propped up along the
way. Keep Out, Danger Ahead, it reads. The wood is half-eaten by termites and damp at the centre from the morning shower. It slouches pathetically towards the ground with the weight of being leant on by too many callous passers-by.

Wei Ying leans on it as well, and takes in the scent of soil gone loose with rain and then sunlight, and of evergreen leaves sweating their musk into the atmosphere. The chirping crickets and chirruping bats make for much better companionship than the voices in his head. *Keep Out, Danger Ahead.* The forest Yue Wangshu calls home had once been a sanctified place of cypress and petrichor. Nothing like the Burial Mounds, with its topography of scorched flesh that sublimated over the gums and through the pores, its monuments of bone picked clean. She would not have known the coppery, tallowy, burnt-hair taste of grudges piled like landfill into hungry maws, or what it was to move through air that had condensed into sludge. And yet, her shackles — how it had hurt to wrap his grip around them! How it had torn the tissue of his mind to wrench them loose, dragged over his nerves until they crackled and frayed! It had called forth an intimate pain from the edges of Wei Ying’s being, rust flaked from the creaking wheel of memory mingling with the rust from Yue Wangshu’s chains.

There had been more, still, alongside the pain of being bound by resentment: the absence of pain, or rather, the absence of anything altogether, as his stomach dropped out and his blood frosted through. Echoes of the feeling from when he dropped into a gorge and watched Lan Zhan diminish above him, when he watched the world split in two on that achingly beautiful face and reached out to wipe away his tears, to say, *don’t mourn this, not you,* and found that his arm wouldn’t span the distance. Or the feeling from when he watched Song Zichen walk out of a ghost city, with two eyes that weren’t his own and two holes drilled through his scalp and a tongue butchered at the root, carrying in trembling hands the swept up shards of his heart’s heart. Brought into Wei Ying’s consciousness, Yue Wangshu's loss had been felt as an old friend.

*I would not wish such a fate on anyone,* Wei Ying had told Yue Wangshu. At the time, blissfully fooled by his own misdirection, he had not fully realised what that might mean. But now, as he stands on the path leading into the forest, he understands that — yes, that is very much what it had all been about: a wish that could be traced back to bubbly doodles on the frame of his teenage cot. Underlying last night’s efforts had been a frantic need to resist fate. For if fate would have happiness be only a trick of the seasons for them — for Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian, for Yue Wangshu and Lei Meifeng, for Song Zichen and Xiao Xingchen — then such a fate had to be resisted.

Despair encroaches as surely and perniciously as death. Lan Zhan’s promise had ultimately been a transient comfort — what power does he have against something so profound? The chances that Yue Wangshu will be able to track down Lei Meifeng’s remains are slim to none. As for the possibility that Lei Meifeng is not dead, but somehow biding her time as an untethered spirit — Wei Ying has never had much faith in miracles.

But Wei Ying also knows of the circumstances behind Yue Wangshu’s efforts. He knows that time and fortune have been stingy with the two women, and knows, through a night of shared torture, what Yue Wangshu has borne to steal a fairer portion of each.

If fate would have happiness be only a trick of the seasons for them, then such a fate *must* be resisted. It doesn't take faith in miracles to wish for them. Wei Ying uncurls the sag of his spine, straightens and inhales and exhales, calibrating his breaths to the lulling cadence of the woods. Silently, he makes a prayer for Yue Wangshu and Lei Meifeng, and for Lan Zhan — and for himself, too.
As warm wind from a bellows chases out soot and scuttling insects, the walk back to their rooms skims off Wei Ying’s oppressive musings. Lan Zhan’s work has been stacked away into fussy piles on the desk. His pen stands clean in its groove by the inkwell, the moisture residue on its whiskers incandescing under lamplight.

From over at the folding screen, the gurgle of water being ladled over skin oscillates. This inn does not offer the privacy of a separate bathing chamber; instead, a tub has been issued behind the partition, with a washbasin and sparse accoutrements laid out on dressers adjacent to the wall. Behind the translucent panorama of an orchard, Lan Zhan’s silhouette reclines against the edge of the tub, lit by flames. The ladle is raised again; Lan Zhan’s outstretched arm traces a branch that bows under the weight of pear blossoms, their petals drawn apart by mauve-dipped anthers. There on the supple curve of his shoulder perches a kingfisher, poised to swoop into the pond below. Its one eye, having kept watch over this scene for the past few days, winks knowingly at Wei Ying.

The stream of water from Lan Zhan’s arm into the tub splashes Wei Ying out of his trance. “Back?” Lan Zhan asks.

“Uh-huh,” Wei Ying says. The sound breaks into a high pitch on the second syllable, as though it’s caught on the stutterings of some callow youth.

“The proprietor has set a tray aside for you downstairs, if you want it.” Lan Zhan’s voice is quieter in the evening, projected in private tones in the grungy, truncated hours before bed. Lower in its timbre unlike the spring-waters clarity of daytime — as though the polished stone bottom of it has been cushioned with deerskin and fox fur to form a sanctuary.

“It’s fine,” Wei Ying says, tearing his gaze away from the view so he can don his sleeping robes. “I had some flatbread while I was out.”

Lan Zhan hums cryptically. As Wei Ying hops into woollen pants, skidding one foot in and then the other, he hears the sluicing of water that signals Lan Zhan is done washing, catches a shadowy trace of Lan Zhan’s form unfurling to its full graceful height before the flap of towels obscures anything else. He slides the windows halfway shut and sprawls over their shared bed atop the covers, expecting Lan Zhan to join him soon — except that he waits, and waits, and though the strange scrooping and sliding of fabric has long ended, Lan Zhan remains behind the screen with tinkering noises to punctuate his movements.

“Lan Zhan,” he calls, sitting up. “Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” comes the distracted answer. Another dull clack as something is put down, a quick crinkle as something is picked up.

Frowning, Wei Ying springs off the mattress and stalks over to the partition. Burgeoning in this corner of the room is the fragrance of osmanthus flowers and smoky cedarwood incense, and sure enough, once he pokes his head around the frame, he finds the bathwater scattered with dried petals. “Lan Zhan,” he says, raising his head, “what are you— you...you...”

Lan Zhan turns around, a fine, thin brush in hand, and raises a meticulously groomed eyebrow. “I?”

“Uh,” says Wei Ying.

He looks...he looks...so different! Gone are the thick-knitted evening robes Lan Zhan wears to keep...
the cold at bay after his baths, with their narrow hems and whitework embroidery. Tonight, Lan Zhan is draped in a snowy white guipure overrobe, its gossamer meshwork blooming and retreating in mimicry of the celestial constellations. Beneath it, a voluminous chiffon underrobe, dyed the blue-violet of bellflowers swollen around fog-drenched rock. A layered waistband cinches the cloth tight around his waist, malachite on white on crocus purple, the edges plated gold under candlelight. From its stiff, raised collar to Lan Zhan’s sternum, the front of the robe is clasped together by a prissy triplet of ribbons, revealing a sliver of amber-washed skin underneath.

Wei Ying gapes at the man swathed in fabric before him. He gulps down a mouthful of steam and incense smoke, and tries again to think through the haze of confused rapture. “Lan Zhan, you…”

“Yes, me,” Lan Zhan encourages, in a distracted sort of way that doesn’t manage to mask his glee as well as he thinks it does. His attention is re-focussed on the looking glass before him, where his eyes dart to watch Wei Ying quizzically while he applies stained paper to his lips.

There are lines tracing the sweep of his eyelids, painted in shimmery cobalt.

“You took this seriously?” Wei Ying gets out at last. “From back then?”

Setting the paper down to dry on a tray that slides out of his cosmetics box — he has a cosmetics box?! — Lan Zhan says, “You sounded serious enough about it, back then.” He turns around and folds his hands behind his back, cocking his head to the side in mock-coquetry. A lock of hair, still ringed with dampness from his bath, slides away from where it is tucked behind his ear to fall onto his shoulder. “You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like it?” Wei Ying parrots incredulously. This is obviously some sort of mirage, and Wei Ying’s gaze doesn’t know where to settle. Lower, on the clean, piling drop of fabric from Lan Zhan’s clothes that accentuates his natural height? Higher up, on his bare forehead, glimmering as though it’s been rubbed with gold dust?

On the indigo-black fall of his hair as it curls dry? Boldly on his lips, tinted pumpkin red, or on the smudge of rouge atop his cheekbones that flushes them begonia pink? Perhaps on his skin reflecting the polished insides of a clamshell, bonfire heat spilling over it? “I don’t like it? Lan Zhan, you—” Wei Ying scrubs a hand through his own hair, confounded by how he has managed to woo himself this impossible man. “—Come here?” he finishes weakly.

Lan Zhan gives a minute shake of his head, the curliee of his mouth tipping upwards. “You come here.”

Wei Ying goes obediently, and when he is standing in front of him Lan Zhan turns to the dresser and says, “Close your eyes.” So Wei Ying closes them, holds still as he is instructed to and bears the downy graze of Lan Zhan’s breath on his cheeks while bright red flourishes are painted to extend the corners of his lash lines. Then comes the blow of cool air over his lids to hasten the ink’s setting. He blinks right into Lan Zhan’s scrupulous assessment and remarks, “I thought we agreed I’d have to wear the rouge, too.”

“We did,” Lan Zhan says, leaning back when he is satisfied with his art and putting the brush aside. He tugs Wei Ying into him by the flank, so that both of their weights are balanced on the dresser, and the dark mica of his eyes frolics with victory to the tempo of candle flames. “Well-remembered.”

The words tickle on Wei Ying’s lips. Their noses tickle where they touch, tip to bridge. Wei Ying’s entire body is tickling under the surface, thrumming with the jittery energy of damselfly wingbeats; it’s stretching its fibres out of tension where Lan Zhan’s hands coax at his waist and the
Lan Zhan waits until Wei Ying looks at him, until he exhales the last of the air that’s been stagnating within him and breathes in Lan Zhan’s scent. Then his hands come up to cradle the back of his head, thumbs lining up with his jaw to hold him in place while Lan Zhan kisses him, firm and lingering, once and twice and thrice and again to leave interlocking stains over Wei Ying’s mouth. Wei Ying’s head is tipped back when he presses in for more, a playful chastisement, and a thumb thick with叫uses wipes off a smudge from Wei Ying’s chin.

“Good enough,” Lan Zhan decides. The rouge is a contained mess around his mouth, smeared into the umbra of his lower lip and the highlight of his upper. He looks like he’s eaten something with too many hot peppers in it and it’s left the skin around his mouth inflamed — and that comical image is all it takes for the enchantment to lax its hold on Wei Ying. He laughs, and kisses Lan Zhan fervently, messily, until the ruin is unsalvageable on both of them, and he laughs while they’re kissing, and when they’re both sufficiently breathless he snatches up Lan Zhan’s rouge paper and smushes the dye onto his lips for another round. “That’ll do,” he says, flinging it in the general direction behind them and hooking his arms around Lan Zhan’s neck. He tosses his head back, smacks his lips obnoxiously for effect, and preens imperiously. “Now I’m better-suited to being such a handsome lord’s bed companion, don’t you think?”

Lan Zhan straightens himself against the dresser and steadies Wei Ying with a hand on his back. “Foolish,” he says, stealing another kiss.

“Yes,” Wei Ying agrees unrepentantly. “I’m the most foolish man on earth, that I won’t deny. But look who I have in my arms? I must be the luckiest man on earth, too.”

Lan Zhan’s hand squeezes affectionately around his waist. “Indeed,” he says. The corners of his eyes lift up, crinkle with joy, and whatever crushed gemstone is mixed into his eye paint must beam as it catches the light, because Wei Ying feels a little blinded.

“And?” Wei Ying insists, bumping up against Lan Zhan’s chest. “Will I be getting luckier tonight?”

“Take me to bed,” Lan Zhan says. “Then we will see.”

Somehow, despite the not insignificant heft and girth of Lan Zhan’s outfit, they manage to get to the bed with limited stumbling. Thereafter follows an impassioned bout of wrestling — it’s really best not to pretend it’s anything else, Wei Ying thinks, because for all that resplendence, getting Lan Zhan out of his clothes is like unwinding gnarled ropework.

“What even is the point of all this fabric,” Wei Ying bemoans, as he pulls aside one layer of chiffon to find another, denser layer of chiffon underneath. Silk coils and folds wilfully every which way between and around Lan Zhan’s legs. “Where did you find a tailor willing to put it all together in such short order? Isn’t this too extravagant? Isn’t it against the principles of the Lan Sect, Hanguang-jun?!”

Lan Zhan has decided that tussling about to undress is beneath his dignity. In his supine, half-unkempt state, he now watches Wei Ying play the harrowed valet and says, “You weren’t complaining when you first saw it.”
He allows Wei Ying to flounder about for a while longer, entertained by his misery, and then rises and rolls them over smoothly. “Alright, Wei Ying,” he says, laughter running high in his voice. He leans close and soothes Wei Ying’s indignance and complaints away with kisses, rubs the tips of their noses together and leaves pearl dust there. “Alright. Let me.”

Lan Zhan disrobes slowly and fastidiously, his dexterous motions flirting at eroticism. He folds his layers into a sensible pile on the ottoman by the foot of the bed. Wei Ying lets him get away with this, because Lan Zhan also makes the sage decision to keep the guipure robe on. He keeps it on while he spills fire over Wei Ying’s chest and down his navel, and then when he kisses worshipful trails from the arches of Wei Ying’s feet up to the recesses of his hip bones, and also when he looks up at him from between the valley made by Wei Ying’s legs and his lips curl with mischief and his lashes flutter with purpose on powdered cheeks, and he teasingly invites Wei-gege to reposition himself on the cushions spared for his waist and back.

Heat and longing swarm heavy in Wei Ying’s gut as he is inundated with kisses. The candles give out and Lan Zhan ignites new ones with an unseeing flick of his wrist, his eyes for Wei Ying alone. Wei Ying luxuriates in the attention. That’s it; that’s perfect, keep going darling.

When Lan Zhan is chest to chest with him, printing sweet, frenzied kisses into the dips and cords of his neck and over the swell of his breastbone, when Wei Ying is so tangled up with him that Lan Zhan’s hair pours over his shoulders, no longer a combed cascade but the unruly tide itself, when lace threatens to tear under the twist of his fingers and their legs twist so there are no ends and beginnings between them — it feels, finally, as though their hearts will break through their bone prisons to merge into one. More, he pleads Lan Zhan through the haze of nutty oil and osmanthus. More, through first the thunderstorm and wildfire of pleasure and then the friction of timber against his palm and last the zing through his hamstrings as he asks almost intoxicatedly for more, please, and closer, and stronger — so he can preserve this feeling, have its echoes harmonising through his rib cage and know that their souls have inoculated each other so fundamentally that no force or distance could ever pull them apart.

With the candles snuffed out again, there is only the cold blue moonlight to guide their movements. It sifts through rice-paper windows to puddle like rainwater on their bed, and their fevered evening dies down to a half-lucid trekking of each other’s bodies. Touch dwelling over the landmarks that map their orbits on each other; lips asking pardon for bruises old and new. Lan Zhan traces the mounds and dips of Wei Ying’s shoulders, fingers slipping where the skin is still misty from the pass of a washcloth. His nails catch on a strand of hair that sticks to Wei Ying’s collarbone; he lifts it and tucks it behind Wei Ying’s ear as though it’s a rosebud.

Wei Ying’s grip tightens with resolve where it rests on a bicep. “Lan Zhan,” he starts, staring at the fuzzy line dividing his overcast knuckles from moon-stained fingers. He contracts and relaxes the bangle of his hand, watches the chiaroscuro slip and slide like bedrock under a stream. He thinks about the uneasy want that has snared and shredded through him since last night and before that, clamouring, clamouring. "What do you think of marriage?"

Lan Zhan’s unhurried motions slow to a stop. He shifts his head along the pillows to shrink the space between them, so that Wei Ying has no choice but to meet his gaze. Flecks of gem dust linger around his lids like stone-ground chips from the starry river above, left there after he had wiped his face clean. Wei Ying can’t look away.
"What aspect of it?" Lan Zhan asks, a dip worrying at his brow.

“For yourself,” Wei Ying clarifies. “Will you ever marry?”

Hot air rises on a drift outside and knocks against the wind chime dangling from the eaves, wringing out an inquisitive tinkle. “I have you.”

“Yes, you do.”

After a protracted silence, marked only by the incessant mating sounds of crickets outside and the ebbing clinks of the chime, Lan Zhan says, “Do you want to marry, Wei Ying?”

“...Yes,” Wei Ying admits, his thumb pendulating along an ambitious slash from the whip. The edges are serrated from uneven healing. “And no.”

Lan Zhan’s forearm falls onto the sheets below. He fishes around for Wei Ying’s spare hand, weaves their fingers together like wicker and pumps their palms in a gentle deliverance of courage. “Tell me.”

Wei Ying chews his lip, sucks on his own tongue as he configures the words into order. “I do, because with each passing day I want more and more to — to put a seal on what we have, have something greater than ourselves be witness to it,” he says, watching the shape of Lan Zhan’s eyes for the tells of reassurance. “And I don’t, because I don’t want that witness to be — custom. I don’t want what a marriage should be to warp what already is between us.”

Having lived the better part of his life without a mother or father, the politics of marriage have never held much appeal for Wei Ying. The children of servants offer no honour and rogue children have no claim to posterity; thus, there would be few families for Wei Ying to marry into and none for his love to marry into through him. Wei Ying, who has lived his whole life chasing the thrill of freedom, could easily pursue a marriage of freedom as well.

But the heavens’ matchmaking is the stuff of irony. Here lies his love, the Second Jade of the Lan Sect — the former Chief Cultivator himself. His love has been the sole parent to their child for sixteen lonely years. His love is a man of noble blood and noble character — and if he should want the hallmarks of nobility from Wei Ying as well, how is Wei Ying to refuse him?

“It’s true you’ve never been one for tradition,” Lan Zhan says, sounding unperturbed.

If he had any idea of the turmoil Wei Ying is going through...! Wei Ying centres himself with a deep breath, nipping his nerves into composure. It’s crucial that he get this out as neutrally as possible. “But you have.” Tapping his fingers where they are locked into the hulls between Lan Zhan’s knuckles, he repeats his question. “That’s why I’m asking you. Do you want to marry?”

“Some time ago, you made a sorry attempt to ask for my hand as your cultivation partner as well,” Lan Zhan observes. “This has been weighing on your mind.”

Of course it has! Granted the possibility of articulating their future together in the most intimate terms known to man — how could it not?! Now, reminded so astringently of the destiny that may await them — how could it not?! It’s only that Wei Ying is all too aware that structure and process are just as difficult to stomach — that the bonds of loyalty bite into flesh and the spittle from hearsay flays skin open.

He tackles the part of the comment that’s easiest to go for. “Excuse me, ‘a sorry attempt’? Oh, yes, Lan Zhan, please, just go on ahead and demolish my confidence, why don’t you!”
“Impossible,” Lan Zhan dismisses. He pauses, cants an eyebrow. “You won’t ask me again?”

“I —.” Wei Ying frowns. “I said that without thinking at the time. I’ve thought it over and…”

“Oh, I see,” Lan Zhan says facetiously, “you’ve lost interest.”

“No!” he exclaims. “No, it’s. Being cultivation partners involves...systems; conventions. As with marriage. People would naturally assume that I’m —. Any doubts about what path I cultivate would be dispelled, and you’d be implicated by association…”

Lan Zhan waits until he is sure Wei Ying won’t explain any further. “The matter of my image seems to cause you great anxiety,” he says. Upon Wei Ying’s sheepish lack of response, he adds. “You have brought it up, time and time again, recently and in the past.”

“Is it not reasonable?” Wei Ying sulks.

“Is it?” Lan Zhan challenges. “Wei Ying. So long as I swear myself to you, people will make accusations. It does not matter how I do it. It does not matter what we do, or where we do it — the wind will blow by; word will travel and gossip will thrive. Would you cast me aside, then, to keep my reputation pristine?” Would you again?

Wei Ying swallows, stares at where their hands are joined together and feels the skin around his eyes and mouth tighten. Skreet-skreet-skreet-ching-ling, says the night.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I have told you that my home is with you, and you have been kind to offer me a place in your own,” Lan Zhan says gently. “You don’t have to give me any ceremony. I know where we stand with each other.” He brings their hands up to his lips and kisses each of Wei Ying’s spindly fingers. “If marriage or a sanctioned partnership are things you want, if they will bring you peace—— and I think you do, and they will, he hints, “— then private or public, however you want it, we will have it.” He urges Wei Ying’s chin upwards, so he will look at Lan Zhan again and find security in the depths of his adoring eyes. “But to have it like so, or like so — neither for my sake.”

The words, chosen with care and spoken with eloquence, sink in as surely Lan Zhan’s touch consoles him. What he wants, and however he wants it. Given not out of indulgence but in recognition that their needs differ in this respect, following the divergence of their pasts. And not merely given, either, pressed into form with a mooncake mould — but tempered and tweaked by hand upon request, nimbly evading any sticky trappings.

Wei Ying’s gaze rests on the fairer streak of skin normally hidden under Lan Zhan’s browband. Now it looks as though a moonray has seared its grace there, tattooed a ribbon of light across his temples to mark his virtue. “If we did it,” Wei Ying says, touch hovering over that mark, “if we swore ourselves to each other, with the heavens and our ancestors as witnesses. This would be mine too, wouldn’t it?”

A tiny, enigmatic smile dimples the contours of Lan Zhan’s mouth, likely at Wei Ying’s expense. Wei Ying can almost taste the ripe loquat sweetness of it. “Sleep now,” Lan Zhan says, without any authority. “The hour is late.”
Humidity from the approaching summer permeates through the air in the days that follow, the brittle heat of mid-Spring months giving way to a balmy warmth that leaves limbs languorous and cheeks glowing. In the forest, dry leaves don their glossy coats once more. Bark flakes to the ground to bare fresh skin to the coming showers, and roots stretch their toes into the moistening soil. Life warbles through the treetops, in the understory; wild orchids wave on their stalks and flash their merry colours.

Soil, recently soaked with water and turned for sowing, passes over Wei Ying’s hands like breadcrumbs. It compacts under his palms like wet flour. Loamy perfume rises from the sprawling garden beds, sumptuous brown earth primed for the warm season. Wei Ying plants his pet projects in neat-ish rows, the requisite seeds and bulbs having been obtained through his fox-eyed friend’s expansive trade network: mallow and aubergine; hairy gourd and winter melon next to stakes. Bitter melon and cucumbers trailing the lattice for Lan Zhan, and of course, pickling radishes and pepper trees for Wei Ying. *I have a lot of experience growing radishes,* he’d told Lan Zhan. *Is that so?* Lan Zhan had said, drying their porcelain into neat piles, *You, or Wen Qionglin?* And Wei Ying had given him a soapy pat and said, *Oh, you know.*

Further out front, Wei Ying will pad the crater Yue Wangshu had carved into stone with mud from the beds of the brooks that slither through their grove; overflow the depression with silty water. He will plant lotuses there, then, for their leaves and roots and seeds, and for their petals to saturate Lan Zhan’s hair oil. And in the trench he has dug to frame it, calf-deep in mud, Wei Ying will plant taro and watercress.

There are other things he had hoped to grow — his previous life toiling the fields (*ha!* had hardly been the romance he’d dreamed it would be, and with money on his hands and in Lan Zhan’s pockets, this could be a shining opportunity to nurture life out of sleeping soils. But Lan Zhan — and who would have thought *he’d* be such an expert?! — had advised him to moderate his ambitions for this first venture. At any rate, they were beginning rather late into the season. Perhaps more could be done when autumn would bestow its visit.

Lan Zhan emerges from the shed towards the back of the house carrying a stack of seedling pots. Unlike Wei Ying, Lan Zhan’s form repels dirt intrinsically — even brought down from his windy peaks to the human squalor below, with his skin aureate from labour under the fire of the sun, he has the air of an immortal. His overalls are spotless, off-white honeycomb-weave held back by ribbons to allow easy movement. *These are for peony,* he lists, pointing to the tallest stack when Wei Ying asks. *These for azalea, these for lilac, those for camellia.*

“And these,” Wei Ying says, tapping his grime-encrusted nails against another stack. Abstractly, he wonders whether his nails will be stained ruddy with pigment when the dirt cakes off after today’s work. “You’ll plant orchids in these? For me?”

Lan Zhan smiles at him, with the corners of his eyes. “For you,” he acquiesces, spooning soil from his wheelbarrow into a lined pot, and from the slant of his lips Wei Ying knows that their garden will be choked with orchids in no time, a feast inviting winged critters to the moss carpet of their clearing.

“You might have to wait up to three years, if you want to see some of these bloom,” he observes.
“Then I will have to be here three years from now, won’t I?” Lan Zhan replies.

Wei Ying grins and claps him on the back, spoiling the once-immaculate cloth stretched taut across it. “That’s my Lan Zhan,” he says. “I give it a year before either of us grow weary of domestic life. But no matter what, we can’t miss out on the flowers.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan agrees.

“We’ll have to find someone to take care of the place when we’re gone. Can’t let all our diligence go to waste.”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan says, tipping a seed from his palm into its cozy earth nest. “Wei Ying. You can stop fondling me now.”

Wei Ying’s hand pauses where it is appreciating the flex of Lan Zhan’s dorsal muscles. “Rude!” he blusters. “Here I am giving you a massage to ease the strain on your back, and you accuse me of such dastardly ulterior motives?!”

Lan Zhan pauses in his work. “The strain, if any, is on my thighs,” he notes drily.

Wei Ying stares at the way his trousers bunch at the knees and pelvis from squatting. “Good point,” he concedes. “Does that mean I have permission to grope your thighs?”

“You’ve been doing enough groping as of late, don’t you think?” Lan Zhan retorts.

“And you came out with excellent lumbar health and no sprains for it, despite all the exercise you’ve done,” Wei Ying says, “which only substantiates my case.”

By ‘exercise’, Wei Ying is referring to their activity over the last three months and a half: red palms and faces, sweat running grooves through skin; sleeves rolled up tight enough to leave rings through their elbow perforations. Each day of reconstruction would ride on the waft of fresh-cut wood, and end with their clothes plastered to their bodies, plastered with sawdust and tile chips and wet clay. There would be loose threads from fabric clippings to pick out from underfoot, and splinters to heal on rubbery hands from weaving reeds and bamboo. There would be crumbling paint to wash off from chins and foreheads, littered there by fingers gone astray. And on their days off: skin to pamper, nails to treat, hair to lacquer. Bodies to massage, too — or grope, as those of less romantic inclinations might call it — and, most importantly, more than enough furniture shopping for two lifetimes.

After some bickering over the finances surrounding their cohabitation-to-be, it had been agreed that Wei Ying alone might be responsible for the rent only if Lan Zhan might fund the task of rebuilding and furnishing the house. But neither of them are do well at sitting like good ducks when there is work to be done. In the end, both had lent active, energetic hands to the labour, from demolition to decor. The least of it had been the landscaping: raking away leaf litter, pruning out the thriving colony of weeds and shrubbery, and then digging the trench around the pool space like a giant worm tract. They had been advised to chop down a portion of the overhanging trees as well — to open the clearing to light from the sky, and because leaf fall would be an undeniable nuisance once summer passed, choking the garden beds and clogging up the gutters — but Wei Ying was vehemently against it. He had chosen this space for his own with the intent to restore, he argued, not to destroy.

Then there had been the matter of laying down new foundations, erecting a sturdier frame and moulding a house around it. They had chosen to preserve the structure of the original cottage: two storeys, open-plan. In the storey below, a living space, with a well-stocked kitchen and a room for
meals. A room for sitting with a tea table by a hearth, and at the very back, another for prayer and solitude, with Yue Wangshu’s cabinet and zheng retained in custody. Doors to the right sliding open to a porch with a hammock for Wei Ying to drink his wine in on chilly nights under the cataracted watch of the moon, and blanket-laden chairs for Lan Zhan to progress on his needlework through the draining of morning into the forest floor.

Under the stairs leading to the second storey, the linen. In the loft above, their bedroom and a study, closets and shelves and Lan Zhan’s loom and Wei Ying’s studio, all fitted together so closely that they would bump hips when moving together. A balcony opening into the westerly wind above the porch, facing the wall of evergreens beyond that teems with the chatter of shrikes. And necessarily, by the well, an annex, split between the outhouse and bath chamber.

Other than the comforts needed to truly make a home out of their abode, they have not added on much else of their own design. The only exceptions may be said to be the stalls Wei Ying has put together for Yinfeng and Xiao Pingguo, which adjoin the shed out back that doubles as a workspace. This latter extension had been a matter of prudence above all else: gardening demands storage space and Wei Ying’s slovenly work habits demand a playroom, lest he drive Lan Zhan out due to irreconcilable differences.

— The point is that Wei Ying has done his best to preserve things as Yue Wangshu would remember them, in hopes that her next return to the forest will be a homecoming rather than a visitation. Visitations, as such, should be reserved for occasions like housewarming ceremonies, to foster cordial relations with the handful of intrepid (and inquisitive) townsfolk who have sent greetings to the peculiar men settling in on dubiously-exorcised grounds. So dubiously, in fact, that even now the forest seldom receives guests — and that is without mentioning the fences and warning posts lining the path to the house, which Wei Ying has conveniently forgotten to take down. Finding a contractor willing to send labourers their way had been nothing less than a test of resolve, and though Lan Zhan has kept mum about it, Wei Ying knows he’d had to spend an exorbitant amount. At this rate, Wei Ying suspects their sensor wards may never come to use.

Because the universe is determined to prove Wei Ying wrong at every instance, it is precisely as he is pondering this that the wards signal a new arrival. Two of them, in fact; both cultivators of some skill, neither hostile. Wei Ying, who has already begun to feel the first itchings of boredom, wipes his hands on his overalls and stretches this way and that, craning his neck to better see who is coming down the track.

Two figures appear in the distance as dots of colour: white gold and rose gold, magnifying into blobs and then into human outlines. Both of above-average height, one slim and one broad. As they take on more distinct appearances, Wei Ying catches the seesawing rhythm of agonisingly familiar conversation, a soft and measured voice buffering a sharp and swaggering one. He spots two proud stripes of blue stirring around one of their heads. Thrill and elation bubble through his chest instantly. “Lan Zhan!” he exclaims, grabbing him by the shoulder, “Lan Zhan, look! Look who it is!”

Lan Zhan lifts his head, glances at the figures in passing and rises from his crouch in a fluid, unhurried motion. He lifts the pail of water next to the wheelbarrow and catches Wei Ying by the upper arm just as he is about to rush ahead to greet their guests. “Wash your hands,” he says, with endeared laughter flickering in his eyes. “They aren’t going anywhere.”

“Your bucket and soap aren’t going anywhere either,” Wei Ying argues, for the sake of it. “He’ll survive; I’ve touched him with grubby hands before. I’ve planted him in the ground like a sapling, Lan Zhan, you know this!” But he washes his hands nonetheless, scrubs them well until they glisten pink so there are no crescents of dirt under his nails to foul virgin robes, and he dries them
His Ah-Yuan has changed in two years.

He remains the same in all the important ways: his eyes still glaze over when they recognise him, and his pearly whites still push through when he livens the air with his smile. His baby dimples still burrow into his gentle, malleable face, pressed there by Wei Ying’s enraptured fingers when Wen Qing would charge him with babysitting. His brows still hold all the compassion he’s learnt at Lan Zhan’s knee, and all the equanimity at Lan Xichen’s.

But he is also taller now, by just a little less than an inch. [1] His face is sharper around the jaw when he turns to talk to ‘Jin-zongzhu’ beside him, and the ornament that catches the daylight atop his head is not the silver hairpin of the Lan fashion, but a tall, flared piece in gold, set with pearls. It contrasts starkly with the paleness of his clothes, and when he allows Wei Ying to crush him into his chest (earning the both of them an wide-eyed look of stupefaction from Jin Ling, who stands at a distance with his arms hanging awkwardly by his sides), Wei Ying almost fears he’ll get a prong through the nostril for his trouble.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, breathless in his exhilaration. He shifts his fingers around Sizhui’s shoulders, grasping him more crushingly than he means to.

“We heard about two cultivators taking up residence in the forest despite some ghost trouble, so we thought we’d extend our greetings as colleagues, maybe offer some help while we were in town,” Sizhui murmurs, a hushed, but fierce jubilance welling past his initial shock. He sags into Wei Ying’s grip and passes his hand over his back a few times. “Who would have thought we’d meet you here, too? What a happy coincidence!”

“Coincidence indeed!” Wei Ying laughs, pulling away to give Sizhui a chance to breathe. “I live here! I’m the one you’ve come to see!”

Sizhui blinks at him rapidly, several times in succession. “You bought—”

“You bought a house?!” Jin Ling, until now observing their exchange through a circumspect eye, blurts out. “With whose money?” he demands.

“Well,” says Wei Ying, “The house itself, technically with Lan Zhan’s.”

“You’re moving in together?!” Jin Ling cries, so loud that the birds roosting in the trees overhead disperse with offended squawks.

Wei Ying winces. “Now, now, there’s no need to get so excited. Jin Ling?” he beckons, spreading his arms wide open. Sizhui, ever the dependable one, gives Jin Ling a cheerful nod of assurance, even as it appears that he is grappling with this new information.

Jin Ling gapes as he understands what they expect of him. “You — me — no!” he manages. “I’m eighteen, not a kid, you weirdo. Neither of us should be hugging each other — out in public, on top of that — neither of you, for that matter.” His gaze flicking flicks to Sizhui in accusation, as though he is somehow the traitor in this situation. Then, apparently remembering something, he straightens to his full height to puff himself up like a blowfish. “And you’ll address me as ‘Jin-zongzhu’ from
now on, thank you.”

Wei Ying rolls his eyes and drawls, “Yes, of course, as you wish, Jin-zongzhu.” He heaves an exaggerated sigh and shakes his head, dropping his arms with a snap. “It’s truly as they say. Nothing corrupts as power does.” Discreetly, he rakes his eyes over Jin Ling, taking note of his health and all that these two years have brought his nephew — strength in the breadth of his shoulders and chest, and experience in his face and hands that are sunburnt from travel, and character in the way his chin tilts with none of that old artifice, because his own skin has finally fit him — and clucks with forlorn disapproval. “So many times your Wei-shishu has saved your life. I even took a stab through the stomach for you — nay, from you! And now that you’re a sect leader you won’t even let me embrace you. A pity; such a pity—”

“Are you done?” Jin Ling cuts in, with a supercilious sneer for impact. He barges past the incident at the Carp Tower as confidently as Jiang Cheng had his own at the Burial Mounds. “Every time you open your mouth, nonsense comes out of it. Who is ‘my’ Wei-shishu? Disgusting.” But for all his scorn, pink rides high on his cheeks, and he hobbles close enough for Wei Ying to drag him into a hug anyway. He allows it to last for no more than a moment, holding himself aggressively rigid as though he is a jammed-together puzzle complex, before he shoves Wei Ying away and straightens some nonexistent wrinkle on his robes. Satisfied with his inspection, he clears his throat and crosses his arms over his chest, refusing to say another word.

Wei Ying tucks a smile into the corner of his mouth. “So? What calamity has Jin-zongzhu and the Head Disciple of the Lan Sect staying at Yichuan, so far from home?” He gestures between the two and adds, “Together, even? You aren’t the most likely of travelling buddies.”

Sizhui chuckles. “No calamities, Wei-qianbei. I was on my way back from a visit at Ning-gege’s in Qishan — we bumped into each other on the roadside and Jin-zongzhu kindly offered to accompany me back to Gusu.”

“I was headed to Biling myself,” Jin Ling interjects, rather awkwardly. “Journeying together is more convenient.”

So Jiang Cheng’s miscreant was Sizhui after all, Wei Ying confirms. Calling my son names? I’ll teach him! But there are a number of other things Wei Ying must tackle in that answer first. He starts with what is most pressing. “Hold on,” he says, placing his hands on his hips. “‘Ning-gege’? After I put in all the effort of growing a nice, healthy radish out of you, he gets to be your ‘Ning-gege’, and I’m some random ‘qianbei’ you picked up? Is that how it’s going to be, Ah-Yuan?”

“I —,” Sizhui blinks. He fumbles for his next words, looking earnestly stumped. “What should I call you then?”

“IF Wen Ning is your Ning-gege, it follows that I should at least be Wei-gege. Or Xian-gege, if you like. That’s what you used to call me, back when you were a tyke, about this tiny —,” he approximates the size of a water canteen with his hands, “— and you’d stuff your cheeks with crabapples before wiggling your butt into my lap. Like a chipmunk.”[2] Then he does his best imitation of a toddler saying ‘Xian-gege, story time?’ through a mouthful of mashed fruit.

Jin Ling snickers. Sizhui shoots him an injured look, and he hides his snickering behind a cough. Scarlet-faced and unsure, Sizhui says, “Then. In that case, uhm. Wei...gege. Is that alright?”

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Wei Ying hums noncommittally. “It’ll do, I suppose. Though with how you make the words sound like sacrilege, I must wonder — what were you calling Lan Zhan all these years? Don’t tell me he was ‘Hanguang-jun’ to you this whole time. I’ll have to yell at him if it’s so.”
“There’s no need for that,” he says with some amusement. “Of course he is more than just ‘Hanguang-jun’ to me. I also call him—,” here he sneaks an uncertain glance at Jin Ling, barely brief enough to not be impolite, “—Xiongzhang, when it’s appropriate.”

Wei Ying appraises this. “Hmm,” he sniffs, not greatly impressed. “Boring. Dry. Too stiff. I’ll tell you what; the day you first met, you came up with the name ‘Youqian-gege’ for him. You should try calling him that sometime; see how he reacts.”

This time, Jin Ling does not bother stifling his laughter. Taking pity on Sizhui, who is looking increasingly flustered and like he doesn’t know where to rest his gaze or what to do with his hands, Wei Ying gives him a good-natured pat on the back. “I’m only kidding. Don’t take it to heart, you’re both fine just as you are.” He jabs a thumb in the direction behind him. “Why don’t you go say hi? He’s over there planting you some siblings.”

“Planting?” Jin Ling splutters incredulously. Both he and Sizhui peer past Wei Ying to see Lan Zhan positioning flowerboxes under the windows. “Wei Wuxian, you’re incorrigible! Making the former Chief Cultivator himself do your menial labour; have you no shame?!”

Sizhui is hasty to vindicate Wei Ying. “It’s alright, Jin-zongzhu; Hanguang-jun enjoys tending to plants in his spare time.” True though this may be, it takes even him a while to come to from the view of his father in field clothes, counting out seeds into potting like prayer beads. He smiles sweetly at Wei Ying then, his eyes folding into half-moons. “Wei-qian-...gege. I am very glad he found you so swiftly — I’m glad for both of you! Congratulations on your new home.”

What a filial child! Wei Ying could weep with joy.

“Thank you,” he says, omitting the endearments that want to follow. It’s hard, denying the urge to ruffle Sizhui’s hair. To have his son and nephew bless his new home with a visit so unpredictably, and so soon into his life here — it feels like a prophecy. Like reprieve. “But now I must insist you both stay for tea. You should congratulate your father, too. And you said something about offering to help? Well, have I got some work for you...”

Following an intense round of blackmailing, Wei Ying successfully persuades Sizhui and Jin Ling to stay the night with them. If Lan Zhan’s face is usually like a sheet of ice under glaring post-winter heat, water swelling underneath in kaleidoscope patches — then it becomes a tepid spring when he greets Sizhui and asks after his affairs in Gusu: as though he had felt this arrival in the air, and in the muted waiting all his frost had thawed to leave behind satiny shoals, lolling wisteria bringing ripples to the surface. It is an extremely doting look on him, and he deserves to wear it for more than an afternoon.

With Lan Zhan engrossed in the kitchen over tea and snacks, Wei Ying is left to entertain the children. Sizhui eagerly lends a hand to the vegetable bed, regaling Wei Ying with descriptions of the fruit orchard Wen Ning has started in his backyard in Qishan.

“I know he’s undead, but an orchard? All by himself?” Wei Ying marvels. “That’s dedicated!”

“Oh, no!” Sizhui says. “He isn’t alone at all, now. He runs an orphanage there with — you remember Song-daozhang? From Yi City?”
Wei Ying’s mouth falls open. “Wen Ning?! He’s manning an orchard with Song-xiong?!”

Sizhui laughs, cupping dirt together under his hands in a giddy, bashful manner. “I don’t know what brought them together, either. But they get along so well! There were already four children in their care by the time I left; all like peas in a pod.”

“Huh.” Wei Ying tries to picture Wen Ning and Song-xiong in one of Qishan’s deserted valleys, picking fruit with their ragtag family. He can almost see it — Wen Ning carrying a runty girl on his shoulders as she stretches her arm towards a pear fat with juice; Song-xiong with a crybaby boy at his hip, charming him silent with spoonfuls of ripe persimmon.

“You should visit sometime,” Sizhui suggests. “Ning-gege misses you. Song-daozhang must feel restless, too, without old friends for company — I’m sure he’d appreciate it if Hanguang-jun and you were to pay a visit.”

“Ugh!” Jin Ling yells all of a sudden from where he is stomping around the back shed. “What is that smell?”


“Ugh!” Jin Ling denounces, with even more vitriol. “I’m going inside.”

Sizhui muffles a giggle into the collar of his robe as the front door slams shut behind them. Rubbing his shoulder in commiseration with his elbow, Wei Ying whispers, “What did dung ever do to him? Ah-Yuan, how on earth did you survive this leg of your trip with him — voluntarily, at that?”

“He’s not so bad, gege, you know that,” Sizhui chides, his mouth still quivering with laughter. “He can be very considerate. Do you know — he wouldn’t let me pay for anything while we were on the road together!”

“Because he thinks you’re poor,” Wei Ying snorts.

“It’s his way of being thoughtful,” Sizhui counters, assessing his row of cucumber mounds with satisfaction. “And he really is. Thoughtful, I mean. He grows attached very quickly. And he likes to fuss.”

“That, I can believe,” Wei Ying agrees, betting with himself on how much of Jin Ling is the spitting image of his dear jiujiu, and how much anyone else. “If he treated you well, I hope you were taking care of him in return. He’s a little rascal, but he’s your cousin little rascal, you know.”

“Of course,” Sizhui says sincerely.

“Was that a bluff, about him heading to Biling? Bit roundabout to go there through Yichuan, if you ask me.”

“No, that was fact. He was out exploring further west before this.”

“So he really has been shirking his duties as Sect Leader!” Wei Ying gasps with faux horror. “Corruption runs amok in the cultivation world, I see!”

Sizhui bites his lip. “Mm. That may be true. But Jin-zongzhu...I don’t think he was running away from his responsibilities. He doesn’t seem to have much faith in his retainers at Lanling. Many of the Sect’s former allies have cut off ties, and there have been few newcomers joining the ranks after what happened with the previous Sect Leader...My hunch is that he’s forging new
Connections, recruiting fresh faces to join the Sect."

"Ah," Wei Ying says. He sits back on his haunches.

"He’s learnt a lot during his journeys too! It’ll be apparent once he opens up to you. That was probably part of it also; he thrives on the independence."

Many of the Sect’s former allies have cut off ties. The sentence rings like wrought iron through Wei Ying’s mind, bitterly cold and omnipresent.

He doesn’t have much faith in his retainers. Few newcomers joining the ranks. He thrives on the independence.

He’s independent, Wei Ying thinks, guilt stabbing through him. Is he alone? Does he feel lost? Have I left him to fend for himself?

“What’s that over there?” Sizhui asks, nodding at the pit with the trench around it.

“Oh, that!” Wei Ying says brightly. He’s getting maudlin again. He quashes the feeling ruthlessly. “It’s an accident. But a good one — I’m planning on turning it into a lotus pool.”


“Ah, hah,” Wei Ying stutters, feeling blood rush to his cheeks. “It’s nothing,” he demurs. “Your father’s done most of the heavy-lifting, actually.”

“Yes,” Sizhui replies, “he has.” Wei Ying takes umbrage to the odd tone he puts on, looks up automatically with his eyebrows shot up. A breeze streams through the grove between their faces as they study each other. “Both of them have,” Sizhui says, with a firm, intense stare that cows Wei Ying into acceptance. “Equally.”

Rustling leaves signal a change in the shade of green tingeing the air around them, like curtain cues for theatre. Chartreuse to viridian as the sun draws clouds shut around it, and movement picks up between the trees to clack twigs like drumsticks against trunk hollows, a rhythmless percussion to the trill of the breeze.

“Wei-gege,” Sizhui says softly, strands of his hair swimming with the wind. “Please don’t blame yourself for what happened in the past. No one who matters blames you or dismisses your efforts. Least of all my father and Ah-Ling.”

Rain splits through the greying sky that afternoon, luring musk out of the crunchy floor and calling tree frogs to a chorus. It drips wet and warm onto the clearing, making jade mirror puddles over the moss and etching them with concentric rings.

Wei Ying sits by the kitchen window, pitting the jujubes Sizhui and Jin Ling had brought along with them. He watches water plip-plop from the awning onto the ground below, stream from there down the natural decline of rock into the trough out front, slothful as fronds of seaweed. They’re filling up all on their own now, the pool and the trench. A small something from above to ease his burden.
At the stove, Jin Ling is watching over the rice cakes Lan Zhan has put to steam. Cooking to indulge his sweet tooth is supposedly one of the things he has enjoyed learning independently for grave and momentous political reasons. He cooks beside Lan Zhan with an unforeseen ease, a tacit method to their teamwork.

Sizhui emerges from the living space to announce that the tea is done brewing. They gather around the table with candied fruit and jujubes and with steam from the rice cakes fogging up their faces. The low fire at the hearth warms their feet as the day cools with the pass of rain into evening. Hot tea, and rice cakes moulded by loving hands, and jujubes from his son and nephew. Warm, endless conversation, Lan Zhan listening intently to Jin Ling’s complaints and offering succinct counsel, Lan Zhan glowing with pride as Sizhui talks about his and Jingyi’s progress with the disciples at the Cloud Recesses. Boisterous laughter from himself, when Jin Ling cracks a joke at someone’s expense, and the satisfied smirk on his mouth at pulling such a reaction from Wei Ying.

When their bellies are full, he clears the table with Lan Zhan. He leans his head on his shoulder when they wash the dishes. Lan Zhan presses a long kiss to his temple after Wei Ying has stored away the leftovers. There is an arm around his waist, and between them they have four shoulders.

They return to the tea table to find Sizhui tuning his qin, Jin Ling pressing a score from his sleeve into Sizhui’s hands. “Play this one,” he is demanding. “I got it from a merchant near the southern border. Let’s hear it.”

Sizhui plays as requested. The score documents a euphonious song, low and tranquil like the buoying of lullabies on waves of sleep. The pittering rainfall outside muffles its shallower notes, textures it into something dreamy, coming and going in snatches. Soon, Lan Zhan is joining in with Wangji, enriching the music with depth and narrative, turning a lullaby into a ballad. Soon, Wei Ying is promising Jin Ling he will teach him the art of the dizi, so as to restore the balance of musicians in the family.

Sunset and sunrise do not register in the clearing as they do in the world outside, barricaded out by the density of trees. The rain turns to ink in the blackened evening, and Wei Ying ignites the lamps so he won’t have to squint. Music lingers around the rafters, coaxing them into its sway. Resonant strings, the hissing slide of calluses against silk chords. In the background, rain beating unremittingly, vacillating between mild and harsh. As embellishment, the hooting of owls and the ribbiting of frogs. Bats gossiping in the treetops, night creatures hustling under the downpour.

Jin Ling, drunk drowsy on the music, has flopped to sleep with his neck at a crick-prone angle. Wei Ying repositions his head so it will be supported by his arm. On the other side of the table, watching the two of them in his periphery, Sizhui’s eyes crinkle with mirth.

In voiceless affection, indoor light contouring his face in gradients, Sizhui is the mirror-image of Lan Zhan, who follows his lead as though it was nature’s intention all along.

Wei Ying breathes in the woodsmoke from the hearth, the cooking smells loitering in the kitchen. He breathes in air cleared by the weight of rainfall, and muddy soil from which green things will uncurl, erupting into an assembly of life and colours and flavours. Fresh paint and fresh wood, resin from the conifers they’ve left to dry in the empty crates lying in wait of cooler weather. They have already made their footprints in this place: On the couch by the eastern wall lies a summer blanket Wei Ying had forgotten to fold up, strewn there like a makeshift throw. On the bookshelf next to it are conspicuous gaps from the volumes Lan Zhan has taken out to read. By the western wall, where the linen huddles under the stairs, laundered sheets lie in wait of storage atop their basket.

There is a tea stain on the tabletop from their afternoon meal. Wei Ying's eyes move to Lan Zhan’s
across it. Black made brown by lamplight, Lan Zhan’s eyes contain the immensity of the universe in them, all the vastness and all the stars — and yet, they train on Wei Ying alone, as though they cannot contain him. There is a promise there — an old promise made new, a promise from a lifetime ago made a promise for a life to come — that speaks to Wei Ying of the folding of a lengthy scroll, and the ending of liminal hours.

Wei Ying breathes it all in, until each stroke that composes this scene is locked away in sense memory. The fibers of his lungs expand with his breath, so much so he could swallow the world whole. He is standing on his tip-toes at the brink of a precipice. He is standing with the blessings of his loved ones, hand in hand with his love of every life — braced to leap into tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

1 Referring to the Chinese inch, or cun.[back]
2 Specifically, the Siberian chipmunk! Imagine baby chipmunk Ah-Yuan ^u^ !!![back]
3 Canon has it that Lan Sizhui did call Lan Wangji ‘gege’ in his younger years, though I am not sure what name was attached to the honorific. That being said, here Sizhui doesn’t divulge that bit of information out of concern for Lan Wangji’s privacy.[back]

This chapter brings the story of afterword(s) to a close. I want to thank all of the readers who have stuck with me through this journey, and all of the commenters who have filled my days with so much joy and food for thought. I want to thank my friends and mutuals, who offered me much sought-after advice, encouragement and support, over the period of writing this work, and particularly this chapter; I was insufferable in the leadup to this update, and your kindness and patience did wonders for me. And I want to thank my first reader, who is my champion and the light of my life, and without whom this fic would have remained a pipe dream.

I hope I was able to bring you all a story that, despite everything, was in some way touching or meaningful. Much love to everyone!

End Notes

i’m on twitter as @paperweaving if you want to chat about chén qíng lìng! thank you to the lovely folks there who cheered me on & gave me the courage to write this fic!! *mwah*

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