

Three changes.

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Three changes.

by [orange_crushed](#)

Summary

Wangji risks a glance across the aisle; Wei Ying's gaze is tilted down to his book, a model of diligence. But he's smiling as he writes, and when his eyes flick over to Wangji's, just for a second, they're alight with something beautiful.

This is love, Wangji realizes, right then. This is what it feels like. It's happening afresh even as it dawns on him.

He copies the next line wrong, and the next.

Notes

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

- Translation into Español available: [Tres cambios](#) by [evirtual3](#)

I. *the lake*

The morning after Wangji humiliates himself in the library—there's really no excuse for yelling in such a place, no matter the provocation—he finds a tiny scrap of paper in his belt, where it must have caught on a seam as it fluttered. He's mortified for a second, his flesh briefly running hot and cold. But the paper is soft between his fingers, less delicate than a fresh flower petal, less brittle than a dry one. The little fragment of the picture is just a hand, long-fingered, splayed. On its own, innocent.

He was so angry. It seems stupid now. He should have shut the book and confiscated it, or handed it back with disinterest. Getting carried away over such a simple, thoughtless trick... and Wei Wuxian's eyes had really been shocked for a second, huge as bowls, when the pieces had rained over them. He couldn't know, could he? That Wangji—no, he couldn't. At least Wangji hopes not. Not only because he has no real wish to be caught out. But because he has no wish to discover that Wei Wuxian is really that cruel.

In class Wangji tries to ignore him. It's like trying to ignore a feeling in his own leg, his own eye: a sensation so insistent it's close to need. But he manages anyway. After a few hours of avoidance Wei Wuxian slides a note across the floor, attached to a tiny talisman that makes its own breeze. Turned away from view, back stiff, Wangji begrudgingly allows himself a second to marvel at the ingenuity of it, the cleverness evident in almost everything he does.

Are you angry at me? it reads. Hit me if yes!

Wangji glances across the aisle at him, only for a second. Maybe he won't see—but no, Wei Wuxian is already looking at him, waiting, intent and curious, as if Wangji were an ethical knot in his readings that won't come undone. And then the corner of Wei Wuxian's smile lifts. He mimes a shallow punching gesture with one fist, pumping his elbow back and forth slightly as if he were driving his knuckles into an imaginary stomach. Wangji turns his gaze back to the front of the room. That's probably how he and Jiang Wanyin solve all their problems, Wangji thinks. Odd, to imagine hitting a brother. Although probably he did, when they were both small. He doesn't remember. He just can't picture Xichen hitting back.

Another note wafts against his legs. Wangji scoops it up without looking, tucks it into his lap. Unfolds it under his desk when nobody is watching.

If you're not mad, do you want to go fishing? it says.

Bizarre. Wangji crumples it up in his palm. He doesn't remember being teased very much, either. This must be what it's like.

Three days later—after weeks of middling, bearable heat—true summer hits the mountain like a damp backhand to the face. On the first worst day Wangji wakes sweating, untangles himself from the sheet, and goes to dip his face in the bowl of water waiting on his dressing-table. It does almost nothing to help. No matter how much he swabs and powders himself under his clothes the scent of sweating body will undoubtedly come through: by the time he gets to the lecture hall he can feel moisture slithering down his spine, leaking down the backs of his legs, the nape of his neck. It is absurdly, humiliatingly hot. Not even the breeze helps much: the wind is the temperature of a close breath, and tastes of dry pine and tarry melting resin. The beams of the lecture hall itself feel as if they might leak sap, might bend like noodles. Even with all the sides of the pavilion opened to the air, the room is boiling. Several of his classmates have sprawled across their desks in helpless misery; others have thrown decorum aside and started loosening their collars, rolling their sleeves. Nie Huaisang is fanning himself so vigorously that every piece of paper in the room is shivering. As a whole they look half-dressed, half-cooked. Pathetic and wilting.

Wangji sits straight at his desk. Today's lecture should have started at least five minutes ago. On the dias, his uncle is locked in a nearly silent but obviously intense argument with two of the other masters, gesturing so that his sleeve billows out. More paper flutters. Wangji thinks longingly about a fan of his own, but suppresses it. Anything survivable can be endured without complaining. Probably.

“Pssst,” Wei Wuxian hisses, at his right. Wangji ignores him. His urge for self-preservation is particularly strong this morning. “Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian whispers, and at that impertinent familiarity Wangji cannot help but turn his eyes and fix him with what he hopes is a discouraging look.

A huge mistake.

Wei Wuxian hasn't just rolled his sleeves. He's tied his hair up. It sits in a huge coiled loop just below his crown, the fringed ends hanging loose. Flyaway strands curl away from the back of his neck, or stick against it in small spirals. He's opened his collar a little, like the others, and it sits back on his shoulders just slightly, showing off the tanned start of his spine, the dip of his throat, the barest suggestion of a collarbone. He looks warm and soft and sweaty. He looks... undone, Wangji thinks, and then smothers the thought brutally. It's just the heat. Turning his brain to mush. “Hey,” Wei Wuxian whispers, and smiles at Wangji with conspiratorial eagerness. “Lan Zhan. You think they're going to let us out? Or maybe we're here to get turned into cha shao.”

Wangji stares at him.

Wei Wuxian's smile wavers just a fraction. In the seat in front of him, Jiang Wanyin turns around.

“Shut up,” he whispers. “Don't bother him with your dumb jokes.”

“I'm not bothering him!” Wei Wuxian hisses back, his face going narrow and mean in Jiang Wanyin's direction. It lends credence to Wangji's theory about their methods of conflict

resolution. "I'm just asking a question!"

"Your questions bother people!" Jiang Wanyin retorts. "You're going to get in trouble again!"

"If we get in trouble it'll be because you're yelling!" Wei Wuxian says, at exactly the same volume.

Wangji sits silently, face trained ahead again, and sweats in his seat.

"Attention!" his uncle calls, from the speaker's desk. The room swivels lethargically to look at him. Qiren's robes look perfectly neat, though his brow is as shiny as anyone's. "Due to the unusual heat, we will postpone today's lecture—"

Wei Wuxian makes an audible, if quickly swallowed, noise of triumph. A tiny burst of laughter skitters around the room. "Until after sunset, when the air will have cooled," Qiren finishes, slowly and pointedly. Wei Wuxian puts his face down into one hand. Not that Wangji is watching him do it. "I recommend rest and mild activity only," Qiren says. "Overtax yourselves and you will feel the consequences. And if I hear about groups going down to the lake unchaperoned—"

Wei Wuxian's head lifts.

"Lake?" he says.

Qiren looks at the ceiling. And then, for some unfathomable reason, he looks at Wangji and sighs.

"Anyone who is late to tonight's lecture will receive the appropriate penalty," he says. "You're all dismissed."

The lake is long and ragged-edged, fed by a high spring river, squared at one end where a piece of the ancient mountains must have collapsed and sheared away. That loss left the smooth side of the cliff bare above the water. On the eastern side a path winds down from Cloud Recesses, running parallel for a while to the long stairs, diverting into the deep forest and then giving way to sparse pine scrub, and then to a bank puckered by pebbled ridges of silt. By the time Wangji has finished in the library and taken the long trail down, the others are all there, spread out over the little beach. They're clustered in small groups with their outer robes peeled off and their trousers rolled up and their calves damp and shining, talking and passing around paper packets of peanuts and stuffed mantou and fruit. Some are still

wading in the shallows, splashing each other. The chaperones are lying in the shade of the poplars with straw hats over their faces.

A few heads look up as he passes by; he hears some whispered murmurings. Receives a few perfunctory nods. He picks his way along the uneven shoreline, enjoying the way the wind sails across the water in unbroken streams, a little cooler here than in the cluster of the trees. He can find his own spot further on, somewhere quiet and shaded.

He sees the Jiang contingent—minus Wei Wuxian, he observes, with total neutrality—closest to the edge of the water, camped in the sun on a few flat rocks, their robes damp and their wet hair plastered and drying on their backs. They must have actually gone swimming. Not surprising, maybe. Of all his classmates they seemed to be enduring the heat with the best grace: the river country is far hotter and hot far longer than the mountain. They're all laughing at something, chattering away, but Jiang Yanli looks up as Wangji walks by and smiles at him, unexpectedly.

"Lan ZHAN," someone shouts, faintly.

Wangji looks out across the water, shading his eyes with a hand: the surface is unrelentingly bright, a cool blue mirror of the hot sky above it. There's a dot of black far out, bobbing like a duck, making small ripples that spread and expand and arrive to touch the shore near Wangji's feet. It's Wei Wuxian, still swimming. His silhouette sticks an arm up and waves. Then he ducks and disappears, leaving an empty wake. He doesn't surface for a long minute, long enough that Wangji takes a worried step closer to the lapping edge of the water.

"He's alright," Jiang Yanli says, from behind him, as if she could read his mind. She steps up to Wangji's side, dusting at the skirt of her robes. She gives him another kind smile. "He can hold his breath a long time."

Wangji looks at her, and then back out at the lake. And then Wei Wuxian bursts up like a fountain in the close, hip-deep shallows. Water streams off him; he flips the hair away from his face and pushes it back with two hands. He's bare to the waist, tanned and gleaming. He sees Wangji and Jiang Yanli on the shoreline and sloshes up towards them eagerly, his thin pants dragging wet against his body. They cling and stick obscenely. Wangji turns his gaze stiffly up—wet belly, slick lean-muscle chest, no, the same, worse—and then up higher, in time to see Wei Wuxian's face split in a grin. Inside Wangji goes hot and cold all at once, to the tips of his fingers, the soles of his feet. He wonders what his face is doing.

"It's a lot better out there," Wei Wuxian says, breezily, as if Wangji had not just turned to ice in front of him. Maybe he didn't. It's hard to tell. "There are actually cold spots if you go far enough." He loops his own hair around a fist and squeezes it out, then slings it over his shoulder. Wangji swallows. "Shijie, are you coming back in?"

"No," Jiang Yanli says. "I'm fine. I'll save you some snacks."

"We had snacks? This whole time?" Wei Wuxian says, sounding affronted. And then he laughs. "Lan Zhan, you should come for a swim!"

What an idea.

Wangji says nothing. But Wei Wuxian keeps looking at him expectantly, and at Wangji's elbow Jiang Yanli is still hovering with that pleasant smile on her face. All their gazes are suddenly suffocating.

"I... don't," he begins, clumsily.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian interrupts. "Do you not know how? That's okay, I can teach you," he says, with easy cheer.

Wangji looks at him. It would be impossible to look anywhere else, but Wangji does it deliberately anyway: his tangled seaweed hair, his one cocked hip, the encouraging smile that reaches his eyes.

He really would, Wangji realizes. He'd teach me how to swim.

Wangji thought—he'd been so angry before, but maybe he was wrong. This isn't teasing at all. That new understanding strikes him like a thunderclap and then runs shivering along his spine like a bead of his own sweat.

"I know how to swim," Wangji says.

"Oh." Wei Wuxian chews his lip. "So, you don't—"

It really is unbearably hot, Wangji thinks, in his own defense.

He steps away, only a few paces, and sets Bichen down on a rock near the other Jiang swords. Then pulls his belt off, folds it neatly, and shrugs off his outer robe, then his middle one, leaving him in his tunic and pants. He steps out of his shoes and wraps up his outer clothes carefully, aware that he's being watched; he feels half-mad, doing this, but he still doesn't really care if anyone else looks. The only eyes he can really feel are Wei Wuxian's, trained on his back. They rest against his spine like hands.

When he turns around Wei Wuxian is still waiting at the waterline, a strange uncertain expression on his face. Wangji walks past him barefoot into the water, his face hot and his shoulders stiff, treading light and quick over the pebbles until the lake laps his knees, then his thighs. Wei Wuxian follows him, trailing his arms at his hips so they draw vanishing lines in the water. "Well," he says, and smiles again, less broadly and boldly. It's a small smile, only designed to fill the short space between them. And it does. "Want to race to the island?"

"Fine," Wangji says, and dives.

"Cheater!" Wei Wuxian yells. Underwater it sounds like a laugh.

Wei Wuxian wins by an arm's length anyway, slipping past Wangji like an eel at the last stretch, slapping a rock and laughing in triumph and then flipping around in a suspended somersault, paddling off on his back. Afterwards they loop their way slowly around in an expanding circle. The island is little more than a jut of boulders with a few straggling pine trees perched on it, a few nesting ducks. They squawk at the disturbance and Wei Wuxian calls a respectful apology to them. Wangji feels his face tugging almost into a smile: he hides it in the water, turning for air on every opposite stroke. His lungs expand with the effort, his arms pull and burn pleasantly. Beside him Wei Wuxian keeps pace, his strokes smooth and confident, his bare arms flashing gold in the sun. He swims like he fights. We're matched in this, too, Wangji thinks, with a feeling in his chest that he'd be hard-pressed to name.

"You're a good swimmer," Wei Wuxian says, when they pause for breath, treading water in the deeps. He bobs, corklike, hair floating in ropey twists around his shoulders.

"So are you," Wangji says, honestly. He's probably the best swimmer Wangji's ever seen.

"Well, yeah, I had to learn," he shrugs, sliding the compliment off and away. But his eyes look pleased. "Everybody swims in Yunmeng."

He kicks away from Wangji. But not too fast, too far. Wangji follows him.

The center of the lake is cold, depthless and black, carved out below their bodies as if by some ancient grain-scoop. Treading water over the abyss their shoulders and heads cook in the sun and their legs freeze, prickled and trembling. After a little while Wei Wuxian stops paddling and just floats, spread-eagled on the surface like a leaf. He turns in a lazy circle with the gentle rocking of the lake tide. Wangji does the same: flips himself up, shuts his eyes. The sun beats down on his face and the wet front of his clothes, brilliant and blinding. Wangji's extended fingertips accidentally brush something smooth and solid: a foot, a heel. "I'm not trying to kick you," Wei Wuxian says, "honestly," and shifts to slip away, and the water ripples around them.

Insanity grasps him: Wangji cracks an eye open, reaches. Wraps his hand around Wei Wuxian's knobby ankle.

He thinks he means to push him off.

Wei Wuxian laughs. "Hey, hey now, is that a snapping turtle?" he says. "I'm not a piece of driftwood."

It's so strange to be alone together like this, floating in the great featureless mass of water. It's as if there was no one else in the lake, in the woods, in the world. And no one can see them, out this far: they'd look like specks. Shadows. Emboldened, Wangji grips him: his leg is warm and cold at once, hot where the sun touches it, chilled too by the water. Fine-haired and bony here. Wangji presses his thumb against the joint. Wei Wuxian doesn't kick him off. He doesn't say anything at all for a long minute. Even if he did, Wangji might not hear him over the pounding rush of blood in his own ears, the throbbing feeling in his head. This is undoubtedly what Qiren wanted chaperones for. Wangji feels like a shark, a snake, a hunting

bird: something cold and sharp and starving. And like something soft, untethered, an unraveled rug. And like a fool. What's possessed him? But Wei Wuxian isn't kicking him, isn't jerking away. "Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says, finally, in a strangled small voice.

Wangji lets go.

Wei Wuxian huffs a thin embarrassed little laugh, then splashes as he paddles around. He dips his face in the water, smooths his hair back down against his round skull, and while he does it Wangji feels an edge of panic rising in him, tight and fiery in his chest. If Wei Wuxian—if Wangji's offended him, if anyone else heard about—but then he's bobbing up beside Wangji again, close, his chin dipping in the water. "Did you, um," he says. "Have you ever seen an otter? Someone told me they link up, like that, in the sea." And then Wei Wuxian puts a light hand on Wangji's wrist. His eyes are strange, dark and shining as his head. Wangji feels his heart stop for a moment, and restart with a kick. "When they're floating. I've never seen it, I've only seen them in a river, I've never been to the sea, but," he says, and for a second he keeps his hand there, gripping like Wangji gripped him. And then his fingers slip off and he turns, turns again, sliding through the little waves like an otter himself, away.

He turns back and looks at Wangji over his shoulder. Wangji swallows and swims after him, silently. And then they go on together that way, paddling side by side towards shore.

There are fewer people lingering on the bank when they walk up from the water, and others packing up to depart, wringing out their hems, finding misplaced shoes. Wei Wuxian finds his own crumpled robe on a rock and uses it to pat his face dry. He glances back over the water as he's pulling his clothes on, as Wangji glances at him. "It's really beautiful," he says, with a sigh. "You must have great memories of this place."

"A few," Wangji admits.

"Did your parents bring you here?"

"Never," Wangji says. There must be something in his tone, in that word, that he didn't mean to let slip; Wei Wuxian lifts his head and gives Wangji an unreadable look. "My brother did, sometimes."

"Ah," he says. There's something knowing in his voice. Wangji wonders at it. "Did he teach you to swim?" he asks, and smiles at Wangji's nod. "It was the same for me. My shijie taught me." Then his face shifts slightly, takes on a teasing pout. "You know, Lan Zhan, you really should have shown us the lake before. Imagine keeping it hidden! I'd have come down here every day!"

"I'm sure you would have," Wangji says, and Wei Wuxian laughs with surprised delight and slaps his arm.

"Are you done?" Jiang Wanyin calls. "Hurry up and make yourself decent! You look like a cooked crab!"

It's true. The bronze of his skin is turning pinker across his face and chest in flushed-looking patches.

“Aw, are you worrying about me?” Wei Wuxian says, turning his voice to syrupy sweetness. Jiang Wanyin rolls his eyes and throws Wei Wuxian’s belt at his face, not so hard that he doesn’t catch it easily. “Going to rub balm on my shoulders, nanny?”

“In your dreams,” he snorts. “When you peel, don’t come crying for help.”

“I wouldn’t. I’ll peel myself. Hey! Have either of you ever wondered if you could use dried skin in an amulet? Like for—”

“No,” Wangji says, quickly.

“You’re a freak,” Jiang Wanyin says.

They walk up together, all in a bunch. On the trail some walk faster and some slower, and eventually the bunch thins into a long sparse line. Wei Wuxian keeps pace at Wangji’s side, close to the front. He chatters and asks questions and needles Wangji about debates they’ve been having in class, and seems content with only the briefest answers. He plucks a leafy branch from a shrub and fans himself with it, then drops it into the brush when he finds himself a passable walking-stick to make much over instead. Nobody has ever before found such heights of amusement along this path, Wangji thinks.

At a turn in the path, another wild idea overtakes him. Wangji glances up, then back; nobody is paying attention to them. Jiang Wanyin has disappeared up the rise. Jiang Yanli seems deep in conversation with a handful of the Jin girls, some yards behind them.

“Would you,” Wangji says, quietly, “like to see something?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Wei Wuxian says, without hesitation, and so Wangji steps quickly between the trees, ducking hanging vines and fallen saplings to reach the little hidden path he knows weaves upwards from this point. In a moment they’re out of sight of the main path altogether, weaving through a dense thicket of berry bushes and brambles that stick to their wet clothes, their hair. Wei Wuxian pushes vines aside with his walking-stick as they go. “This is so handy! I’m going to call it Problem Solver,” he says, holding it aloft proudly, as if he wasn’t also holding a sword that could serve the same purpose. He is really sort of ridiculous.

After a sweaty trek through the thorns the path opens up. “Oh,” Wei Wuxian breathes, staring out. “Wow.”

There’s a sandy clearing overlooking the lake here, just a jut of the mountain that sticks out like the point of a triangle. A few pines sway around them, bent but hardy, long-enduring against the high wind. Stepping nearer to the edge they can see the lake and its little valley stretching on into the distance, and the foothills beyond them, and behind them to their right the face of the mountain stretches upwards in silent majesty.

It’s a good view.

Wei Wuxian is silent beside him for a long moment. So long that words have time to form in Wangji’s throat and push themselves up and out into the air.

“Did you mean it?”

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian says. He glances at Wangji; his eyes seem glazed and lost for a second. “Mean what?”

“Your invitation,” Wangji says. “Fishing.”

“Yeah, of course,” Wei Wuxian says. He blinks. “Why, would you want to? I’m good at it. Ask Nie-xiong, I caught three last time. Oh, but you don’t eat fish, do you? Or do you? Or is it that you just can’t kill a fish? Hard to eat a fish without killing it,” he says, and then stops himself, as visibly as if he’d just jerked his own reins to a halt. “We could do something else,” he says, more slowly. “Whatever you like to do around here. I just thought it’d be nice to, you know.” He shrugs. “Get out, have a good time. Or whatever.”

“With me,” Wangji says, still feeling as if there’s a thread here that he’s failed to grasp.

Wei Wuxian looks at him.

“Can’t we be friends?” he says. “I thought—”

Wangji has had friends before, more or less: some of the other children he was raised alongside were consistently pleasant to study and train with, especially the ones as organized and quiet as he is. He sat with the same few people at lunch for most of his younger dormitory years. And then, of course, there’s Xichen, who he’s closer to than anybody.

Not that any of those experiences prepared him for this one.

“We can be,” Wangji says, haltingly. *Friends*, he doesn’t add. He doesn’t have a better word for them than that familiar one, though the feelings are not familiar at all. Wei Wuxian looks surprised for a second, and then he grins and thumps Wangji in the arm with his pointless stick.

“Yeah, of course!” he says. “I mean, obviously. Great. Well, if... you ever want to hang out, when lectures are over, if—”

“If you don’t have lines to copy?” Wangji says.

Wei Wuxian’s face travels through several emotions, passing through hilarity and outrage before landing on what looks like ‘mildly offended.’

“Lan Zhan,” he huffs. “We already have a funny one in the group, and it’s me. Don’t try to topple my position.”

“The group?”

“Yeah,” Wei Wuxian says. “You, me, Jiang Cheng, and Nie-xiong. The four of us are going to be best friends! We’ll spend every free second together this summer! Pals for life!”

“Oh,” Wangji says.

II. *the fight*

It becomes a routine: Wangji rises in the morning and does his exercises, then bathes quickly and dresses and goes to the lecture hall, and for a few hours he reads and answers discussion questions and watches various people argue with a passionately defensive Wei Wuxian. And then after lunch, and a little time in the library, he is scooped up by the same human whirlwind and taken to ramble the grounds of Cloud Recesses: they tromp through streams and up hills, recline in meadows, pick wild berries, and generally waste time with abandon. Wei Wuxian seems delighted by Wangji's added presence. Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang mostly seem baffled.

To be fair, Wangji is also baffled at this turn of events.

“What did he do? How’d he bully you into this?” Jiang Wanyin asks, after a week or so, when the two of them are sitting up on a boulder in the shade, watching Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang fumble around in the creek, ducking each other and shrieking. It’s a little surreal to be sitting here with them, still, even though he was specifically invited. Jiang Wanyin’s prodding isn’t helping. Wangji gives him a cold, even stare that will hopefully shut him up. Jiang Wanyin just frowns. “Is he blackmailing you?”

“With what,” Wangji says, icily. Jiang Wanyin flushes.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’m just—”

“AHHHHH!” Nie Huaisang screams, as he careens into the deeper portion of the stream and sinks, arms windmilling helplessly. Wei Wuxian bends in half and laughs so hard he sounds like he’s choking. “I’m drowning!” Nie Huaisang yells, even though there’s obviously still air in his lungs. “I’m drowning! Save me!”

“Stand up!” Jiang Wanyin calls down. “You’re fine, just stand up!”

Wei Wuxian waddles over and tries to pull him up; they both go toppling sideways for a minute, briefly ducking underwater with their knees in the air, and then Wei Wuxian pushes a sputtering Nie Huaisang upright, both of them sitting with their heads above the stream. There’s some unintelligible chatter between them and then they’re both laughing hysterically. “Idiots,” Jiang Wanyin mutters. He looks at Wangji. “It’s always like this, you know.”

“I assumed,” Wangji says.

“Hey,” Jiang Wanyin says, with mercurial heat. “Don’t go looking down on them. As if you Lans know everything.” Wangji slides him what he hopes is a withering look, but Jiang Wanyin seems unperturbed. “You two!” he yells down. “Are you going to catch anything or what? I’m starving!” Wei Wuxian throws him a rude gesture while he’s helping Nie Huaisang over the rocks. “Great fisherman my ass,” Jiang Wanyin mutters. “We should have eaten hours ago.”

Wangji digs in his sleeve for a minute. Finds the packet of doumian gao he tucked away earlier out of an overabundance of caution. It’s slightly squashed now, but he untwists the top of the paper and holds it out to Jiang Wanyin.

Jiang Wanyin stares at him. “What’s that?”

“You said you were starving,” Wangji reminds him, flatly. If Jiang Wanyin is incapable of recognizing food when he sees it, that’s hardly Wangji’s problem, he thinks. But then Jiang Wanyin takes the packet and looks into it with an air of checking for scorpions. He plucks a sticky roll out and takes a bite. He passes them back, and Wangji takes one of his own. They sit for a while, chewing in silence. The glutinous roll and bean paste stick to Wangji’s teeth, sweet and dense and melting. Jiang Wanyin takes a second one when he’s done with the first and eats it just as quickly.

“These are good,” he says. “Thanks.”

When Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang make it to the flat side of the boulder they sprawl on their backs on the sunniest edge, soaking the rock, still chattering about something—books, some publisher in Qinghe, plans for redecorating Nie Huaisang’s rooms, all of it too fast and disjointed for Wangji to follow—but then Wei Wuxian rolls onto his stomach and blinks up at Wangji, eyes locked on the paper packet. Wangji’s own eyes slide over Wei Wuxian’s back, the wet folds of his clothes curved over his ass, his bare ankles and long feet, and then summons up all his mental defenses and goes back to looking safely at the rock.

“Hey, is that food?”

Wangji hands it over without glancing up again. Wei Wuxian digs inside and then crams a roll in his mouth before passing it to Nie Huaisang.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, you’re just the best,” he says, and makes a low sound of pleasure as he chews, close to a moan. Wangji tries hard to ignore it.

“This is tasty,” Nie Huaisang says. “Your pastry chef is better than ours. I thought this year’s nian gao was going to pull my teeth out.”

This provokes a brief argument on the best spring festival desserts, then on which region has the best desserts in general: Wei Wuxian argues strenuously for Yunmeng, Nie Huaisang says “anywhere but where I live” with a glum air, and Jiang Wanyin wonders loudly what on earth Wei Wuxian would know about the food anywhere else.

“I’ve traveled!” Wei Wuxian says, hotly.

“To where?” Jiang Wanyin says. “Here? That doesn’t count.”

“How does it not count?”

“Because we’re all here.”

“So if we all went somewhere else together, it still wouldn’t count as traveling? Make that make sense!”

“Shut up,” Jiang Wanyin says. “You know what I mean. We’re not here to sightsee and eat.”

“We should be,” Wei Wuxian mutters. “We should at least be let out to night-hunt! What good’s all this education otherwise? It feels lazy to sit up on the mountain all year. We ought to sneak away and become wandering cultivators. Fighting wickedness, rescuing maidens, sleeping under the moon—”

Jiang Wanyin snorts. Wangji glares at him.

“Maidens?” Jiang Wanyin says. “Give me a break.”

“Fine, stay home. More maidens for me,” he says, and looks at Wangji. “And Lan Zhan! They’ll be falling into your arms, just looking at your handsome serious face. And your swordfighting! What maiden doesn’t love a fierce swordfight!” Wangji stares at him, utterly at a loss. “What?” he says.

“When the lectures are over you should all come to Qinghe,” Nie Huaisang says. “There are some really fine shops, I’ll show you the best places.”

“And then Yunmeng next,” Wei Wuxian says. “Come for the lotus harvest. We’ll take you out on the boats. There’s nothing like a lantern party in the middle of a lake, you’ll never want to leave. Oh!” he says. “But I’ve heard autumn is pretty here on the mountain, so maybe we should go all the way around in a circle.”

“You want us to wander around for a whole year? Just because you never think of working, doesn’t mean nobody else has responsibilities at home,” Jiang Wanyin says.

“Grouch,” Wei Wuxian says, without much heat. He turns to Wangji; his bright, searching eyes meet Wangji’s with the force of a reaching hand tugging at his sleeve. “You’d wander with me, right? What do you think? You’d definitely come to Lotus Pier, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, right,” Jiang Wanyin mutters under his breath.

Wangji swallows his pride. Tries to forget the word, *maidens*.

“If that’s not an imposition,” he says.

Jiang Wanyin chokes silently on a piece of his roll.

“Not at all, are you kidding?” Wei Wuxian says, ignoring him. He gives Wangji a dazzling smile, and Wangji feels his ears beginning to heat, bizarrely. Maybe he’s gotten too much sun

again. “You’re welcome anytime.”

“We’ll probably all meet in Yunmeng next year anyway,” Jiang Wanyin says. “Or Lanling, who knows,” he adds, and Wei Wuxian shoots him a suddenly murderous look. Jiang Wanyin puts his palms up. “Hey, it wasn’t my idea.”

“With any luck it’ll never happen.”

“What’s he talking about?” Nie Huaisang says, looking between them.

“My sister’s betrothed,” Jiang Wanyin says. “To Jin Zixuan.”

“He’s a prick,” Wei Wuxian says, with bitter sincerity. Nie Huaisang lets out a shocked little laugh and covers his mouth with one hand. “It’s not funny.”

“I’ve heard he’s a very respectable young man,” Nie Huaisang says, curiously. “Have you heard otherwise?”

“I didn’t have to hear anything,” Wei Wuxian says. “I’ve observed it with my own eyes. He’s a rat. Imagine either of your brothers were supposed to marry someone who acted like he didn’t exist! Like even hearing his name was offensive!”

“You know, da-ge’s a sentimental fellow, really,” Nie Huaisang muses. “I think that’d hurt his feelings. I think I’d have to teach that person a lesson.”

“Hmm,” Wei Wuxian says, thoughtfully.

“No,” says Jiang Wanyin.

“Just a little one?”

“No,” Jiang Wanyin says, more emphatically. “You want to get kicked out?”

“Come on, I’m not going to go and beat him,” Wei Wuxian says. “Even though I definitely, definitely could.”

“What did you have in mind?” Nie Huaisang says.

“Don’t encourage him!”

“Well,” Wei Wuxian says, warming up to it, “I was thinking, if you modified a sleep talisman into a sleep-*walking* talisman—”

“Be reasonable,” Jiang Wanyin says. “What if he went off a cliff?”

“Oh, no,” Wei Wuxian says, dryly.

“What about something to ruin all his clothes?” Nie Huaisang says. “Or dye his hair?”

“Nah,” Wei Wuxian says. “I don’t want to hit his vanity, I want to get his—”

“Pride?” Wangji finishes for him, and three heads swivel in his direction.

“Wow,” says Nie Huaisang, slowly.

“Yes!” Wei Wuxian says, pointing at Wangji in excitement. “Yes, yes. Yes. That’s exactly it. I want him to know *exactly* what it’s like to be ignored. To be looked at like he’s a bug. Oh! Oh. I’ve got it. He should get ignored by someone he *wants* to look at him!”

“Who on earth would that be?” Jiang Wanyin wonders. “That... Luo Qingyang?”

Nie Huaisang laughs.

“I think that would be barking up the wrong tree.”

“Alright, so, task number one, we find out who it is that he likes,” Wei Wuxian says. “Task number two—”

“Who’s this *we*?” Jiang Wanyin says.

“I can’t be caught at something like this,” Nie Huaisang says, although from his tone it doesn’t quite sound like a no.

“Lan Zhan?”

“Sowing discord is forbidden,” Wangji says.

“Well, so is arrogance and cliquish behavior,” Wei Wuxian says, as if reading from a list. Wangji thinks, somewhat uncharitably, that all the copying must have left the rules especially fresh in his mind. “And disrespectful treatment of women. We’d just be doling out a perfectly fair correction, when you think about it. Aren’t those punishable offenses?”

“So is bald sophistry,” Wangji says, and Wei Wuxian claps a hand against his chest like he’s been hit there.

“Lan Zhan!” he gasps. “Blunt your arrows when you aim them at my heart!”

“At least somebody has some sense,” Jiang Wanyin says. He stands up. “Come on, we’d better get back.”

“Betrayed by my own friends,” Wei Wuxian mutters, as they start gathering their things and heading for the path. “Ganged up on and battered and left for dead.” He turns his chin up haughtily when Wangji falls into step beside him, but doesn’t try to walk faster.

“Look on the bright side,” Nie Huaisang says, behind them. “Maybe you won’t get paired with him at all in next week’s sword training.”

Wei Wuxian stops dead on the path and stares into the middle distance.

“Huh,” he says.

Jiang Cheng shoots Nie Huaisang a narrow look.

"I swear, you do that on purpose!" he hisses.

"Oops," says Nie Huaisang.

The week begins with a quick round of skill assessment; afterwards they're broken into groups and assigned sparring partners. The outcome of their matches will determine their next ranking, and so on and so forth. Wangji and Wei Ying are placed together at the top, as Wangji expected. Jiang Wanyin, Jin Zixuan, and Luo Qingyang come just after, ahead of the rest. Nie Huaisang somehow manages to secure an exemption.

"A what?" says Jiang Wanyin, reading the list for the eighth time. "How?"

"Who knows," says Nie Huaisang.

"This is perfect," Wei Wuxian says, over Jiang Wanyin's shoulder. "As long as you beat Jin Zixuan in all your matches, I'll get paired with him next. All I have to do is lose!"

Wangji frowns. But Wei Wuxian isn't looking at him, so perhaps he doesn't see it.

"Why do you get the easy part?" Jiang Wanyin grumbles.

"Oh, come on, you can handle it," Wei Wuxian says, and elbows him. "You could beat him with your eyes closed. I'm not worried at all."

"You're just saying that because of your creepy little plot," Jiang Wanyin says, but looks like he's suppressing a smile.

Before the match begins, Wangji crosses to Wei Wuxian's side of the practice ring and holds out a hand.

"What's the matter?" Wei Wuxian says.

"Give me your sword."

"That's a forfeit," he says, blankly. Wangji says nothing, and Wei Wuxian's face screws up with confusion. "Lan Zhan—"

"I won't fight you if you're not fighting for real," Wangji says. "If you've decided to lose, then lose." He opens his hand again, holds it out. He knows he's being horribly stubborn, but

he can't help it. The thought of Wei Wuxian pretending to lose to him makes Wangji feel rotten inside. But Wei Wuxian just stares at him silently. Then, finally, he glances at the little crowd that's gathered, outside the ring of sand. Something mulish settles into his jaw.

"Are you afraid you can't beat me?" he says.

"Think whatever you want," Wangji says, and Wei Wuxian's mouth opens into a perfect little "o" of shock.

"Unbelievable," he says. "You know, Lan Zhan, maybe somebody should knock you down a peg or two."

Wangji lifts his brows, incredulously. Wei Wuxian's eyes narrow into vicious little lines. There is nothing fake in that expression. There is probably something wrong with Wangji, that such a thing could make him feel excited.

The match begins.

For the first few minutes it's hard to say how seriously Wei Wuxian is taking it. The stream of chatter, Wangji's come to understand, is part of the technique.

"But think about it!" Wei Wuxian insists, as Wangji's blunted practice blade swings over his head. He doesn't even really duck: he just steps back and leans, tilting his head just enough that the dull edge slides by his nose and away. It's as if he could read Wangji's mind, see the coming angle of his swing. Infuriating. Thrilling. He pops up again, still talking. "If you can repel spirits with a talisman, why couldn't you attract them?"

"Who the hell would want to attract angry spirits!" Jiang Wanyin yells, from the sidelines. They've been having this same argument all day, on and off, at various volumes. Qiren told them all this morning that the next time he heard anything about lure talismans he'd have someone kicked off the mountain, potentially literally. "And stop dropping your guard!" Jiang Cheng chides.

"I'm doing it on purpose!" Wei Wuxian snaps back, just as Wangji lunges for his visibly undefended left shoulder; Wei Wuxian dips and spins in close enough to land a point-hit on Wangji's gut and then slides past him, away, under his arm. Someone claps. Wangji grits his teeth. "The point of a lure flag would be to get them all in the same—"

Wangji darts forward, quick and light, nearly taking a point right from the front, and Wei Wuxian's attention snaps back to him, to their fight. Their swords clash and shear off one another as they step in a cautious circle, testing each other's guards. Wangji pushes in and then feints to the side and lets Wei Wuxian's momentum carry him in closer; he tries a quick jab but Wei Wuxian's fast enough to meet it and knock it aside. They turn and turn around each other, striking, blocking, faster and faster. Wei Wuxian spins into a flashy turn and blocks Wangji's strike behind his back, then huffs as Wangji neatly flips his grip and slides low to take a point on his leg.

"Three to three!" Nie Huaisang calls. "Come on, Wei-xiong!"

“Hear that?” Wei Wuxian says, to Wangji. His eyes are flashing, intent and focused again. “They think I can win.”

“Stop talking and try,” Wangji says, low and roughly, and Wei Wuxian makes an outraged noise and then parries Wangji’s blade away. Wangji attacks in sweeping powerful strokes, driving him backwards around and around the practice ring, but then Wei Wuxian steps sideways and the angle forces Wangji onto his back foot, and then he’s the one being driven. Their swords ring like strung bells, like hits of lightning, flashing silvery in the air like minnows in a bowl; the little crowd around them is making noise but Wangji can’t hear them anymore, can’t see them past the white blur of Wei Wuxian’s sleeves and the black fan of his hair as he spins and whips his blade through the air, as he twists and dives to match Wangji’s strokes, blow for blow for blow for blow, as if they were each fighting a mirror.

“You’ve got him!” someone calls, and Wei Wuxian laughs loudly. Wangji arcs up and tries a slashing downward cut. Wei Wuxian blocks neatly and ducks the backswing and then falls and rolls, springs up on his knees to slice at Wangji’s legs; Wangji jumps the strike and aims down and Wei Wuxian has to twist quickly to avoid the point of his blade. Wangji’s blood thunders in his ears, his arms sing with the shivering of the sword behind every hit; Wei Wuxian is still grinning like a madman. His eyes are like hot stars. Wangji could fight him like this for a hundred years and not get tired of it. Nothing else would need to exist.

“Somebody has to win!” a voice yells, dryly.

“I’m about to!” Wei Wuxian yells back. He tries a quick angled hit meant to knock the sword from Wangji’s hand. If he does, he’s going to take the match. Wangji can taste defeat like copper in his mouth, sore as a bitten tongue. So he borrows a trick. Wangji lets him think he’s fumbling, that he’s dropping his blade arm: when Wei Wuxian stabs out again Wangji catches the flat of his sword between his elbow and his side and clamps down, then makes a neat turn, elbowing Wei Wuxian and sliding his sword away. It goes clattering onto the dirt. Wei Wuxian dives for his weapon, but Wangji hooks him with an ankle and they go rolling together, landing with Wei Wuxian on his back and Wangji holding the sword above him, the point mere inches from his neck.

“Yield,” Wangji grits out. Wei Wuxian stares at him from the ground; one hand has already grabbed Wangji’s other wrist, as if to wrestle him down and keep fighting. He really would. Wangji wishes they could: wishes they could roll and scrabble at each other, tear at each other’s clothes, fight like animals. He doesn’t know why. He does. He shouldn’t. His chest is heaving. Wei Wuxian’s chest heaves underneath him too, in echo, one body pushing air out while the other draws it in. “Yield,” Wangji repeats, a little breathlessly, and sets the very tip of the sword to Wei Wuxian’s throat. It’s not sharp enough to cut, just to press in. When the metal touches him Wei Wuxian inhales sharply and his eyes do something strange.

“I,” Wei Wuxian says, blankly. His fingers dig into Wangji’s arm. Then he lets go and laughs shakily. “That’s my move!” he says. He pushes the flat of the sword away. “Don’t gloat, Lan Zhan. I almost had you.”

Wangji lets him up. When he stands he can see a dozen people watching, maybe more, chattering loudly and laughing behind their hands. It sends a flush of embarrassment up Wangji’s spine, into his face; he turns away and holds a hand out to help Wei Wuxian up. He

takes it and Wangji pulls him upright, and for a second their hands linger together, like in the lake, warm where they're joined. Wei Wuxian slides his fingers away and pushes loose hair out of his eyes and gives Wangji a nervous smile. "Good fight," he says, sincerely. "I'll get you next time."

Wangji has little doubt that he could. That he will.

Nie Huaisang meets them at the edge of the practice ring, Jiang Wanyin trailing behind.

"Great fight!" Nie Huaisang says. "You two are so well-matched." He lowers his voice. "Really convincing stuff."

"Right," Wei Wuxian laughs, only a little falsely. He glances at Wangji; his eyes slide down Wangji's body and then flick up to his eyes again, and then flick away quickly. Wangji feels his skin prickle underneath his clothes. "I bet it looked close."

"By a hair!"

"All this to get one spar with that guy?" Jiang Wanyin grumbles. "Waste of effort. Just win next time, stop embarrassing us."

In the afternoon's second round, Wangji is paired with Jiang Wanyin, Wei Wuxian with Jin Zixuan; Wangji tries to watch the other match, but Jiang Wanyin is good enough that it takes all of his attention to keep him back-footed. Jiang Wanyin's form is very correct, and where he's not as light and quick as Wei Wuxian he compensates with solid defense and good timing. Wangji enjoys the match, up until the minute there's scattered shouting from the crowd and both he and Jiang Wanyin turn to see Wei Wuxian and Jin Zixuan being dragged apart by the instructors. They're yelling and thrashing to get at each other, but thankfully they've both dropped their swords. Wangji and Jiang Wanyin glance at each other for a split-second and then drop their own. Together they start shouldering their way into the other practice ring.

"These are friendly matches!" the instructors cry out. They're ignored.

"See how you like it!" Wei Wuxian hollers. "You pompous—"

"You're no better than an animal!" Jin Zixuan yells over him. "They should put a bit in your mouth and feed you from a trough!" There's a scuffle around him, some exclamations, and suddenly Jin Zixuan breaks free from the hold: he lunges forward, fists raised. He is almost on a still-restrained Wei Wuxian when Wangji pushes through between the flailing bodies and shoves Jin Zixuan backwards so hard that he stumbles and falls onto the ground. One of his cousins scrambles to pull him upright. Wangji glances over his shoulder: Jiang Wanyin's gone to pull Wei Wuxian further out of reach, standing bodily between him and the little gathering crowd of Jins. Wei Wuxian's jaw is rigid with rage. "Stay out of this, Lan Wangji!" Jin Zixuan says, red-faced, while his cousins dust off his back. "You have no right!"

Wangji turns back and fixes him with a cold stare. Several wildly inappropriate phrases spring to mind.

“Calm yourself,” Wangji manages.

“*That* one,” Jin Zixuan says, and points a finger at Wei Wuxian, “should watch his vulgar mouth when he talks to—”

"You watch yours!" says Jiang Wanyin.

“Enough!” the instructors yell. “Everyone is to disperse immediately!”

“I’ll disperse his face!” Wei Wuxian shouts. Jiang Wanyin puts a hand over his mouth and is promptly bitten.

“What’s going on?!” a loud voice booms, over the chaos of the practice grounds: it’s Qiren, sweeping in with his secretaries and assistants running in formation behind him. The chattering dies down, a little, and the circle of onlookers starts to inch away. Qiren looks at Wangji narrowly and then at everyone else. “Who’s responsible for this?”

“He is!” Jin Zixuan says, and points at Wei Wuxian. Qiren purses his lips and looks between the two of them for a second.

“You,” he says, to Wei Wuxian, “*and* you,” he says, turning to a startled Jin Zixuan, “come with me. Now.”

The two of them are released; they stare at each other hatefully for a second, but then fall into step behind Qiren and march away with stiff backs and lifted chins, pointedly not looking at each other. Wangji falls into step after them, a dozen paces behind. They’re almost up to the main pavilions before anyone notices he’s come along.

“What are you doing?” Wei Wuxian whispers, when he catches sight of Wangji over his shoulder. “Go, get out of here.” Qiren turns, sees Wangji, and stops cold mid-stride. The others all halt awkwardly around him in the middle of the path.

“Wangji?” Qiren prompts. “Did you have something to say?”

"I am also at fault."

“No, he isn’t,” Wei Wuxian says, stepping forward between them. He looks in Wangji’s direction: his expressive eyebrows seem to be writing Wangji a very stern silent message to get lost. “It was just the two of us. He didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“He did so,” Jin Zixuan says. “He struck me without warning.”

“It’s true,” Wangji admits. “It was only one push. But it drove him to the ground easily.”

Wei Wuxian snorts.

"Hey," says Jin Zixuan. "That’s not exactly—”

“Come, then,” Qiren sighs.

The three of them spend the rest of the afternoon kneeling in the courtyard to reflect on their poor conduct. They're informed they will kneel tomorrow too, and then spend the following week copying lines after lectures. In compassionate consideration of the natural hot-bloodedness that can arise between young men in the sparring ring, they are not whipped. This time.

"Good thing we're not in Lanling," Jin Zixuan mutters, when they're left alone, on their knees on the gravel and sweating under the sun. Wangji has his eyes closed against the glare of the white stones, and also because if he looks at Jin Zixuan's scowling face for another minute he's going to say something regrettable. "My father would have you beaten with a paddle right on the front steps for your disrespect."

"Oh?" Wei Wuxian whispers back. "He likes that kind of thing?"

Wangji cracks an eye open; Jin Zixuan has gone an apoplectic shade of purple.

"Never speak to me again, ever," he hisses.

"Gladly," Wei Wuxian hisses back.

Wangji shuts his eyes again. After a while a pebble taps softly against his leg, on the side opposite from Jin Zixuan. "Psst," says Wei Wuxian. Wangji gives him a sideways look. "What's the matter with you?" he says, very quietly. "You weren't even in trouble, why volunteer?"

"Shh!" says Jin Zixuan.

"I'm not talking to you, stop eavesdropping," Wei Wuxian snaps. He looks at Wangji again. "You didn't do anything wrong."

He did, though. Nothing he can admit to aloud. How could he be honest about this? When he saw Jin Zixuan's fist raised, Wangji was overcome with the urge to black both his eyes, to grind his face into the dirt. He has no particular hatred for Jin Zixuan, and it's not as if Wangji is unaware of how provoking Wei Wuxian can be. It's only that something hot and terrible woke inside him, and is still roiling in his stomach. They were cruel thoughts. Kneeling is the least of what he owes his conscience. Wangji slides his eyes back to the gravel. Beside him, he hears Wei Wuxian sigh. "Well, it won't be so bad, with you here too," he says, absently, and Wangji feels himself shiver inside.

He feels the same. The same way.

"Stop sucking up," says Jin Zixuan, under his breath. "He doesn't want to hear you babble any more than I do."

"You don't know anything," Wei Wuxian says.

"I know everyone here thinks of you as a trouble—"

"Jin-gongzi," Wangji says, not in a whisper. Jin Zixuan looks at him. Wangji looks back, evenly. "Silence."

Jin Zixuan's face turns red again.

"Of all the," he huffs, and then he glances at Wangji one more time, and his mouth clamps shut. He closes his eyes and settles into a meditation posture, obviously done with both of them. Wangi turns his head slightly to see Wei Wuxian, who's staring at him with shocked eyes and parted lips, as if he had rising words caught in his throat. But none come out. He doesn't say anything. Finally he puts his hands in his lap and lowers his gaze to the ground, and after a minute Wangji does the same.

None of them speak for hours.

When they're released, Jin Zixuan stalks away immediately. Wei Wuxian lingers for a moment, rubbing his knees.

"Ah, augh, ow," he groans. "My legs just aged a hundred years."

"Cold will help," Wangji says.

In early evening the cold spring is empty; dinner is only a little while away, and the sun is just descending. The trees around the spring are tall and green, and the light here faint, turning their bodies into pale shadows, the world into soft-edged blue. Wangji leads him over the bridge and down the rough stone stairs. Behind him Wei Wuxian stops on the highest step and exclaims at the beauty of it.

"It's so pretty," he sighs, and leans against the railing with a dreamy look on his face. "You know all the nicest places. I think I have you figured out, Lan Zhan. You act so strict, but you're really a beauty-lover at heart, aren't you."

Wangji looks up at him from the side of the pond. Studies his face. Could he mean—but no, he's gazing out at the water, the trickling stream over the rock fall, still without a hint of teasing in the set of his mouth. He wasn't talking about himself. It wasn't a joke. But he's right: Wangji is. An admirer of beautiful things. How odd to have that seen and understood, when he barely understands it himself. Wangji lets his eyes trace Wei Wuxian's silhouette, framed in the last orange light of the early evening that comes in slivers between the trees. His white robes look blue in the shadow; his black hair is lined with gold. Wangji turns his face away and leans Bichen against a tree, then pulls his outer robes off, and after a moment more fabric rustles behind him, and a sword clatters against a rock, so Wei Wuxian must be doing the same. Wangji steps down into the cold water, feeling the frozen grip of it seize the muscles in his legs. It sends a thrill up his spine and his arms, curls like a stab in his belly. He

suppresses a shiver and sinks in up to his waist, and then to his neck, the water pressing into the skin of his back like icy fingers, like a thousand cold nails. He breathes through his nose slowly, willing himself to stop quivering. Out of long practice, he does.

He turns around just in time to see Wei Wuxian dip a naked foot into the pond and then shriek at the top of his lungs. He flails back and stands with his arms wrapped around his bare chest and his leg still poised in midair, toes clenching. His face is accusatory: he looks like a cat that's been startled off a table. If his body had fur it would be standing on end. "What!" he yells. "Is this a trick?"

Wangji can't help it: his mouth makes a small smile without permission. He tries to swallow it but it only widens until his cheeks ache. Wei Wuxian stares furiously into the pond and then at Wangji, but as he lifts his eyes to Wangji's they soften, and then the rest of him follows suit. He puts his foot down onto the grass. Rests his hands on his hips. "Are you a sadist?" he says, without rancor. "What's so funny about me getting turned into an icicle?"

"I told you," Wangji says. "Cold will help."

Wei Wuxian sighs and looks up at the heavens, and then down at the water again. He puts his foot back into the pond and makes a bitten-back grunt of displeasure. Then steps into the water to his knees without hesitating any further. Let it never be said that he's a coward, Wangji thinks. He strides through the water slowly until he's just below the ledge, his head level with Wei Wuxian's chest. "Here," Wangji says, and holds his hands out. Wei Wuxian watches him with searching eyes, and then slides his hands trustingly into Wangji's. For a second Wangji just clasps their fingers together, his cold ones and Wei Wuxian's warm ones, and Wei Wuxian swallows hard, his throat bobbing. He licks his perfect lips.

And then Wangji jerks him forward into the pond.

Wei Wuxian doesn't really have time to scream: he just trips and splashes down into the water, displacing it in a slapping wave. Wangji keeps a tight hold on him, pulling him up again just as quickly, and Wei Wuxian comes up with wet hair plastered over his eyes and his mouth open in a sputtering yell. He spits water into Wangji's face and tears his hands away, slapping at Wangji's forearms in inchoate fury.

"Assassin!" Wei Wuxian shouts, when he gets his air back. He cups a handful of water in his palm and throws it at Wangji's eyes. "Traitor!" He flips back so that he can kick a high wall of spray at Wangji, legs thundering in the water; Wangji ducks underwater to avoid it and comes up to find Wei Wuxian still glaring at him, peeling the hair away from his face. "You're a monster," he huffs. "I thought you were being nice!"

"I was," Wangji says.

"Well, then we have really different ideas about that!" Wei Wuxian snaps. "How could you —"

"Are you cold?"

“Of course I’m cold, you—huh,” Wei Wuxian says, and then floats back and swishes his arms back and forth. He paddles in a small circle and then dips his face under the water, pushes his hair back, and grins. “You’re so mean, Lan Zhan. You should have told me it was a distraction.” He laughs. Dives and comes up again, and then treads water in a slow circle around Wangji. “Hey, maybe you’re the troublemaker after all. Do you have to come up here a lot?”

Oftener, lately, Wangji thinks.

“It promotes clarity.”

“It promotes freezing,” Wei Wuxian says, and laughs again, and shakes once all over. The water laps his face. He rolls over in it, like a dog in grass, and stretches his arms over his head. Then turns back to Wangji and floats close to him. Wangji watches him do it, feeling an awful, delicious covetousness stoke itself in his chest, his hands. Wei Wuxian’s shoulders are broad and rounded with muscle, his back ripples with each stroke; his arms are long and lean and glistening again, even here in the faint dark of the pool. The water has gone purple-black already, and their bodies below the surface are obscured, the color of thunderclouds. If their legs tangled together no one could see it; if their bodies slid against one another the cold water might hide his flush. To think Wangji imagined this feeling was hatred at first. How little he knows himself; what untrammelled wilderness there is inside him still, what brush yet to be cut. Wei Wuxian makes him feel like such a child.

Water sloshes; Wei Wuxian stops paddling for a second and steps closer. “Lan Zhan,” he says, breaking Wangji out of his reverie. With his feet on the bottom of the pond he could stand up all the way, lift his shoulders out of the water. But he doesn’t. He bends his knees and paddles his arms slowly and floats in front of Wangji, looking up. There is something shy and unfamiliar in his eyes. The lashes are wet. “Do you, um,” he says, and falters. “I know we didn’t get off to a great, uh. Start.”

Wangji regards him thoughtfully, but doesn’t deign to give that a response. Wei Wuxian snorts and splashes a little water at him. “You know, you’re the one who tore up my book and broke my wine,” he says. “I didn’t do anything but be friendly.”

“Hm,” Wangji says.

“I didn’t,” Wei Wuxian protests. “I’ve been nice to you the whole time! I was excited to meet you, you know. You have a good reputation. I thought,” he says, and trails off.

Greed rises in Wangji’s throat; a feeling like a constricting knot.

“What,” he says. Wei Wuxian’s eyes lift to his jerkily, as if startled out of some distant daydream. Some memory.

“Oh,” he says. “Just. You’re different. At first I thought you’d be more... well, your brother’s very nice, but he’s not fun. Like you are.”

Wangji blinks.

And then he lowers himself into the water, bending his knees until it touches his chin, his cheeks. He sinks low enough that his hair floats around his shoulders. Wei Wuxian snorts a laugh through his nose, no louder than a breath, and then they're even in height again, looking at each other across the dim little distance of the pond. A thousand feelings waver inside Wangji like butterflies, like moths battering a lantern inside him. Nobody has ever, in his whole life, said such a thing about him. Before today he would have thought they were mocking him. Anybody else would be.

That shivering sensation runs down his back again, that bead of sweat: something inside Wangji turns over, startled, like a turtle on its shell. Like a revolution of the sun, illuminating everything. The unfinished shape of this feeling emerges like the sky under a moving cloud, too bright to be grasped completely.

The real sun sinks an inch lower.

"Wei... Ying, I," Wangji says. He knows the beginning of this sentence, but not the end; it comes out of his mouth anyway, the way dew rolls off a leaf when it must. But Wei Wuxian—Wei Ying—blinks and smiles and shoves him in the shoulder before he can finish.

"Ha," he says. "Finally. You can be so stuffy sometimes."

"Yes," Wangji admits.

Wei Ying grins, not unkindly. Wangji is possessed of the wild urge to push across the pool, crowd him against the ledge, and kiss that smug, happy mouth until it's red as a plum. Until Wangji's brain goes soft as a cloud, until their bodies touch and meld and merge, until the moon rises and tomorrow comes unnoticed, until—

This is a new feeling. So new it makes him lightheaded.

"Hey, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, suddenly, softly. Wangji's heart stutters. He couldn't know what Wangji was thinking. Could he? Does he? Would he want the same things? "Do you think—"

"Hm?"

"Do you think we missed dinner?" he says, in a puzzled voice. And Wangji lowers himself slowly into the pond to cool his head.

Wangji wakes early the next morning and lies in bed for longer than usual, wondering at himself. He runs a finger over his mouth and his stomach clenches; the fantasy he woke from feels like a memory, so strong and real it lingers in his body like a bruise.

He washes his face and hands and dresses lightly—the days are still hot, though the season will turn in only weeks, and the lectures will end, and autumn will descend on the mountain soon, too soon, he can't remember the last time he wanted time to stop before—but it's still not the hour for class. He tries to read, and can't make himself focus. Tries to eat, but his stomach is still in a knot. What will he say when they meet again? What will his expression look like? Their new familiarity feels... tangible, like a rope. Wangji probably overstepped, pulling him into the pond. Touching him, thinking those things. Maybe Wei Ying saw his covetous glances, the heat in his eyes, maybe he'll think Wangji is secretly a terrible, voracious—

Wangji shuts his eyes. Breathes slowly through his nose and out through his mouth. He has got to find something to do.

So he settles at his desk and plays the guqin for half an hour, maybe longer. His fingers make an unusual amount of mistakes, but they make them with confidence: there is something real under his playing today, a resounding sensation like the feeling of the lake stretching on and on below their bodies. Depth. He doesn't know where it comes from. But every trembling note finds an answer in a string inside him.

He is early to class anyway; he sits and waits in silence, reading from his workbook, while the others file in.

Wei Ying stumbles performatively on the edge of his desk as he sits down. A folded paper square skids across the floor and lodges beneath Wangji's leg. Wangji palms it without looking, anxiously. He unfolds it later, at the first chance, while they are all meant to be copying down the various types of curses and spiritual deviations that can affect a cultivator's sword. His fingers tremble slightly as he unfolds it. *My knees feel great today, it reads. That cold spring must be magic! Let's go back soon.*

Wangji risks a glance across the aisle; Wei Ying's gaze is tilted down to his book, a model of diligence. But he's smiling as he writes, and when his eyes flick over to Wangji's, just for a second, they're alight with something beautiful.

This is love, Wangji realizes, right then. This is what it feels like. It's happening afresh even as it dawns on him.

He copies the next line wrong, and the next.

III. *the lure*

They do not go to the cold spring together again after their second punishment. When the kneeling is finished Jiang Yanli appears in a kind but ill-timed gesture—as far as Wangji is concerned—to collect Wei Ying before dinner, promising ointment and sympathy. Wangji goes alone, and pretends that he isn't sulking. Difficult work.

The next night they copy lines in the library until it's nearly dark. Jin Zixuan sits on the other side of the shelves and makes loud shushing noises whenever Wei Ying speaks, which is often. The chastisements don't deter him: he shuffles his own desk closer and closer to Wangji's as the hours slide by, until they are almost touching where they sit. If this were a few weeks ago Wangji would have shoved him away by now or moved himself, gut churning with those previously unnameable feelings. As it is, he can't keep his face from going hot, his eyes from sliding sideways every few minutes to watch him at work, or at the lack thereof. Wei Ying shows him sketches in the margins of his workbook and asks him questions about his favorite foods, whether he's ever seen a water ghost, his favorite animals, what instrument he plays and how long he's played it, whether he likes rain or sun better, the furthest he's ever travelled, why he picked the name of his sword, what famous dead or possibly immortal legendary heroes he most admires, what he thinks the highest calling of cultivation is, and a few other things that surface from the tireless spring-wound machinery of his mind. It might be exhausting if Wangji weren't so hungry for it, if he weren't suddenly starved for every scrap of attention that Wei Ying turns on him. As it is it feels rich and satisfying, a banquet that could never overflow him, never sour. It's strange to like someone so much. Wangji feels almost sick on it.

This goes on for nearly a week. But then, on the last day of their punishment, Wei Ying does not appear in the library after lectures and lunch. Wangji waits, listening to the soft scrape of Jin Zixuan's brush, and mindlessly copies his own lines. But the sun sinks down, and Jin Zixuan departs with a cool glare, and Wei Ying still does not come.

At twilight Wangji heads back to the guest houses to look for him, but he's met on the path by Nie Huaisang.

"Oh," Nie Huaisang says. "You're here."

"Where—"

"He's in trouble," Nie Huaisang says, with none of his usual dissembling. "Come on. Maybe you can talk some sense into them."

He leads Wangji back up to the main pavilions, where they find Jiang Wanyin and Xichen arguing in the forecourt of the mingshi, with some of the Jin contingent hovering nearby and looking eager for gossip.

"Zewu-jun, sir, there is no way," Jiang Wanyin is saying, through his teeth, "he could have... no way he *would* have done it," he says, and Xichen sighs.

“The talisman that was brought to us—”

“He’s been yammering about those things all week! We all heard him!” one of the Jins yells, pointing at the paper flag in Xichen’s hand. Jin Zixuan’s cousin, with the sour expressions. Wangji keeps forgetting his meaningless, unimportant name. “Who else would it be?”

Jiang Wanyin turns a baleful eye on him.

“Doesn’t that mean that it could have been anyone?” he says, stiffly. “If you heard him talking about it, maybe it was you who did it!”

“Hold your tongue!” Jin Zixuan’s cousin shouts, and pushes through the little crowd. A few of the others grab at his sleeves and drag him back. “Who but Wei Wuxian would do such a thing anyway! He’s already attacked someone! Nothing’s beneath him!”

Jiang Wanyin and Wangji both take a step forward. They notice each other at last, and Jiang Wanyin’s expression shifts hopefully.

“What about you?” he says, to Wangji. “Haven’t you been in the library with him all week? Can’t you vouch for him?”

Wangji looks at Xichen. His face looks sad rather than angry. Disappointed, maybe. He glances at the paper in Xichen’s hand again; a talisman, smeared with cinnabar ink, torn at the edge. What on earth has Wei Ying been accused of?

“If you know anything,” Xichen starts.

“Come on,” Jiang Wanyin interrupts. “Tell him.”

“It’s true,” Wangji says. “We’ve been in the library until sundown every day.”

“And after?” Xichen says.

Wangji feels a flush of heat creep up his chest, his neck. He hopes it won’t show. But Xichen can always tell these things.

“We’ve walked. Together, in the hills, a few times,” he says, feeling horribly exposed. Jiang Wanyin is looking at him, along with Xichen. Along with all the others. He keeps his back straight. They only walked. They didn’t do any of the things that Wangji imagined. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. “I have not seen him use any talismans,” he adds.

“Did you ever see him going down to the lake alone?”

“No,” Wangji says. “Why?”

“Talismans like these were found around the top of the lake, near where the Caiyi road passes by,” Xichen says, and holds it up. The characters are familiar, but the placement... Wangji frowns at it. There is something wrong about them. The paper’s been crumpled and the lines smeared, so it’s hard to tell where exactly the error, or the deviation, lies. “They look like

altered spirit-repelling flags. I understand that Wei Wuxian has proposed this type of talisman recently."

"Yes," Wangji says. Jiang Wanyin glares at him. "Imagining is not doing," he adds.

"True," Xichen says. He looks at Wangji for a moment, considering, and then turns back to Jiang Wanyin. "These wouldn't work, such as they are. But think if they had. The lake road is full of merchants, this time of year. Real lure flags could have made the way very dangerous."

"He'd never do something like that," Jiang Wanyin says.

"The fact remains, someone did," Xichen says, in his soft grave voice. "Until we have the truth of it, I think it's best Wei Wuxian stays in your quarters."

Wangji follows Jiang Wanyin back to the guest pavilions in the dark; Jiang Wanyin is sullen and silent on the way, until he turns on Wangji and pokes a finger into the air between them.

"You know he wouldn't," he says. It's a question.

Wangji nods.

Jiang Wanyin's shoulder's relax, just fractionally. "Okay," he says. "Good."

Jiang Yanli is waiting in the courtyard of the guest houses, sitting at a table in the light of the lanterns with another girl in Jin gold. Jiang Wanyin's eyes narrow when he sees her, but he says nothing; still, it's hard not to notice his expression, clenched and hard as it is. The girl looks up, then pats Jiang Yanli's hand and hurries away. "What did she want?" he says, sitting down on the bench with a thump. He glances over his shoulder at her departing back. "To spy on us?"

"A-Cheng," Jiang Yanli frowns. "She's been very kind to me. She doesn't think it was him, either." She glances up at Wangji. "Were you able to—"

"He tried," Jiang Wanyin interrupts. "But it doesn't matter."

He slumps down onto his elbows.

"May I speak with him?" Wangji says.

Jiang Wanyin grunts and waves a hand at him. Jiang Yanli gives him an encouraging smile.

"Of course," she says. "He'd be glad to see you."

There is a Lan guard at the entry of the Jiang guesthouse, who looks stolidly into the middle distance as Wangji passes through the doorway. Jiang Yanli raps on an inner door with the backs of her knuckles. "A-Xian," she calls. "Your friend is here."

There's a shuffling noise from the other side. Through the thin door, Wangji can hear Wei Ying sigh.

“Tell Nie-xiong I’m not—”

“Your other friend,” Jiang Yanli says, with a suppressed laugh in her voice. There’s a thump, and then the door slides open abruptly. Wei Ying is on the other side of it, looking surprised. And more than a little wary. “Invite him in,” Jiang Yanli chides. “I’ll get you something to eat.”

She leaves them to it. Wangji stays in the hallway where he is, and Wei Ying only looks at him for a long moment. There’s a mulish set to his jaw. He’s dressed in dark black and grey, his own colors. Not the Lans’ school robes. As if he were already being dismissed. Expelled.

“Lan Zhan, if you’re here to tell me off for—”

“I know it wasn't you,” Wangji interrupts.

Wei Ying stares at him. The brief silence is painful.

“Oh,” he says, eventually. “Okay. Well. Then... come in.” Wangji steps through the door and Wei Ying slides it shut again after him. Wangji glances around; the room’s in disarray, with clothes thrown across the bed and the floor, and papers strewn around. There’s a rucksack on the floor by the door, as if Wei Ying was planning to go somewhere in a hurry. “Sorry, I don't know why I thought,” he says, and then trails off and scrubs at his face with both hands for a second. “Okay, first things first.” He folds his arms across his chest. “Do you have any extra talisman paper?”

“What?”

“They took all of mine,” Wei Ying says. “And I’ll definitely need some tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he says. “I have to go stop whatever’s coming!”

“I thought,” Wangji says, slowly, “those talismans wouldn’t work?”

“Whoever did it is an idiot, for sure,” Wei Wuxian snorts, and kneels to rifle through the bag: Wangji sees rope and brushes, tools for making arrays, and a few other things jumbled together. He’s packed for a night-hunt. “But I saw the one they found, and some of the characters were right. Maybe by accident. The rest was a mess, but it’s definitely going to lure in *something*. People could get hurt.”

“We have to tell—”

“I did,” Wei Ying shrugs. He stands up and hefts the bag over one shoulder. “Nobody believed me. They said I was wrong about the reversal pattern, that you’d have to adapt a whole new character to mean—anyway, it doesn’t matter. If nobody else is going down there tonight, then I have to.”

For a moment Wangji can think of nothing to say. Accused, punished, mistrusted, the streak of stubborn righteousness in Wei Ying remains untarnished as gold. To think Wangji believed

him merely a show-off.

To think Wangji believed this feeling was enmity.

“Alone?” he says, through the rock in his throat.

“I can’t get them in trouble,” Wei Ying says. “If I got Jiang Cheng expelled...” he exhales through his nose, hard. “She’d kill me.”

“I’ll go with you,” Wangji says. Wei Ying’s gaze flicks up. His mouth twists.

“Lan Zhan,” he says. “That’s... nice of you, but you’ll—”

“I can’t be expelled,” Wangji says. “I live here.”

Wei Ying boggles at him. And then he smiles.

“Ah, Lan Zhan,” he says, wonderingly. “You really are the funniest person I’ve ever met.”

When they’ve slipped away from the house they run in silence, sticking to the shadows. They sprint as fast as they can go without tripping, Wangji in front; there’s no path of the mountain that he doesn’t know by heart, even if they grow much wilder and denser in the dark. When they’re far out of sight of the pavilions they stop and Wei Ying hastily pins talismans on their chests and activates them with a flick of his wrist: small circular pools of light burst out and radiate around them, bubblelike and bright, as if they were both miniature human stars. “Do you like it?” he says, glowing. Literally. “I’ve been trying to get the circles bigger, but this is as far as it goes.”

He truly is incredible.

They’re almost down to the shores of the lake when they hear a crashing in the bushes behind them, coming closer. Wangji draws Bichen and Wei Ying sketches a defensive talisman in the air, holding the last stroke poised and tense, and then Jin Zixuan comes stomping out of the brush. Wei Ying scowls and swipes the unfinished talisman away. “What do you want?” he snaps. “Are you following us?”

“Of course I’m following you,” Jin Zixuan snaps back. “You’re two giant balls of light!”

“Get lost,” Wei Ying says, “you—”

There's another, fainter sound of something rustling in the woods. All three of them freeze and glance at each other, then look outward into the darkness between the branches. Somewhere an owl hoots, and something scurries up the bark of a tree. But there are larger things than birds moving out there, unseen. Wangji can almost sense them looming. Wei Ying was right. "Go back," Wei Ying says, quietly. "Tattle on me if you want, but get out of here."

"Are you trying to be noble?" Jin Zixuan says. "It doesn't suit you."

"Come on, do you really want to get me in trouble this badly?"

"I don't care about you," Jin Zixuan says. "I'm here to do my duty!"

"What? What nonsense, you're—"

"—what would you know about responsibi—"

"People like you never—"

"It's my stupid cousin, so it's my job to clean it up!" Jin Zixuan finishes, loudly, and then looks aghast at himself. His mouth clicks shut. Wei Ying stares at him with dawning comprehension on his face.

"What do you mean, your stupid cousin?" he says, and puts his hands on his hips. "I knew it! Your family is framing me!"

"It wasn't my idea," Jin Zixuan says, grudgingly. "I didn't know anything about it. I was writing lines in the library just like you," he adds, to Wangji. His face is a little red from yelling. "It's not his fault. He's loyal. He was only trying to... help me."

"Help you?" Wei Ying scowls. "By getting me kicked out?"

"Yes, obviously!" Jin Zixuan says. He takes a visible breath. "I'd never allow such a ridiculous prank," he adds, in a calmer voice. "He didn't realize there could be... harm in it. But I made him tell me where the talismans are. If we work quickly—"

"I don't believe you," Wei Ying says. "This is just another trick."

"*You* don't believe *me*?" Jin Zixuan hisses. "Who do you think—"

Wangji slams Bichen back into its sheath with a loud, rattling smack. The two of them stop fighting and look guiltily in his direction.

"Show us," Wangji says.

Without much more complaining, Jin Zixuan leads them to a clearing by the road, where there are a dozen paper talismans fluttering in the dark, high on a handful of trees.

"I think this is all of them," he says.

Wei Ying grumbles under his breath the entire time, but between the three of them they get the talismans down and deactivated in a matter of minutes. They really might have worked, Wangji thinks, as he crumples one in his hands. There's a faint thrum of power in it, no matter how imprecise the characters looked. It really might have called something in. Jin Zixuan dusts his robes off while Wei Ying examines his own handfuls of paper, turning them over and over with a puzzled expression.

"Your cousin's calligraphy is so awful," Wei Ying says. Jin Zixuan snorts disdainfully, but doesn't disagree. Wei Ying holds a talisman up higher, so that the red ink shines in the small circle of light. "I still can't figure out what he wrote for... hey, look at this. Am I crazy, or does that say—"

Something cracks in the underbrush. A loud sound, like a snapped branch.

They turn, slowly, in the direction of the noise. There is another rustling sound, and then a huffing breath.

And a growl.

"Wei Ying," Wangji whispers.

Wei Ying's gone grim-faced. The talisman flutters in his grasp. Wangji can see it now, the mistake. In the character for suppression, restraint.

Jin Zixuan squints. Then his eyes widen.

"Does that say.... *bear*?" he has time to ask, incredulously, just before a gigantic thick-furred animal is crashing through the saplings, half-in and half-out of their circle of light. It's a massive beast, nearly double their height, broader than a wagon. It rears on its hind legs and roars thunderously, and Jin Zixuan draws his sword and takes a slow step backwards. The bear sways side-to-side like a drunkard.

"There's something wrong with its eyes," Wei Ying yells. Wangji sees the red haze in the pupils, the foamy spit dripping from its jaws. "Maybe the talismans—"

"Does that matter right now?" Jin Zixuan yells back.

The bear lunges in Wangji's direction; Wangji spins out of reach, yanking Jin Zixuan out of its path as it swerves and thrashes. It seems furious but undirected, shaking its head and clawing at tree trunks as it seeks them. When it lunges again Wangji smacks it with his sheathed sword on the side of its muzzle; it howls and rears up again and shreds the air. Jin Zixuan lifts his sword to slash at the bear's side but it shifts quickly and claws up a spray of dirt and brush; he blocks it with an arm and the bear runs bodily into him, throwing him into the trees. Wangji leaps over the bushes to strike it again and the bear wheels, roars. He's reluctantly drawing his sword when the bear lunges, already upon him, and then it—stops. The bear hangs in midair for a second, paws waving, nostrils flaring, and makes a sound of rage. It claws out at Wangji, but it can't reach him. Wangji takes a few quick steps back, then sees a thin line of bluish light strung around the bear's neck.

"I can't hold it forever!" Wei Ying hollers. Wangji turns to see Wei Ying with both feet braced against a huge tree, hands wrapped in some kind of radiant rope; the thin glowing string loops around the tree and over a branch, anchoring there, and runs taut all the way to the bear's neck. Wei Ying is holding it back. Wangji barely has time to marvel at it, at him. "Get him away!" Wei Ying yells.

In the bushes Jin Zixuan groans and rolls over, pushing himself off the ground; Wangji runs to his side and yanks him up and out of reach of the bear's huge deadly swings. The bear jerks and screams and bats for them helplessly. But then it backs up a few paces. The rope goes slack. It sniffs the air in great snorting breaths.

And turns around.

Too late, too slowly, Wangji shoves Jin Zixuan behind a tree.

Wei Ying lets go of the talisman-rope. Starts yanking his sword from his back. But it looks like he's fumbling.

The bear charges for him.

In the dark, with only their wavering circles of light to see by, the woods seem hallucinatory, jerky, piecemeal: Wangji only sees flashes of the ground, the leaves, as he runs. Like flashes of sunlight, like the glare on waves, rippling to blinding peaks on the surface of the lake. He yanks Bichen from its sheath as he goes. But he's not going to make it in time.

The bear roars. Wei Ying skids backwards, sword raised defensively but unsteadily. Wangji leaps. And something whistles through the air and thunks into the bear's shoulder: an arrow, feathered and vibrating. The bear roars and spins, biting at its own shoulder, and Jiang Wanyin comes bursting out of the bush with a bow in his hand. He lines up another shot while the bear rears up, and then suddenly the beast's eyes roll up in its head and it drops down to the ground on its belly with a crash.

For a second they hold their breath, their trembling swords. Jiang Wanyin's bow creaks as it stretches. But the bear doesn't get back up. It breathes slowly, side rising and falling as if it were asleep. And then Wei Ying climbs around it, using his sword like a walking-stick. "What happened?" he says, in a shaky voice. Wangji suppresses a manic urge to run to his side.

"I happened," Jin Zixuan says, stepping out of a shrub and dusting himself off primly. Their eyes all swivel to the back of the bear, where a single sleep talisman is attached to its hindquarters.

"Sure, I did nothing," Jiang Wanyin mutters.

"Right in the ass," Wei Ying says, approvingly. "Nice aim."

"It was all I could reach."

"Oh, I wasn't criticizing!"

“What’s the fuck is that thing?” Jiang Wanyin says, furiously. He lowers his bow, then raises it again to gesture around the clearing at all of them. “What the fuck were you all thinking?!”

“What does it look like?” Wei Ying huffs. “We had to take the talismans down. For exactly this reason,” he says, and points at the snoring bear.

“So you sneak out and don’t even—”

“I was *trying* to keep you out of—”

“—and I have to hear from *jiejie* that you’ve run off—”

Wangji lowers his sword and tries to make his breath come evenly again, while they go on arguing. Beside him, Jin Zixuan sits down on a log.

“You’re all insane,” he says, tiredly.

Wangji slides him a look.

“*Your* cousin,” Wangji begins, and Jin Zixuan puts his hands up. Shuts his eyes briefly in acquiescence.

“I’ll speak with Zewu-jun,” Jin Zixuan says, and sighs from his gut.

Satisfied with his honesty, Wangji leaves him there. He goes to the bear’s head and pulls one eyelid back: the red haze is gone, and the whites are clear. The spell-madness, if it was spell-madness, seems to have passed. This is no yaoguai, only an animal whose blood was raised. Next he looks at its shoulder, examines the arrow wound. It’s bleeding sluggishly, but it doesn’t seem to have struck an artery or bone; in fact the sharp head is poking out from behind a flap of skin, having pierced through. Wangji slices off the feathered end and then draws the arrow out from the opposite side with a wet, ugly squelch. There’s a tearing noise behind him, and then Wei Ying nudges Wangji’s arm.

“Here,” Wei Ying says, and drops a long strip of cloth into Wangji’s hands, that must be from the hem of his robe. It’s a little damp and stained-looking, but the fabric is already too dark to see what it’s stained with. Probably mud or streamwater. “No killing on the mountain, right?”

Wangji looks up at him in mute gratitude. There’s still some light left in the talismans, but not much. The circle around them is only a few feet wide, dimming to a faint radiance, like one candle in an empty room. There’s a mark on his cheek. Dirt, not blood. He’s okay.

I love you, Wangji thinks.

“Right,” he says.

He binds the bear’s arm loosely, to staunch the wound. It will live, he’s certain. He stands up in time to see Wei Ying bumping shoulders with Jiang Wanyin.

“Great timing,” Wei Ying says. “And a great shot. Maybe someday you’ll beat me.”

“Beat you?” Jiang Wanyin says, meanly. “I should.”

“Ah, don’t be like that!”

They march back up the hill in the dark, much more slowly than they descended. At the high turn of the path, almost back to the pavilions, Wei Ying slips on a rock and grabs for Wangji’s arm to steady himself. He laughs and treads on, but even in the slim fall of moonlight Wangji can see the dark smear his palm left on Wangji’s sleeve. Wangji catches up with him and jerks him back by the forearm to peer at his hand in the little light they have left. “Lan Zhan, hey, what—” he protests, but doesn’t pull his wrist away in time.

Wei Ying’s hands are torn up: the skin of his fingers and palms is rubbed red and raw. He’s bloodied from the wrists down. From the rope, from holding back the bear by himself. Wangji stares at the wounds in horror and Wei Ying jerks his hands out of Wangji’s grip, cradling them to his chest.

“You two, hurry up!” Jiang Wanyin calls, from above on the path. He and Jin Zixuan are far enough away that Wangji can only see the glint of their swords and the pale shape of their clothes in the dark. They must not have noticed Wei Ying’s hands, either.

“It’s not a big deal,” Wei Ying murmurs to Wangji, under his breath. “Go on, we’re coming!” he calls up to the others, and they shrug and turn to climb the next set of stone steps. But Wangji tugs Wei Ying’s sleeve, pulling him to a fork in the path and away. He protests, but his hands must actually hurt, because he doesn’t bat Wangji away or peel him off. “Lan Zhan, come on, Lan Zhan, you don’t—”

The trail up to the jingshi is quiet—despite Wei Ying’s steady stream of muttered complaints—and unpopulated. Wangji pushes the doors open and pushes Wei Ying inside, then goes around the room and lights the lanterns quickly. Wei Ying turns in a slow circle, taking in the house, the curtains, the desk and lone bed against the wall. “Wait,” he says. “Do you live here? Is this your house?”

Wangji ignores him, in favor of getting a basin and a jug of water and bringing them to the low table.

“Sit,” he says, and Wei Ying huffs and then folds down onto the mats cross-legged. He holds his hands out.

“It’s not that bad,” he says, ludicrously. In the light they look even worse. Wangji makes him soak his hands in the water and then he thumbs the dirt out of the wounds himself, as gently as he can, while Wei Ying bites his lips and yelps every few seconds, as if the person who endured this in stubborn silence for the last hour was someone else entirely. When his hands are clean and pink Wangji rubs salve into the cuts and wraps them. They’re shallow and should heal quickly, but he’d rather not take the chance. “This is too much,” Wei Ying complains. He waves his bandaged hands in the air. “They’re like paddles.”

“Endure it,” Wangji says, coldly. To think his plan was to wander around bleeding in the dark. His genius is oddly variable.

“We should have gone with them,” Wei Ying says. He leans across the table on his elbows. “Lan Zhan. They could be saying anything about us right now. What if they’re blaming it all on you?” Wangji raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, okay,” Wei Ying laughs. “I don’t think that would work either. I guess both of our good names are safe this time.”

His stomach rumbles.

They both look down at it.

“Have you eaten?”

“When?” Wei Ying says. “When I was getting dragged out of the hall for crimes, or when we were fighting the bear?”

“Hm,” Wangi says.

Wei Ying sits on the floor picking at his wrappings and wincing while Wangji gathers a light supper: pickles and roasted nuts, small oranges that are starting to wrinkle a little. It’s all he has in the house at the moment, and he’s concerned that if he leaves Wei Ying alone too long he’ll pull his bandages off and wander away. Highly likely. He sets the tray on the table beside Wei Ying and starts peeling the fruit.

“I can do that myself,” Wei Ying says, and then looks down at the mittens in his lap. “I could. I still have nails,” he says, optimistically.

Wangji peels the oranges for him. He holds out a segment for Wei Ying to take with his fingertips, but Wei Ying just—leans forward. Takes the fruit from Wangji’s hand with his lips, pops it in his mouth and chews it blithely. “Kind of sour,” he says. “But not bad.” He opens his mouth again. “Ahh. Feed me, Lan Zhan.”

Wangji does it, blankly. Wei Ying eats two oranges that way, while Wangji’s pulse hammers in his ears like a marching army, ten thousand men and half as many horses.

When Wangji cleans up their makeshift dinner Wei Ying slumps onto a pillow on the floor, belly-down, his legs in the air and heels crossed. “It was cool, wasn’t it?” he says. “The rope? I think I’m going to call it Binding.”

“Oh?” Wangji says. “Not... Rope?”

“Hey!” Wei Ying squawks. “Are you making fun of how I name things?”

Since it's improper to lie, Wangji says nothing. Wei Ying rolls onto his back and kicks his heels and then tries to fold his hands against his chest, bumping the knuckles together. He settles for resting the paddles on his belly. "It's good you came with me," he says. "I might have let that bear eat Jin Zixuan."

"No," Wangji says. "You wouldn't have."

Wei Ying sighs.

"He did okay," he says, grudgingly. "Maybe he's not the worst person in the world. That talisman was pretty good. I should ask him.... huh." He sits up on his elbows. "Lan Zhan," he says.

"Hm?"

"Do you live here by yourself?"

"Yes."

"How come?"

"This was," Wangji says, slowly, "my mother's house."

Wei Ying sits up all the way. Close to Wangji, so close their knees touch.

"I don't have anything of my mother's," he says, plainly, kindly, but without pity. "Do you remember what she looked like?"

"Mostly," he admits, and Wei Ying bumps their legs together, on purpose.

"Me too," he says. "Sometimes I think... I'm just imagining and not remembering. You know?"

"I know," Wangji says.

Wei Ying makes an expression that isn't quite a smile. He glances up at the ceiling, the open doors.

"Is it weird to sleep alone up here? Away from everyone?" he says. "Jiang Cheng says I snore, but he's actually the one who snores. But if I couldn't hear him snoring in the next room, I think it'd be, I don't know. Lonely. Do you ever get—"

All the time, Wangji thinks. He is learning the difference.

"Yes," he says.

"Well, now if you're lonely you can come visit me. We have plenty of room. We can go night-hunting in the marshes, sometimes really weird things wander in there. Or we can write to each other. I've never really had anyone to write letters to, but I promise I'll write them really quickly, so you won't have to wait. Maybe I should come up with a faster way to send

letters. Like a portal talisman, but just for a piece of paper. Oh,” he says, and sits up straighter. “What if you turned the character for body into—”

Wangji leans forward, as if tugged by a rope, and presses their mouths together.

His mind is all white, like clouds.

Wei Ying doesn’t make a sound. He doesn’t pull away. He holds his breath, maybe. Wangji’s hand sneaks around the back of Wei Ying’s arm, curls around his elbow. It pulls him closer as the clumsy, blunt kiss goes on.

When Wangji’s brain stutters back to life and he sits back, Wei Ying’s eyes are still closed for a second. He blinks them open and his mouth parts to suck in a great gulp of air. His tongue is shockingly red behind his teeth. “What,” he breathes. His eyes are huge and blank with incomprehension. “Lan Zhan. What are you...”

Oh, as if he knows.

He leans in again, his pulse hammering, and Wei Ying gasps just before their lips touch, as if to steal the breath right from Wangji's mouth. It sends a hot thrill through Wangji's body, tremoring in his gut, clenching in his thighs. Wangji kisses him, more intent this time, still clumsy and imprecise. His body's shaking. Wei Ying’s paddled hand comes to rest tentatively over Wangji’s knee. Wangji slides his own hand up to the back of Wei Ying’s neck, where it sits against his slightly sweaty nape. Wei Ying makes a suppressed noise in his throat and then pulls back, his face pinking. He pushes at Wangji’s leg. “Lan Zhan, what are you doing?”

Wangji is tempted to say, *kissing you*, to hear him squawk with indignation. But he doesn’t have a real answer.

It’s just... letters, visits. When Wei Ying was talking about the future Wangji could suddenly see it, taste it: long days of walking, slow boat rides. Unfolded papers with sketches inside, souvenirs, invitations. Someone chattering in his ear, hiking at his side. Waiting, anticipation. Parting and reuniting. Happiness.

Wangji shivers.

“I’m,” he tries. And then, even less certainly: “do you want to stop?” He doesn’t mean for his voice to sound so plaintive. But it does.

“Oh, I,” Wei Ying says, equally, endearingly weirdly. His mouth opens and shuts a few times. It makes Wangji’s heart throb. “Don’t you, aren’t there rules? About this?” he says, weakly, as if he were afraid of those things, as if he has not already encouraged Wangji to break the precepts a hundred times in a hundred different ways since they met.

“Yes.”

Wei Ying’s mouth quirks up.

“And?” he says, pointedly.

“I will not dishonor you,” Wangji says, “or use your body selfishly, without—”

“Lan ZHAN,” Wei Ying shrieks. He bursts into a gut-deep laugh and tries to cover his face with his wrapped hands. “What’s gotten into you? Did you go crazy? Did the bear bite you? Are you rabid now?” He lowers his hands again. He looks oddly lost. “Are you teasing me?” he says, suddenly sounding less amused. “Are you trying to get me back for—”

“No,” Wangji says, appalled.

Wei Ying huffs.

“Then what? You can’t tell me you actually... you know. Do you even like me that way?” he says, all stubborn heat, as if he already knew the answer and didn’t much like it. “I thought I was too—”

“I do,” Wangji says.

“You do?” Wei Ying says, thinly.

“Yes.”

“Huh,” says Wei Ying. He chews his lip. “You,” he says, as if it were incomprehensible, “*like me, like me?*”

Wangji leans in and covers his mouth again. Wei Ying makes a pissed-off grunt but then hooks his wrist around Wangji’s head and mashes their mouths together harder. Then he jerks away again. “Lan Zhan!” he says, flushed-looking and too loud. “You—but—what if somebody—”

“Let them,” Wangji says, wildly, and Wei Ying bursts into another startled laugh. When Wangji reaches for him this time he goes easily, leaning into Wangji’s grip and shutting his eyes and turning his face up; Wangji presses fevered kisses onto his mouth, grips him—probably too hard—by the arm and cups his neck. He’s never done this before and he’s sure he’s doing a terrible job. But it feels wonderful. Wangji drifts for a while, face burning, mouth tingling, hands numb. Wei Ying’s skin tastes like salt. Somehow, their lips slide open against one another.

“Uhhng,” Wei Ying murmurs. He groans as their tongues touch accidentally, electrifyingly, and their hot wet breath mingles. Wangji’s heart beats and beats and beats, too fast and uneven, like a drummer at a festival that hasn’t practiced. He’s really lost his mind. Wei Ying shifts and sighs in his throat and Wangji pulls him in harder, as if to yank him into Wangji’s lap.

Huh, he thinks.

He twists on his knees and pulls Wei Ying closer, closer, until Wei Ying shifts and loops his arms around Wangji’s neck and then fumbles forward, legs splayed over Wangji’s thighs. When he sits down onto Wangji’s legs a stab of some indescribable feeling runs along every nerve ending he has, wiping his mind clean the way a broom pushes snow off a step. Wangji

was aware of sex, dimly, before. But suddenly he is possessed of the wild simple thought that there are places Wangji could touch under his clothes, hidden places like the ones Wangji has himself. Wangji could bring him pleasure. Could make them one. The exact trajectory of how they could get from this stage to that one is not completely clear but the general idea is crystalline and driving: he rocks his hips up, feeling the blood rush to his own groin, and Wei Ying makes a wounded sound and presses his belly to Wangji's, buries his face in Wangji's neck. There's something between his legs that's prodding on Wangji's gut. If Wangji thinks about that right now he'll die: he puts his hands in Wei Ying's hair instead, tangles his fingers in the strung threads and strokes them smooth. Maybe this is a dream. "Lan Zhan," Wei Ying breathes against him, "Lan Zhan." He laughs faintly. "Who are you? What's this wild creature doing in your skin? How long's he been lurking in there?"

He's me, Wangji thinks, helplessly. He woke when you came.

Wei Ying lifts his head, as if he heard Wangji thinking. For a long moment they do nothing but look at each other and breathe. "This is so weird," Wei Ying says, eventually, thoughtfully. He bumps Wangji's cheek with one of his wrapped hands. Smiles wryly. "That was supposed to be a really suave cheek touch," he says. Wangji leans his head to the side. Sets a kiss on top of the bandages. Wei Ying laughs. "That's exactly what I mean," he says. He pats Wangji's face with the flat of his palm again. "You're... it's so different. Like this. Doing this."

Wangji swallows.

"Is that bad?"

"No," says Wei Ying, settling in his lap. "No, I like it."

"You do?"

"Yeah," Wei Ying says, softly. Wangji's arms slip around his back, so that they're almost one body, one knot of limbs. Linked, like in the lake, like in the ring, like in the dark. Joined up. "I like you."

On the last morning, Wangji wakes to find Wei Ying already up and waiting on his porch.

"Hi," he says, when the doors slide open. "And.... bye...." he trails off, as his eyes drop down to Wangji's thin short sleeping-robe and widen comically. As if they haven't spent the last two weeks kissing furtively and groping each other at every free moment in every quiet grove from here to the waterfall. "I thought... maybe," he says, and since Wangji knows what

he thinks, he pulls him inside and starts yanking at the ties of his belt. Wei Ying slaps his hands away, scarlet-cheeked. “I didn’t come here to—do that!” he says, scandalized. But then he tilts his head. “Unless you think we have time.”

“We have time,” Wangji lies, confidently, although he has no idea what hour the Jiangs plan to depart. Fortunately or unfortunately, he’s right: as soon as he gets Wei Ying’s outer robe off and they tumble to the bed, it’s only a matter of minutes before they’re gasping and then collapsing together, sticky and still half-dressed. They had plenty of time for... this.

Wei Ying flops onto his back and stares at the ceiling, looking shocked.

“Wooow,” he breathes.

Wangji turns face-down, hoping to smother himself in the mattress and be reincarnated as something with stamina. Wei Ying will be happier with the maidens after all, he thinks. But then Wei Ying nudges his arm. “That was amazing,” he says. Wangji lifts his head, reconsidering death. Wei Ying looks radiant in his messiness. He looks happy. There are sweaty hairs plastered to his forehead. “But we barely even kissed,” he complains.

Wangji rolls over him and remedies the situation, and then gets the chance to redeem himself a little while later. They go more slowly this time, hands in each others’ pants, eyes and knees locked together, breath hot and humid between them. Wei Ying comes first this time, wetting Wangji’s palm, with a helpless cry that penetrates Wangji’s bones. All of him clenches and then he shoots into Wei Ying’s fist, smearing come as far up as his wrist, his forearm. Wei Ying wipes his hands off on Wangji’s sheets. “It’s so much messier with two people,” he marvels. “I usually just come into an old—”

Wangji shuts his eyes in horror, wishing ears could be closed. But then Wei Ying is wiping off Wangji’s hand and his belly with tender passes of the cloth, and lipping kisses at his cheek, and Wangji forgets to be disgusted, forgets anything but the desire to pull him in with one clean hand and touch their mouths together.

Tomorrow is going to be unbearable.

But then, later, together, it will be bearable again. He’s not used to having something to look forward to this much. To want this much. It’s different. Wei Ying was right.

When all the retainues are departing, Wangji stands with the farewell party on the lower level of the steps, bowing to each in turn. When the Nies pass, Nie Huaisang gives him a bold grin and then a little wave. When the Jins go by, Jin Zixuan gives him an only mildly grudging nod. When the Jiangs go by, Jiang Wanyin gives him a significantly less grudging nod, and Jiang Yanli bestows a warm smile and then an embroidered pouch with the Yunmeng lotus on one side. His sincere thanks feel wildly inadequate.

“You’ve made a lot of friends,” Xichen says, sotto voce at Wangji’s elbow, when the Jiangs are headed down the stairs. He nudges Wangji’s side, still nodding placidly out at their departing guests. He has a way of doing that so that nobody notices. He used to drop sweets in Wangji’s sleeves that way, sometimes, when Wangji was still little; Wangji can’t believe he

didn't remember that until just now. He glances at Xichen, and Xichen glances back, and his smile lifts. "I'm glad," he says.

There's a noise from the stairs: Wei Ying, of course. He breaks off from the Jiang group and comes back up the steps. He makes another hasty little bow to everyone else and then flicks a tightly- folded square letter at Wangji. Wangji manages to pick it out of the air before it hits Qiren in the forehead. Barely.

"Sorry!" Wei Ying says, looking mortified.

"Safe travels," Qiren says, nonplussed.

Wei Ying looks at Wangji. If they had all the time in the world, Wangji would not know what to say to him. His throat feels like it might be closing up. But Wei Ying just smiles his beautiful smile and waves, as if he knows and doesn't mind.

"Read it later, okay?" he says, and then, because Wangji is in love with a horrible boy, he winks broadly. He skips down the steps afterwards, looking over his shoulder a few times before the Jiang party reaches the bottom and turns away to the road. An ache settles in Wangji's body when he's out of view, like a coat of stones. Maybe it will lift, pebble by pebble, the closer they come to meeting again.

Qiren exhales slowly, as if he were feeling an equally heavy garment rise from his shoulders.

"Well," he says. He glances at Wangji. And frowns. But he doesn't look angry. Just resigned. "I suppose I have plenty more of that to look forward to."

Wangji stares at him blankly. Qiren sighs and then turns around and heads up the steps, his secretaries scurrying after him. Wangji and Xichen follow them, taking the stairs side-by-side. He used to have to scurry after Xichen's longer strides. How odd time is.

"It'll be strange," Xichen says. "All the quiet."

"Mn."

"Still," Xichen says. "Nothing stays the same forever."

"Mn," says Wangji. Not even him.

"The ring on the finger is tapered by being worn,
the dripping water hollows out the stone,
the plow is subtly worn by the impact of the fields."
—Lucretius, *De rerum natura*

End Notes

Huge thanks to the organizers of the Wangxian Summer Exchange 2021 for this fun opportunity! And to lianhua_lianzi for the cute prompts!!! I tried to stick as many classic romcom/teen movie tropes into this as possible, spot them all!

Original prompt: "1. any flavor of "cloud recesses era romcom, no wen threat" is delicious to me! I'd be very happy with anything along these lines, but a more specific prompt I've been thinking about is lwj arriving at the wwx/jzx fight early enough to prevent it. maybe lwj reprimands jzx for being rude and now wangxian have a foundation for bonding, and wwx doesn't get kicked out, and lwj becomes a reluctant fourth member of the nhs/wwx/jc shenanigans trio! things I'd like to see: any combination of fluff, comedy, romcom tropes, friends to lovers, family, canon-era, exploring the characters' insecurities, chinese food."

Works inspired by this one

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