

## Ajar Hearts

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# Ajar Hearts

by [Inrainbowz](#)

## Summary

*Wei Wuxian didn't get why Jin Ling felt the need to be so contradictory, and hurtful at times. Despite the appearances, they were friends indeed, mostly thanks to Lan Sizhui's efforts.*

*"So. What was that?" Wei Wuxian asked Jiang Cheng. The scene, was, after all, quite common.*

*His brother let out the longest, weariest, most dramatic sigh he possibly could and knocked back his cup of tea as if it was alcohol.*

*"That," he said, slamming the cup back on the table, "is the second coming of Jin Zixuan."*

In which Jin Ling inherited his father's romance skills and Wei Wuxian feels compelled to step in and help the kids out (also Jiang Cheng asked him to).

## Notes

I don't know why this ship is so attractive to me. I read most of the fics about them on ao3 so it's time I contribute...

I watched both the anime and the drama, and this draws from the drama mostly when it comes to Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli. I love Jin Zixuan okay, I just love him, he's so terrible at people it's hilarious. And so all I could think of was what if Jin Ling was just as bad. I had the "this is the second coming of Jin Zixuan" line in mind and I wrote 7k around it lol. Couldn't help throwing in some general Wei Wuxian feels because I have many of those and they have to come out one way or another.

Translate in spanish by Lil6969 [here on ff.net](#) and [here on ao3](#). Thanks again!

Anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this thing.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [Ajar Hearts](#) by [lil6969](#)

“Oh, Senior Wei! You’re up early.”

Given how quickly Lan Sizhui’s smile fell off his face, Wei Wuxian had failed to hide a pained grimace at the comment. He didn’t have to look at Lan Zhan’s expression by his side to know there was the barest hint of smug satisfaction in there. Lan Zhan had made the exact same comment just a few minutes ago – albeit not in so many words. Wei Wuxian had brushed it off, claiming that it wasn’t that unusual.

Except it definitely was. The sun wasn’t even fully up. He would have been hard-pressed to remember when he had last seen the lights of dawn softening the edges of the Cloud Recesses.

“I didn’t feel like sleeping in today,” he answered weakly, knowing that he didn’t look well-rested at all, what with the messy hair, shadowed eyes and pale skin. Lan Jingyi made a dubious face.

“You can come with us then!” Lan Sizhui went on. “We’re going to greet Sect Lead Jiang and Sect Leader Jin at the gates.”

Sometimes Wei Wuxian seriously wondered if the boy was as clueless as he appeared to be. The tone was light and innocent, and yet he couldn’t help but think that the young cultivator had said that on purpose – that he knew this was the exact reason why Wei Wuxian was up so early.

It wasn’t to go greet his brother and his nephew per se. Had they been scheduled to arrive for lunch or by late afternoon, he would still have risen with the sun, unable to sleep.

“It will be fine,” Lan Zhan had said earlier, when he had opened his eyes at the bespoken hour to find Wei Wuxian already awake. It wasn’t that he was nervous, no, but...

Ah, damn. He probably was.

Things between him and his brother were surely not as tensed as they used to be. Months of uneasy meetings and simmering resentment had culminated in a night of yelling and cursing and laying down all their grievances and reproaches, and as painful as the memory was, it also had the soft flavor of a time gone right, for once. They would never be as they once were, or how they would have been if the past had been different. But they weren’t strangers either, or worse, enemies.

The matter was different with Jin Ling, for he had a hard time associating the fearsome Yiling Patriarch that had haunted his nightmares and fueled his desire for revenge as a child, and the man Wei Wuxian was today – a “troublesome idiot”, according to the rude young man. Besides, Jin Ling deferred to his uncle on all things, even if he tried to hide it – once Jiang Cheng had decided they would attempt to build something other than hatred between them, Jin Ling had followed. He had heard the whole story, but it had the distant, blurry quality of a history lesson to him, when it was still so vivid and sharp to his uncles, and he could distance himself from it way more easily than they ever could.

It was more than Wei Wuxian would have ever hoped for. He knew he had no right to any of Jin Ling's attention and affection, and all he got was a blessing, even if the boy had such a bad temper.

So, things weren't too bad.

Wei Wuxian was nervous still.

He didn't think anyone could tell, apart from Lan Zhan. Whenever Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling visited the Cloud Recesses – often together, more rarely one at a time – Wei Wuxian made sure to keep up his usual antics and teasing, if only not to disturb the fragile balance they had gotten back in their relationship. Internally though, he couldn't help but worry. He feared saying the wrong thing, turning his brother against him once again, hurting his nephew, once again. He didn't think those feelings would ever go away.

And so, he didn't sleep. And so, he woke up early.

But he would be damned if he had to suffer the walk to and from the gates on top of everything.

So he excused himself out of the trip, claiming he would go and help train the younger disciples since he was awake to see their morning routine for once. The boys looked sorry to be missing this – Wei Wuxian's classes were infamous both for their unorthodox content and for the color it managed to bring on Lan Qiren's face whenever he caught whiffs of it.

Wei Wuxian managed to distract himself with morning training, breakfast, and morning training again, although he kept at the back of his mind the idea that it wouldn't be so bad for Jiang Cheng to see him like this – serious and helpful, for once, as he showed various sword moves to wide-eyed disciples.

Indeed the small party arrived in the heart of the Cloud Recesses as Wei Wuxian was walking among the training teenagers, correcting their stance and posture as he went. Jiang Cheng looked angry, for some reason, but then again, when didn't he? It wasn't to be taken at face value.

His brother really needed to get laid. Or maybe he was just cursed to stay this way. The rumor had it that he had grown quite close to the cultivator he had appointed head instructor of the Jiang disciples, a woman who was as harsh with the young ones as she was with her clan head and his bullshit. Wei Wuxian had no trouble believing it – he had always bet that for all his supposed standards in women, Jiang Cheng would end up caught in with a woman that had a temper even worse than his.

He ought to visit Lotus Pier soon to confirm that, but as much as he longed for his childhood home, it was always hard to make the trip and to stay there. Jiang Cheng had told him once, half-drunk and tearing up, that for all the things he blamed his brother for, the downfall of Lotus Pier and the murder of his parents weren't on the list, not anymore. The Wen would have found a reason or another, he had said, and, loathing Wei Wuxian's selflessness and hero complex as he did, he could no longer bring himself to reproach him trying to help those in needs, trying to do the right thing.



Jiang Cheng didn't blame him, but Wei Wuxian certainly still blamed himself. It was just too painful to walk the Lotus Pier, so full of memories and regrets even though it had changed a lot since they were children.

Wei Wuxian took a wooden stick to the head for being distracted while teaching kids to wave fake swords around. He decided to do the right thing and see his lesson to completion instead of abandoning his pupils on the spot, and focused back on the task at hand. He quite liked to teach, and would have done it more often if it didn't require being up so early, for the afternoons were reserved for lectures, and those, Wei Wuxian had no intention to approach ever again in his life. Except if he was asked to do a class on demonic cultivation or something.

Ah. What a thought. He ought to suggest it to Lan Qiren, just for the fun of it.

When it was finally time to dismiss the class, he gave a hasty salute to the young cultivators and hurried to the Frost Room where he hoped to find his family gathered. Indeed, here they were, sharing tea around the low table. Lan Xichen greeted him with a nod and a gentle smile, Lan Zhan with only a look – more than enough. Jiang Cheng was brooding.

“Jiang Cheng! Hi!”

“Why weren't you at the gates?” Jiang Cheng accused without preamble. So his bad mood was on Wei Wuxian this time. The man sighed.

“I was teaching, didn't you see? Besides, I never do. Why would I have this time?”

Jiang Cheng huffed, annoyed.

“I needed to show you something.”

“How was I supposed to know!”

“Alright, alright, forget it, damn,” Jiang Cheng relented, massaging his temple. A headache already? Wei Wuxian surely wasn't that good.

“It doesn't matter anyway. It's bound to come up again.”

“What's the matter?” Wei Wuxian asked, getting a little worried now, even if Jiang Cheng looked more annoyed than alarmed.

They heard footsteps and voices coming closer, Lan Sizhui polite tone's and Jin Ling's brasher one easily recognizable as the young men approached the Frost Pavilion. Lan Jingyi was following, silent as he only was when he was too annoyed at Jin Ling to even answer him.

“Observe,” Jiang Cheng said under his breath.

Puzzled, Wei Wuxian obeyed, and watched the three cultivators walk the path in front of the pavilion.

“It’s nice of you to come visit us at the Cloud Recesses,” Lan Sizhui was saying, sounding honestly pleased. It warmed Wei Wuxian’s heart that his sort-of son liked his difficult nephew – Jin Ling needed more friends.

“I have important matters to address. I didn’t come to see you!” Jin Ling retorted.

Ouch.

This was exactly why he didn’t have any. Lan Jingyi jumped in.

“Do you have to be so mean? What’s wrong with you?”

Jin Ling huffed and pouted. Lan Sizhui let nothing show, but Wei Wuxian knew him well, and he was experienced in catching signs on expressionless people. He saw the smallest hint of disappointment and hurt on the young man’s face before it was hidden back under his default expression, and Wei Wuxian resisted the urge to go smack Jin Ling on the back of his head.

“What! The food is bad, it’s way too humid and it’s always cold. This has nothing on Carp Tower.”

“And what about the company?” Lan Sizhui inquired, a light teasing note in his otherwise ever polite voice. Jin Ling snorted.

“What about it?” he shrugged, as if the matter wasn’t even worse visiting. Some warmth left Lan Sizhui eyes – the other boy didn’t notice.

“You’re the worse, Jin Ling,” Lan Jingyi said dramatically.

“Should we visit you then?” Lan Sizhui continued, undeterred. “If your home is better than ours.”

“It is,” Jin Ling confirmed, although he seemed quite confused at the sudden proposal. “But I’m very busy, you know. I have my duties to account for now. I can’t just have guests over whenever I want.”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, although despite the obvious, annoying pride Jin Ling took at reminding them of his status every occasion he got, it was true the burden of his responsibilities weighed him down, and he shouldered it with great more strength and aplomb than anyone would have bet for. Tired of getting blindsided by selfish, narcissistic clan leaders, as well as willing to account for the youth and inexperience of the latest one, the Lanling Jin Sect had reworked their whole functioning, putting more emphasis on shared duties and transparency. It was the reason why Jin Ling could afford the trip to the Cloud Recesses and the Lotus Pier without the guilty feeling of letting his entire clan down.

That didn't mean he had it easy. He didn’t have to be so rude about it though.

Fed up, Lan Jingyi put a lid on the whole conversation by declaring they went to lunch, where they weren’t allowed to talk and therefore would be spared Jin Ling’s words. Their

bickering carried for a while, Jin Ling complaining at yet another downside of the place, Lan Sizhui trying to coax a nicer comment out of him, to no avail.

Wei Wuxian didn't get why Jin Ling felt the need to be so contradictory, and hurtful at times. Despite the appearances, the three were friends indeed, mostly thanks to Lan Sizhui's efforts.

"So. What was that?" Wei Wuxian asked Jiang Cheng. The scene, was, after all, quite common.

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"That," he said, slamming the cup back on the table, "is the second coming of Jin Zixuan."

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"Are you done?" Jiang Cheng asked, irritated, a murderous look on his face as he stared down at Wei Wuxian slumped on the table, clutching his stomach.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just... Of all the things... Of all the things for Jin Ling to inherit from his father..."

He couldn't stop laughing.

Lan Xichen had politely asked if this interaction wasn't just Jin Ling's regular brand of bluntness, but Jiang Cheng had assured them that one, he was seldom thoughtless like this anymore, having softened the edges of his prickly personality over the years, and two, they had to take into account the apparently tremendous amount of times Jin Ling talked about Lan Sizhui at home. In fact, despite what he had claimed, Jin Ling had no business being part of this trip – he had insisted to come without being able to provide a good excuse, and even if he had more pressing things to tend to at home. According to Jiang Cheng, there was even a case of never given gifts and never sent letters at play.

This was just too good.

"I am here for matters of actual import," Jiang Cheng said once Wei Wuxian had calmed down a bit, "and I don't want to even think about this. So I'm counting on you."

That finished sobering up Wei Wuxian, who cast a disbelieving look at his stern brother.

"What?"

"You heard me. I won't have a repeat of that mess. Fix this."

Thinking of the years it had taken for his shije and the peacock to get together, when they had been smitten for so long... It sure wasn't an enviable fate. But it was more than this.

What would have happened if Wei Wuxian had kept his temper that day, when Jin Zixuan had insulted Yanli during their studying at the Cloud Recesses? What if they had handled it

differently, what if they had coaxed out the truth about his feelings then? Their first engagement maybe wouldn't have been broken. Everything would have been different.

Wei Wuxian didn't like to dwell on what-ifs – there were so many of them, a hundred ways their story could have been happier, less tragic. But that path had been walked already, and who knew, it could have been worse too, probably.

Still, had they been less of a bunch of idiots, all of them... He remembered being so offended by Jin Zixuan's attitude on his shije's behalf, whereas when he looked at Jin Ling and Lan Sizhui now, he could only laugh. He could see their clumsiness and hesitations clear as day.

What if the adults in their life had gotten more involved back then, what if they had stepped in, like Jiang Cheng was asking Wei Wuxian to step in now? They were young, and stupid too, but the adults had to know better. They thought it was of no import though, kids quarrels, nothing to concern themselves with.

Was it also kids quarrel that had brought them to war, killed so many?

Of course they had had much graver matters to deal with. But that was also the point, in a way – if even Sect Leader Jiang, austere and serious as a heart attack, could find the time to deal with and find worthy to bring up such a trivial, mundane problem, didn't that mean they had made it at last? Of course there was still work to be done, evil to banish, people to save. But they had achieved that peace at last, a peace that allowed for the wonders of everyday life to bloom unrestrained. A peace well-deserved, in Wei Wuxian's opinion, and hopefully long-lasting.

"Alright, alright. I wouldn't want to inflict your love advice upon them. I'll handle it."

Jiang Cheng's eye twitched and he looked like he was regretting this already.

"Lan Zhan will help me!" Wei Wuxian proclaimed to placate him, throwing himself at his partner's side. The man remained impassible, and Jiang Cheng's face relaxed only barely. They weren't on the best of terms, even if they were always cordial with one another. But Jiang Cheng had more trust and respect for Lan Zhan's dependability and seriousness, that was for sure.

"Whatever," he said, dismissive, and turned his attention to Lan Xichen. Wei Wuxian took it as his cue to leave them to sect leader business, and seeing that Lan Zhan seemed to be part of it, he checked himself out of the Frost Room to go investigate this new mission of his.

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Wei Wuxian spent the rest of the day spying on the young disciples, and though it was highly entertaining, it was frankly a bit sad too. He lost count of the number of times Lan Sizhui's genuine comments and appreciation were met with a harsh rebuttal or arrogance. At least Jin Ling seemed to be aware of it on some level – at times he looked the picture of regret, when Lan Sizhui looked away at his not so kind words. Wei Wuxian could only assume it had been this way for Jin Zixuan as well, cursed with the inability to be nice to those he cared about.

Wei Wuxian had had his doubt over the depths of Lan Sizhui's feelings towards the Jin Sect Leader already, and this field day only confirmed his suspicions. It was subtle, but it was there, in the way he paid rapt attention to everything the other boy did or said, how he always tried to soothe his irritation and lift his spirit. Lan Sizhui was polite to a fault, but he wasn't as unconditionally nice as people seemed to believe. He could play polite-but-ice-cold to perfection, with people whose company he didn't enjoy that much.

That's not what Wei Wuxian was seeing here. He cared deeply about Jin Ling – why else would he look so dejected at the boy's thoughtless comments?

Lan Jingyi was in a worse mood than usual, and Wei Wuxian could only assume he too was aware of his friend's feelings, and he was filling in Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian's role from back in the days – trying to protect soft feelings from harsh words, with harsh words of his own. Commendable, but not very efficient – Lan Sizhui looked pain, whenever the two boys fought, and Jin Ling didn't get what warranted such animosity, because he was a clueless idiot.

The sense of déjà-vu was unsettling.

He decided to bring it up with Lan Sizhui first, but in the end it was the young man who confronted him.

"Did you want something?" he asked on their way to the dining hall for dinner. The other two kept walking, arguing once again – it was tiring just to watch them. Maybe that's what Yanli had felt looking at her brothers all these years.

"Why do you ask?"

"You've been shadowing us all afternoon."

"And here I thought I was being discreet!"

Lan Sizhui smiled faintly.

"You're no such thing."

"Those idiots didn't notice me," Wei Wuxian remarked, pointing at Jin Ling and Lan Jingyi who looked on the verge of a wrestling match.

"They're not good examples," Lan Sizhui deadpanned, eyes crinkling with mirth. Wei Wuxian couldn't help a smile.

Oh, how he loved that kid.

"You seem awfully taken with the Jin Sect Leader," Wei Wuxian said without preamble, hoping to take back the rein of the conversation. To his great disappointment, Lan Sizhui was barely fazed, although his cheeks reddened with the softest blush.

"I... suppose I am."

Wei Wuxian didn't expect such a straightforward confession. He was left speechless for a moment.

"I don't see it. He's pretty mean," he said teasingly, to see if he could coax some deeper feelings from the stoic disciple. Lan Sizhui frowned a little.

"That's not who he is, not really. We get to see a more genuine side of him, sometimes, but he's rarely comfortable enough to show it. I suppose he has a hard time trusting the people around him. Besides, he has to keep up composure at all times nowadays. I think he likes to revert to a freer version of himself when he comes here. He knows we won't hold it against him."

This time the blush was more pronounced, when Lan Sizhui realized how much he had said, the affection and tenderness dripping from his tone and words. Wei Wuxian's smiles softly, amused. Lan Sizhui was far more self-aware than he would have thought.

"You've thought this through."

"Lan disciples meditate a lot, you know."

Wei Wuxian chuckled – the idea of the young Lan cultivators using their endless meditation hours to reflect on matters of the hearts was hilarious to him. Who knew such thoughts hid under their stoic faces and perfect hair?

"Even if he was justified" – it was clear in Wei Wuxian's tone that he didn't think much of that concept – "it doesn't prevent you from calling him out on it, if he hurts you."

At last Lan Sizhui lost a bit of his composure. He looked sideways, embarrassed.

"Ah, yes. You're probably right. But I..."

He closed his mouth, looked for his words.

"I wouldn't want to antagonize him, enough that he... hm. That he would... turn away?"

*That he would leave me.*

"Oh, A-Yuan. Boy, you have it bad."

Lan Sizhui gave him a sheepish smile and a small shrug, resigned to his fate.

Something Wei Wuxian surely wasn't.

"Leave it to me, kid. I'll fix it for you."

That finally broke Lan Sizhui's expression as his eyes widened and his lips parted around a protest.

"What? Don't! Please don't do anything!"

“Relax, I know what I’m doing. You’ll thank me later, you’ll see.”

Wei Wuxian walked away before Lan Sizhui could utter more objections. The only thing he caught before rounding the corner of the main garden was a defeated “why?”.

Wei Wuxian couldn’t begin to explain to the boy what was at play here, but beyond the weight of his own memories and past, he just wished for him to be happy. As much as A-Yuan had clung to him as a toddler and as much as Wei Wuxian had loved him, he wasn’t there when the boy was growing up. He wasn’t in any of his memories. The things he knew, the things he had been taught, that had shaped the person he was now, none of them came from Wei Wuxian. It was even truer of Jin Ling, who he had never even gotten to meet as a child.

This was his biggest regret about his long death. This, and leaving Lan Zhan mourning him for so many years. He wanted... he *needed* to have an impact on their life. He needed to be a part of their future, since he wouldn’t ever be a part of their past. And he needed them to be happy and content because wasn’t this the whole point? Wasn’t this why they did everything they did? So that the kids would have it better, so that they wouldn’t face the same trials?

Yeah, there was no way Wei Wuxian would let this go now.

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Lan Zhan blessedly made no comment when Wei Wuxian got up with him the next day too. This time it wasn’t nervousness – it was restlessness, excitement. He had work to do.

He still spent some time with the younger disciples – Lan Qiren did a double-take at seeing him working so early two days in a row. Wei Wuxian reflected that this could be a strong enough incentive to keep doing it – the idea of regularly throwing Lan Qiren off was appealing in its own right.

Jin Ling joined morning practice with Lan Sizhui, Lan Jingyi and the other senior disciples. The three were above the rest, destined to the highest ranks of the cultivation world. Jin Ling in particular had made tremendous progress over the years, wielding the most seamless blend of Great Sect styles that Wei Wuxian had ever seen. Jin Ling’s proud nature had never manifested in sectarianism and rigidity – on the contrary, he took pride in his mixed heritage, in being able to take the best of all worlds. That made him a formidable opponent, unpredictable and versatile.

On the contrary, Lan Sizhui had pretty much the opposite approach – he had cultivated all aspect of the Gusu Lan Sect to the highest degree, his style pure and wholesome, perfect. In this way, he truly was Lan Zhan’s son and best student.

It was always funny then, to see them fight. Jin Ling constantly came up with new moves and ideas – making his mischievous uncle very proud – while Lan Sizhui drew more and more depths and efficiency from his traditional teaching. It helped that he was exceptionally adaptable – despite the Gusu Lan’s reputation for intransigence and inflexibility, they were actually very good at adjusting to their opponent and circumstances.

Today though, spirits were running high for some reason, and the kids were putting way too much effort into a simple training session. Of course, what was bound to happen happened – Jin Ling, caught in the mood, spun around to avoid Lan Sizhui’s blade and stroke him on the side of the head with the hilt of his sword, harder than necessary. Lan Sizhui went down, knocked off balance, and landed on his bottom on the rocks.

Lan Jingyi was at his side in an instant, fretting like a worried mother.

Jin Ling looked like he wanted to give in to the urge too, but Lan Sizhui raised his head toward him, and instead, he spat, “you should pay more attention!”

“Sorry.” Lan Sizhui gave a weak smile, eyes a bit glazy.

“You’re bleeding!” Lan Jingyi exclaimed with a tone suggesting his friend was on death’s door. “Jin Ling, look what you’ve done! Why do you have to be such a brute?”

Lan Sizhui tried to placate his friend and wave off his concern, but he didn’t look so good. Blood trickled from his temple, a stark contrast to his pale skin, and went down to tarnish the blinding white of his robes. Again, Jin Ling looked torn for a moment, but again anger pushed concern off his face and mind.

“If he can’t handle it, he shouldn’t be fighting me!”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes. How, how could a person be so bad at this? Was it the Jin genes? But Jin Zixuan’s father certainly never had a problem with making his feelings known to anyone... Maybe he had hoarded all the courting skills, leaving his descendants emotionally crippled and cursed to struggle with it at every turn.

“I’ll take him to the healer,” Lan Jingyi said. Wei Wuxian waved them off and after a last murderous look toward Jin Ling, Lan Jingyi carried away his still stunned friend. Jin Ling was quite obviously dying to follow – instead he huffed, stomped his feet and stormed off toward the river.

Hopeless, all of them.

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“You hurt him.”

Wei Wuxian hadn’t made as much noise as he could have, but he hadn’t been especially stealthy either, and so there was really no reason for Jin Ling to startle as bad as he did, almost slipping on a rock and plunging to his death down the waterfall.

“No shit,” he retorted, annoyed, shaking off the hand Wei Wuxian had wrapped around his forearm to prevent his fall. “What tipped you off, the blood?”

“That’s not what I meant. The wound doesn’t matter. You’re wielding swords, you’re bound to break some skin and bones.”

Jin Ling grimaced, displeased.



“You hurt him,” Wei Wuxian said again, hoping the boy would catch on. Surprisingly, he did – not so stupid then.

“I know,” he admitted through gritted teeth.

“A simple “I’m sorry” and “Are you okay?” would have worked better.”

“I know, okay! I know!”

Jin Ling turned away, flushed with shame and frustration. Wei Wuxian couldn’t bring himself to tease him – he seemed genuinely distressed.

“Why so mean then?”

The boy only shrugged, with no answer to give.

“Do you dislike him that much?”

“No!”

Jin Ling was greatly offended by the mere question. Wei Wuxian laughed, delighted. It was the reaction he had been hoping for.

“I don’t... I don’t dislike him.”

“You sure act like you do.”

“That’s!...”

The protest died on his lips as he reflected on the past few minutes and how it looked like from an outside perspective. He sighed, defeated.

“I don’t mean to. But I don’t know how to... not.”

“Easy. Just act like him. Lan Sizhui’s great at being nice. He’s a good role model.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

There was a different kind of blush on Jin Ling’s cheeks now. He looked away.

“I don’t want him to think...”

“What? That you care? Don’t you?”

“Then I don’t want him to know!”

“That you like him?”

He reddened some more, enough that his skin had to be warm to the touch. It was adorable really, but Wei Wuxian knew better than to tell him that, not if he wanted this conversation to go anywhere.

“Why?”

“Why-why what?”

Wei Wuxian almost asked “why do you like him”, just to enjoy watching his nephew getting even more flustered and inarticulate, but he decided to be merciful this time.

“Why don’t you want him to know?”

This one seemed easier, as Jin Ling looked at him like he was terribly stupid, which was more on par with their usual dynamic.

“It’s... it’s embarrassing.”

“Why?”

“Why? It just is!”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, faking pensiveness.

“Is it because he doesn’t like you?”

Jin Ling jumped as if he had been burnt.

“He doesn’t? How do you know that? Did he say something?”

Wei Wuxian chuckled.

“Nah, I don’t know. And it seems like you don’t either.”

Jin Ling grumbled and pouted, vexed.

“So why would that be so bad? If he knew,” Wei Wuxian went on. He had to keep them on track – they were making progress here.

Of course, he sort of knew already – he was familiar with that line of thought, that they were all guilty of at one point or another. Better to hide, better to lie, better to show nothing, because what if those feelings were ill-received? What if they caused rejection, awkwardness, what if things changed? And then the other side of the coin, equally terrifying – what if they *were* returned? What then? Wasn’t it a scary prospect, the wild unknown, the vulnerability, the weakness openly shown, ready to be exploited.

Better to hide, better to lie. Better for things to stay exactly as they were, since it worked, since they were content.

Until they weren't, until things did change as they were bound to do, and it was too late and there was nothing left to do but regret and waste hopeless wishes.

"Is it better to keep hurting his feelings?"

"He doesn't care that much about what I say."

"Are you sure about that?"

Jin Ling bit his lips. It was enough self-reflection for one day, Wei Wuxian decided.

"Alright, listen. This is the moment where I give you actual advice. Don't go tell anyone though, my reputation would be ruined if words got out that I could be helpful."

"You can't."

"Tst. Listen, A-Ling. Great wisdom coming your way. You do want not to cause him pain anymore, don't you?"

Though reluctant, Jin Ling did come a little closer, curious despite himself. He gave a small nod, as if such a question was deserving of a serious, thought out answer. Damn, he was the most endearing kid ever.

"Those feelings you have, they're not bad. Feeling, caring, it's not a bad thing. It's not, it never is. You have to believe it."

"Uncle Cheng would disagree," Jin Ling huffed. Wei Wuxian smiled fondly.

"He wouldn't. Your grumpiest uncle doesn't show anything, but that doesn't mean he doesn't feel them. I would say it's the contrary. Jiang Cheng feels too much – it has worked against him in the past, blinded the more rational part of his mind. He's careful of it now."

"You said feeling wasn't bad."

"It's not. You still have to be careful about it. But I assure you Jiang Chang has plenty of feelings hidden behind that gloomy face."

"Like what?" Jin Ling scoffed, doubtful.

"Well, he loves you, for one."

Wei Wuxian took great pleasure in Jin Ling's spluttering as he choked around a weak protest, blush returning full force. The older man laughed, proud of his effect.

"You're the worst!"

"It's only the truth. You shouldn't ever doubt it."

Jin Ling failed to hide a small, pleased smile. Jiang Cheng sure was just as bad as those Jin boys when it came to expressing his feelings, but he was blunt enough that he was easy to

read. No matter how harsh he could be toward his nephew, he had never tried to hide his fierce protectiveness of the boy, and the fate that would befall those who dared to do him wrong.

“Well... Well he loves you too!”

Wei Wuxian faltered, caught off guard by the strange rebuttal. Jin Ling wasn't very good at comebacks, but he often ended up accidentally spurting that kind of destabilizing comments.

Wei Wuxian tried to laugh it off, although the absolute certainty on the boy's face made it pretty hard.

“That's... neither here nor there,” he said, dismissing that line of thought. Jin Ling had found some smugness back though – well, good for him. Wei Wuxian would make the sacrifice.

“Anyway, I'm not telling you to run around after your own heart and be blind to everything else. Just that all the things you think are bad about this – what you perceive as vulnerability, as a weakness or a fault – it's not like that. Of course it can hurt, but it's not something to reject or regret. It's good. It's a good thing, alright?”

Was he managing to bring anything across? He wasn't sure, but those were complicated matters.

He just didn't want to see the boy let his pride, his fears or his doubts get in the way of his relationships and bonds to others, hurting them and himself in the process. Had anyone ever told Jin Zixuan that he was allowed to feel this love? That he ought to listen to his own feelings more than to what others had to say? It seemed to pain him, at times, to ever show kindness and compassion, to have any emotional reaction whatsoever. Wei Wuxian wondered if it stemmed from his father and his many excesses, a man that had never shied away from any of his wants and needs. Maybe Jin Zixuan was convinced acting on his own wishes was bound to paint him in the same light, to have him accused of being selfish, or just too emotional. Love hadn't been particularly rampant in their family, and Jin Zixuan's father had never seemed to care much about his son's feelings – or anyone's, for that matter.

As for Jin Ling, he simply cared too much about what others thought, about how he was perceived. Wei Wuxian couldn't blame him – he had lived his whole life under scrutiny, burdened from an early age with too much history and duties. He was an emotional kid, and it had often been used against him. No wonder he was so wary of it now.

“Like you and Hanguang-Jun.”

Distracted, Wei Wuxian didn't quite catch the awkward mumbling.

“What?”

“Like... Like you. And Hanguang-Jun. A good thing.”

Once again Wei Wuxian was rendered speechless by the boy's unpredictable words. He knew that some took offense at his and Lan Zhan's relationship, judging it too open, too forward,

where they should have been more discreet, hidden, as pairs of cultivators usually were.

But apart from the fact that Wei Wuxian would never think of restraining himself from expressing the depth of his love to his partner, this was another reason – maybe others needed to see that. Maybe it was good for the kids to see that love could be fine, that it didn't mean only pain and despair, that it wasn't something to shun or shy away from. There were hundreds of tragic love to battle, and only two of them – of course Wei Wuxian had to be as obvious as possible about it.

“Exactly like that,” he confirmed. It was too funny to imagine that Jin Ling, for all that he complained about shameless displays of affection and disgusting sappiness, aspired to that kind of bond too.

Wei Wuxian *knew* he would get to be a good role model for something someday.

“So, here's what you're going to do. Next time you're with Lan Sizhui and he says or does something, I want you to think, and I want you to say only what you really want to say. Forget about how it would sound, how it will make you look like, what people will think. Try it once, okay? Think and speak truthfully, just once.”

Seeing Jin Ling's face, it was as if Wei Wuxian had asked him to go and engrave all three thousand rules of the Gusu Lan Sect into another stone. But he wasn't one to back away from a challenge – he nodded, firm and determined.

It was the same determination that had moved Jin Zixuan, all those years ago, to finally take his head out of his own ass and speak his heart to the object of his affection, to fight off his own stubbornness and arrogance with the desire to stop breaking Yanli's heart. At least he had gotten there at last. Wei Wuxian would spare Jin Ling the years it would take for him to complete that process on his own.

"Also, thinking before you speak is a general suggestion I have for you. It would do you some good to practice it."

Jin Ling threw a rock at his face.

.

They went back just as lunch was getting served in the dining hall. Jin Ling hurried to get away from Wei Wuxian as if he didn't want to be seen with him, looking around with zero subtlety to spot his friends in the crowd of starving disciples. Wei Wuxian stayed close enough to eavesdrop – he hadn't done all this work not to witness it come to fruition, or fail miserably.

Lan Sizhui waved at the Jin Sect Leader from the patio. There was some gauze tapped to the side of his head, but otherwise, he seemed perfectly fine. Lan Jingyi by his side was still sulking, but he followed to regroup with Jin Ling.

“All good,” Lan Sizhui said once he had reached Jin Ling, smiling. Jin Ling opened his mouth, but one look at Wei Wuxian, narrowing his eyes at him from the side, and he closed it

again.

“I... I’m...”

He did a fine impersonation of the carps lazing around the ponds in his home a few more times, red as the reddest of them, before he could find it in himself to use his voice.

“I’m... glad. You’re okay. Hm.”

Lan Jingyi took over the carp face thing, but Jin Ling didn’t pay attention to him, for after that mortifying performance, he got his reward – once surprise had passed on Lan Sizhui’s face, it was followed by a soft, charmed smile, eyes twinkling with pleasure. Jin Ling looked dumbstruck, and close to catching fire, but he managed to sort of answer to it with a wobbly smile of his own. Wei Wuxian wanted to give him a thumb up, but he couldn’t hope to catch the boy’s attention now, transfixed as he was by the effect just a few nice words could have on his Lan friend.

No doubt that he would strive to repeat that performance from now on.

Wei Wuxian watched them walk away toward the dining hall, saw Lan Jingyi pump a discreet fist in victory behind his friends’ back, and decided that the kids would be just fine.

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“Jiang Cheng! Pss, Jiang Cheng!”

“What?”

“Shhh. Come here, come here!”

The man looked on the verge of refusing and walking away, but Wei Wuxian somehow managed to convey the seriousness of the situation to him, because he eventually complied with a heavy sigh.

“What do you want?”

“Look, look!”

Wei Wuxian pointed toward the inside of the Library Pavilion. The Cloud Recesses was almost deserted at this hour, with only the few odd Lan cultivators and the foreigners still up and about. It had been a week of Jiang Cheng and Jin Ling’s visit – they would be gone in the morning.

From where they stood by the window, they could sneak a look without being noticed by the people inside – not that those two were in any state to notice anything apart from each other at the moment.

Jiang Cheng’s eyes widened at the view.

“Is that...”

“Yep!”

“But how...”

“A-Ling offered to brush his hair, and A-Yuan said he could take off his forehead ribbon to do it then. It’s been five minutes already.”

The sight was as heartwarming as it was hilarious. Lan Sizhui was sitting on his knees, patiently waiting for Jin Ling to decide what he was going to do with the end of the ribbon he was gripping in one hand, the other squeezed tight around a soft hairbrush. He had yet to pull at the piece of fabric to set it loose. He was so red – the blush spreading to the tip of his ears and down his neck – it was a bit worrying.

Lan Sizhui moved forward, ever so slightly, just so that the ribbon would slip off Jin Ling’s grip if he wasn’t holding it firm enough. Jin Ling tightened his fingers on reflex, and, catching the implicit message, finally gathered the courage to finish what he had started. The Lan forehead ribbon slid off of Lan Sizhui’s head, and of course it could have been terribly mundane and boring, but Wei Wuxian was well placed to know the significance of such a gesture. After all, even after all these years, Lan Zhan still got a similar reaction as Lan Sizhui was right now – whole body relaxing, albeit so subtly it took a practiced eye to catch it, and the softest hint of a blush on his ears and cheeks. Wei Wuxian ought to investigate how the Gusu Lan Sect managed to make those things so meaningful to its members.

At least Jin Ling seemed to be well aware of the implication as well, equally dumbstruck by this turn of event. Overwhelmed, he leaned forward to rest his forehead against the back of Lan Sizhui’s head, breathing heavily. He rested the hand still clutching the ribbon on Lan Sizhui’s shoulder – the other boy covered it with his own.

The two adults decided now was a good time to stop being so nosy. Or, well, Jiang Cheng decided, and he dragged his brother away firmly.

“I have to say I’m quite impressed,” Jiang Cheng said once they were far enough not to be heard. Wei Wuxian preened.

“Right? I outdid myself, I did. And all on my own! I don’t think I’ve ever been prouder of anything in my life.”

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes at his theatrics, but he looked honestly pleased.

“That’s one issue taken care of,” he deadpanned as if they had just concluded a business transaction. Wei Wuxian chuckled.

“I aim to please.”

“Thank you A-Xian.”

They both froze on the rocky path, both looked sideways, embarrassed.

The affectionate names had always been more Yanli’s thing, the boys only reverting to them when they wanted to tease – or when they were being exceptionally genuine and open. It

pleased her when they were nice to each other.

Oh, how he missed her. Yet another feeling that would never entirely fade away.

They both decided to act as if nothing had happened, but Wei Wuxian was smiling stupidly when he fell into bed and into Lan Zhan's arms. Lan Zhan didn't ask. He held on tight though, and maybe Wei Wuxian's eyes spilled some traitorous tears, but it was only the two of them, and Lan Zhan wouldn't tell on him, and he was holding tight, tight, so it wasn't so bad.

.

“Senior Wei?”

“A-Yuan! Did you need something?”

“I... think I ought to thank you.”

Wei Wuxian grinned.

“Told you.”



## End Notes

I have a THING for the forehead ribbon thing. Really, it gets to me. I also have a thing for Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian relationship. This ended up being more about Wei Wuxian than anything else haha, but I like the POV Outsider trope on a romance so... I hope I'll write more about the youngsters - I have another one in mind but it's not so happy... We'll see.

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