

Murder machines

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Murder machines

by [glyphsinateacup](#)

Summary

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian have dealt with a lot of threats to their home, but this one is... different. Their opponents don't seem to be cultivators at all - and good heavens they're so young.

Gideon and Harrow have a mission from the Emperor - but serving that mission is much harder than it looks.

Notes

"Canon-typical violence" meaning that necromancy is/will be part of this story, honestly not sure if I could write violence nearly on the level that Tamsyn Muir does in canon.

Also we live in the beautiful land where I pick the parts of MDZS/The Untamed canons that I want, respectively.

Chapter 1

Lan Wangji is finding himself close to matched in a swordfight, which is unusual.

His opponent is dressed entirely in tattered and fluttering black. There is a white skull painted on their - her? - face, her brilliant red hair is standing straight up. She has an absolutely massive onyx blade, which she is wielding in two hands with an incredible amount of ferocity.

The dissonance in the size of the blade and the size of the person had been puzzling at first, but Lan Wangji has now registered, with a sinking feeling, that he is trying to subdue a *teenager*.

Wei Wuxian, trying to cope with the other, even smaller opponent (*teenager*), is providing a near-constant report on the status of the fight, between directing a half-dozen summoned dead with a skipping, improvised melody on the flute. “Lan Zhan, have you noticed she is covered in skeletons?”

“Yes.” She is currently summoning skeletons too, completely bare of flesh and yet somehow still attacking. He has shattered more than one as it wrenched itself closer to Wei Wuxian than seemed safe.

“Lan Zhan, I've invented a lot of necromancy shit, but this one is terrifying and she won't stop.” And, a moment later, when Wei Wuxian has darted, distressingly, outside Lan Wangji's line of vision: “She is MAKING MORE BONES OUT OF BONES.”

Lan Wangji, with a trio of strikes, pushes the swordfighter back far enough as to be out of her range, and momentarily sheathes Bichen to play his guqin with both hands to keep her there. The swordfighter braces her feet against the concussion of the chords and keeps grinning, holding her ground. This is, again, disconcerting.

Wei Wuxian is starting to sound pouty, which Lan Wangji interprets situationally as *tired*. “I, the Yiling patriarch, powerful and feared, am frightened of this-”

“Teenager.”

“Yes, she appears to be a teenager. We were teenagers once, that doesn't mean we weren't dangerous, you know how many people I killed when I was a teenager?” Lan Wangji knows, obviously, but Wei Wuxian is not listening for an answer. “At least she doesn't have dogs, please don't suddenly summon a dog.” Wei Wuxian huffs another breath, bending over theatrically to rest palms on his knees as though he's exhausted, in the relative safety of Lan Wangji's personal space, cleared by the chords.

“Can we switch? I can take your-”

“*Teenager*,” slightly more emphasis this time, and he's trying to catch Wei Wuxian's eye. The swordfighter is starting to advance again and Lan Wangji strums twice to give her something

to deal with.

“Yes, teenager,” Wei Wuxian agrees again, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I heard you. But it’s not like they’re stopping on their own. Let me take the one with the sword instead, I can cope with swords.”

“Can you?”

“Mostly. Usually when they're that big the trick is to stand somewhere where they're not stabbing. And then keep doing that for a while.” He raises his flute to play again. It looks as though the tall, stabby teenager is also taking the moment to regroup, shouting something at the smaller, bone-coated teenager.

Lan Wangji, with some resignation, prepares to play again.

Chapter 2

Gideon is willing to admit, despite her status as a badass in the extreme, this fight could be going better. She could be winning, instead of squaring up for round two, this time opposite this cheerful inexorable menace of a musical necromancer, with his icily perfect cavalier waiting in the wings. The former appears ready to take her down with very nasty pointy-teethed ghouls, to which: thanks, but no thanks.

“Nonagesimus! Can you stop him playing?” she shouts over her shoulder at *her* necromancer, the one who is supposed to be leading this mission.

At her back, fiddling opaquely with bones as per usual, Harrow grinds out, “Deal with it, Griddle.”

Gideon manages one mightily off-center strike before the darkly dressed necromancer baits and withdraws, drawing a few more squelching hungry things out of the trees behind him. Gideon has managed to smash two of those so far, but if there are a lot more coming... that does not bode well. The advantage here, she muses, is that he isn’t carrying any other weapons, and to put it politely, is an absolute noodle of a man, so if she can land a hit (just one!) the necromancer will be pretty much done.

Meanwhile, her mouth is running with very little of her conscious input. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck, Nonagesimus, he's fast.”

Harrow has nothing to say about that, but with a backwards gesture she does make an attempt to slow the necromancer down. A ridge of razored bone spears pistons from the ground, in a trail leading to his feet. But the other guy - the guy in white, the one Gideon reads as a cavalier even if he has sheathed his sword for the moment - barely tilts his head, lays a hand on his stringed instrument, plays a fast chord, and bam! No more helpful bone spears.

Fantastic.

If it was going to be easy, God the Emperor probably wouldn’t have sent them to this bizarrely sunlit world populated with glowing people and their glowing swords anyway.

A third figure approaches their fight, and that is also *just great*, what they really need in this moment is to be outnumbered. Gideon works a little harder at catching up to the necromancer, who is now shouting at the new arrival, a kid with jewelry in his hair.

“Jin Ling! Go home! This is dangerous!”

The kid is working himself up to some sort of tantrum. “I can help!”

And over the opposite ridge, more kids dressed in white, like a dozen of them. Reinforcements? The necromancer sees them coming too, and presses a palm into his face.

“Aaagh. Fine. You can use Zidian? Try to hold them with it and not hurt them, okay?”

Gideon has gotten through approximately 10% of a routine of wondering what a Zidian is, before a purple lightning whip snaps out from the kid's hand, sends her flying one way and her sword flying the other. The impact kicks the breath out of her altogether, and insult-upon-injury, launches her sunglasses off her face. She is obligated to roll on the ground covering her eyes with her hands and doing nothing else until the tears stop coming. When she has quakily managed to climb back to her feet and get her bearings, a second strike knocks her straight into Harrow, who topples like the basket of sticks she is. Were it not an observation that Harrow would absolutely murder her for, Gideon could swear that she hears a squeak from the pokey pile she has landed on top of.

The kid with the whip looks satisfied with himself, and makes another gesture that wraps the buzzy purple lightning around both Gideon's and Harrow's torsos before Gideon can clamber off of Harrow's creaking ribcages. She hopes that it's the decorative one that's on the verge of breaking.

"Nonagesimus," Gideon tries, with an ineffectual wiggle. "You got this covered?"

"Nav, you are sitting on me with *your entire ass*." Harrow lets the accusation sink in for a moment. "Moreover, this weapon is somehow preventing me from accessing thanergy. So no, to our eternal loss and the shame of our House, I do not "have this covered"."

Now that everyone has stopped moving and Gideon's had a little time to squint into the bright daylight, she uses her powers of observation to note two things.

Firstly, the two guys they've been fighting since the start? They're beautiful. Upsettingly beautiful. Tall, sculpted silhouettes; cheekbones for days; long silky black hair they can probably sit on; skin that looks like it's never had the indignity of a single blackhead. Gideon prepares herself to start begging them for moisturizer secrets. The unreal beauty also makes it next to impossible to clock their ages.

And, secondly, neither of them gives a single fuck about Gideon's appraisal, because they are completely occupied staring at each other. It is one of the single most touching and most embarrassing things that Gideon has ever witnessed, as they are right-out ignoring Gideon and Harrow in favor of making out with their eyes. The necromancer is very slightly cut up (this is an uplifting thought, Gideon readjusts her mental scolding she's been rehearsing on behalf of her swordmaster) and the icy cavalier is inclining his entire body toward his partner in concern.

Some of the kids in white are glaring in Gideon's direction. They look like little mini-versions of their... master? Same uniform with its massively impractical sleeves, same forehead ribbon.

The necromancer limps jauntily over, scooping up Gideon's sword on the way. He sticks it point-first in the dirt by Gideon's and Harrow's jumbled legs, and leans extravagantly on the pommel, arcing out over them. "Didn't think that you were going to meet the Yiling Laozu today, did you? Hasn't everyone gotten the message yet that I live here now? Who even are you? What were you doing trying to enter Cloud Recesses?"

"Meet who and enter where now?"

The Lady Nonagesimus elbows Gideon in the ribs, hard, presumably for the sin of speaking, and with her noble dignity maneuvers herself to a position where she is somewhat less *sat on* and somewhat closer to vertical before answering herself. “We won’t be addressing any of your interrogations.”

The necromancer and his cavalier share A Look. Gideon gets the impression that they share a lot of Looks. That they communicate almost entirely in Looks. That they could tell entire epics in Looks. The cavalier nods silently, once, and the necromancer pulls a piece of yellowed paper out of a breast pocket in his robes. He bites a finger, writes on the note in blood, and addresses Harrow.

“You’ve caused enough trouble already. I’m going to seal your spiritual power temporarily. We’ll untie you, and we’re going to go back up the mountain and all have a talk about this.”

The icy one (who has a steadying hand on the necromancer’s back, Gideon’s pretty sure) follows up with, “Behave, and we’ll resolve this shortly.”

Harrow is doing her best impression of her traditional chilling stare. Her veil has mostly come off and her vestments are washed out by the bright sunshine.

“Hey, yeah, and what about me? I’m a threat.” Gideon tries to compose her own face into a threatening one.

“Yeah, but you’re no cultivator, and I’ve got your sword,” the necromancer says brightly, and taps the paper onto Harrow’s breastbone.

Harrow sighs like the life is exiting her body, and goes promptly and utterly limp. Her weight on the purple whip feels distinctly and disconcertingly corpse-like.

Almost more unnerving than that change is the new Look that the pair of enemies are sharing; shock and disbelief. Apparently whatever that paper was - it wasn’t intended to turn her necromancer off like a light.

Chapter 3

Lan Xichen inclines his head in one final acknowledgement of Lan Wangji's terse explanation, releasing his brother, who clearly, urgently, wants to leave. Wangji sweeps from the room, and Lan Xichen turns his attention to the fidgeting youth flanked by two Lan students.

"Please be seated." The youth doesn't appear to know how to sit. She bangs her shin hard before making it up the step onto the platform where his desk is, and then stands there, looking lost. Lan Xichen takes pity, flicks his sleeves back, and seats himself. Her scowl is an exact opposite to the slight smile he finds himself wearing, to soothe her awkwardness.

Lan Xichen, serene, pours a cup of tea for the girl, and then one for himself. "We'd like to know where you've come from."

"What kind of question is that? I'm a sworn sword and the sworn part, at the moment, translates to 'I'm not telling you *balls*'." She thunks to a sitting position on the cushion across the desk from him, and tries to figure out where to put her feet, settling on an awkward half-folded jumble of legs.

"You've from nowhere around here, that much is very clear," Lan Xichen tells her gently. "We know our neighbors, and you don't resemble them in the least. Not in looks, not in your techniques." Not in your speech, he thinks to himself, amused.

The girl has her face clamped closed, raised chin and narrowed eyes. Perhaps it's best to start small. "What should I call you?" He offers, "Lan is my clan name, and Xichen is my courtesy name, you can call me by that."

She sighs, blows a puff of air upwards to ruffle her hair. "Fine. Can't stay quiet forever. It's Gideon. Harrow would be so much better at this *being interrogated* thing than me. Are you in charge or something?"

"I was previously leader here, yes. Wangji - who you fought today - is my younger brother, and currently holds that office."

"The cavalier in white? He's calling the shots? But I thought..." she clamps her mouth shut again, looks aside.

Lan Xichen follows her gaze to his sheathed sword leaning on his side of the table. Lan Xichen is not stupid. It is within his reach, but not easily hers. Jingyi and Sizhui are also still standing by the door, tense with watching. The girl is tense too, but he's certain it's not about the weapon itself. "You're concerned about your friend. You'll see her soon. I don't think she's conscious right now."

Gideon folds and unfolds her arms, tapping her foot, generally unable to sit still.

Lan Xichen doesn't drop his gaze from her face. "Gideon. Are you aware of the reason she was incapacitated?"

"Because that smug guy hit her with something?"

"Gideon, she was wreathed in dozens of children's deaths, and appeared to be drawing power from them."

Gideon's hands flick as though itching for a blade. "So you've seen right through that, too. Yes. I know."

In the ensuing silence, Gideon meets Lan Xichen's eyes again. She sees the ice behind his friendly face, and the calculation there; complicit, or coerced? How much a threat?

"I know, but you have to understand, *Harrow didn't do it*. Harrow didn't kill them." Her response is rushed. "Her parents did, it was before she was born - all those kids - *it's not Harrow's fault*."

Lan Xichen reaches out and touches the side of her shoulder, a firm grip, a familiar one. "I think you'd better tell me the story."

The necromancer awakens, sputtering, in an icy pool in a dim cave in the arms of a soaking wet Wei Wuxian. He grips her shoulders tighter as her nose starts to bleed - a sign of life, finally - and she becomes a crescendo of thrashing. The first gasping word out of her mouth is, "Gideon!"

"Hey hey hey hey, hold on there, we barely got you working again. Please don't drown yourself, it's deeper than it looks."

The necromancer - Harrow, the swordfighter called her - rights herself, pulls away deeper into the rock-lined pool, hunches, shivers, looks around. Doesn't find her companion anywhere, but does see Lan Wangji standing above at the rim of the pool, waiting. Her fingers flex, but they're bare, as they've left a pile of her curiously gruesome accessories - rings and cuffs and spurs of bone - outside. This was likely a prudent decision.

Haltingly, brushing the blood from her nose, she says, "I expected to wake up in a cell."

"What, you think we're that heartless? The spring's a better place for us injured folks."

Wei Wuxian is propped on a rock and has one pant leg rolled up. The bleeding from the wound the swordfighter gave him has just about halted. He's wearing a headband - incongruous white against his all-black clothes.

It's true in part - the spring is working a healing effect on both of their injuries. But it's not precisely the reason for their removing her to the cavern. It's the simplest way they could jointly think of to contain her unpredictable technique, and Lan Wangji is fully poised to enforce the cavern's protections against intruders. Thus, Wei Wuxian using the headband to sign himself as Lan, though he wouldn't usually bother.

Harrow draws herself up to her complete height, and sashes over to Wei Wuxian's perch, very barely managing to use her standing advantage look down her nose at him. "What's your purpose in healing me?"

"Are we ready to talk? I need you to tell me when the next wave's coming." In response to her glassy stare, Wei Wuxian nods and starts ticking off reasons on his fingers. "You two have the look of a vanguard. Not an invasion force, but the first test. A probe, to see how we respond. And from somewhere far, somewhere cultivation looks very different. And follows a very dark path. Deadly path. Death-ly? In any case, you're not here by accident."

He smiles up at her, but it's a conditional smile. "So let's hear it, Harrowhark Nonagasimus."

"You - you both - think that I am weak. You think I'm a traitor, and will spill my secrets the moment you ask for them," Harrow says. She's shivering, but her color looks better than it did when she first woke.

Wei Wuxian sighs, loud and long, and spins the dark wood flute in his hands. He sends a glance over his shoulder, up at Lan Wangji - still poised, still waiting.

"No, actually, I think you've been faced with a lot of shitty choices."

"I want to see Nav."

"Sure, in a moment. Do you have an answer for us?"

It hasn't been the sort of story where food is a welcome accompaniment, but Lan Xichen has gotten Gideon to drink some of the tea, and that's a start. He's sent one of the students to bring her something stronger.

"...so basically, the Emperor was like "please, Heroes of the Ninth House, we realize we just saved you from a murder challenge that was our own fault, but before you get a break, take care of the rogue necromancers we're reading down there, tell us what it was like, and we'll send you back home with some medals, wicked back pay, and a long vacation." Gideon pauses, glancing back at Lan Xichen's sword. "We were about expecting to get messily divorced from our bones, or shot at, not brought to a fairly nice clean place and given hot drinks. Consider yourselves the nicest of all possible enemies."

Lan Xichen hasn't relaxed his posture during the length of Gideon's story. He lets the pause grow, thinking.

"Gideon Nav, I have a guess at why my brother brought you to talk to me, first."

Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian usher a shaky girl in oversized white robes into the room. The top of her dripping head is significantly lower than their shoulders, and she has several towels wrapped around herself in layers. Gideon launches herself across the room and gives her a hug.

“Hello Harrow, I’m a dirty squealer, so ready your lectures. You are not-dead enough to give me lectures so I’m going to call that a win.”

The mutter from underneath the towels and the hug is harder to hear.

Gideon takes a deep breath, makes a shift. She glances sidelong at Lan Xichen and the students standing by the door. “I do have one question. Where do you keep... the babes?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Babes. Girls. Women. I would settle for ti- uh, tasteful pictures.” Wei Wuxian makes a noise like he’s choking. When Lan Xichen glances over at them, the students are wide-eyed. He also suspects he caught his brother suppressing an eye roll. Gideon continues, “Please don’t tell me that I’m stuck in some kind of monastic hideaway with no ladies.”

At that, Lan Xichen is surprised enough to laugh aloud.

Chapter 4

They've settled the teenagers down in a repurposed dorm room with a stern lecture about not leaving it, dinner (which the swordfighter appeared to be thrilled by, and the necromancer ignored, at least until they left), alarm talismans on the doors and windows, and someone outside to keep watch, measures which will have to be sufficient.

Lan Wangji is proud that Wei Wuxian has managed not to faint in front of the teenagers. Now that they're out of sight, though, Lan Wangji is half-carrying his husband with a hand under his arm. The moment they turn the corner to their bedroom, Wei Wuxian's glassy exhausted stare is no longer even subtle.

This kind of thing hasn't happened in months. It's easy to forget that he pays for his displays of power so heavily and so soon, without a golden core to draw from.

Lan Wangji has almost managed to maneuver his husband into bed before Wei Wuxian's head jerks back up and he makes a wobble for the desk.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, repressively, one hand firmly locked in the collar of his husband's robe.

"I'm fine." Wei Wuxian is demonstrably not fine. Wei Wuxian can barely stand straight.

"*Wei Ying*. Bed."

"What are you gonna do, sit on me? Tie me down?"

This accompanied by a provocative smirk back at Lan Wangji, who is sitting on the bed in question.

"No." *I could do worse than that*, he thinks. Wei Wuxian would appreciate *worse*, and Lan Wangji also finds *worse* very enjoyable, but it won't make either of them less tired.

Wei Wuxian gestures towards the desk. "I have to come up with something to say to Jiang Cheng about all this. Another day or two and he'll have the whole story from Jin Ling."

That's undeniable. And as the implications of this are blowing up into a political incident, likely they'll need to send a message to Huaisang, too.

But Lan Wangji pulls Wei Wuxian back onto his lap, anyway, wraps his arms around him and falls over sideways on the bed without letting go. Thus is the privilege of being Chief Cultivator. "Tomorrow," he insists.

Wei Wuxian goes *hmpf* into Lan Wangji's chest but doesn't resist any further, and melts in his habitual way into the embrace. Lan Wangji thinks that he's falling asleep until he says, "I don't even know what we're going to do with them."

Lan Wangji thinks about this. The usual playbook for ghosts, demons, or rogue, violent adult cultivators doesn't meet this need. The traditional options - liberate, suppress, or eliminate - are not exactly straightforward solutions here. Rogue cultivator youth, though they happen, usually have masters to be responsible for their actions; masters who have a sense of what they're capable of, and how to best take them into hand. No masters to turn to in this case.

Neither of the girls has actually harmed anyone. (Except Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji is prepared to hold a grudge about this, but he expects that Wei Wuxian will not be on board with that.) All Gideon and Harrowhark have actually done is been publicly quite frightening to the local residents, and make one bad attempt to breach the wards around Cloud Recesses, nothing more.

But the implications of their arrival are ominous. What little information they cornered Harrowhark into sharing was a few bare sentences. "The Emperor awaits my signal. No others are coming that I know of." Whether it's true or not, it's troubling. And there was a sense, a strong one, of her holding back more.

And yet. Lan Wangji has seen some evil, and it did not come in the shape of teenage soldiers serving someone they called God. "I don't know," he says, finally. "And we should ask Xichen his thoughts first. Tomorrow."

Wei Wuxian responds with an assenting noise, and Lan Wangji, fondly, de-tangles from him so he can ready for sleep too.

Chapter 5

Harrow, facing a myriad's worth of intractable problems, has come to believe the only acceptable solution is to remain in bed until the world ends on its own.

She hasn't really slept this past night, anyway, facing a miasma of discomfort. Pillow the wrong shape, clothes that aren't hers lying too soft on her skin, scents she can't recognize blowing in through the window. The lingering foggy effects of whatever strange theorem she'd been hit with have left her with a headache, and the icy pool they dunked her in has made her nose runny. She can't shut out the sounds of Nav tossing and turning in her own bed, either. And, most troubling, the King Undying's parting words are ringing in her ears.

"I hate to push you, Harrowhark, but we have so little time," the Emperor has said to her, his dire expression so hopeful; while asking her to slaughter Gideon, digest her soul, and live forever.

Becoming a Lyctor - a necromantic saint, hand and gesture to the King Undying - requires first the mastery of necromancy, which she doesn't consider a barrier. (How could it be? She is designed to be a genius in the art.) It also necessitates the sacrifice and consumption of her cavalier. To imbue herself intimately with this one specific death, and to live with it for the next ten thousand years; that's the secret to achieving her life's ambition.

The Emperor's trust in her is crushing. His gentle encouragement that she continue her studies, though he has consistently elided the conclusion that those studies would lead her to. His single offer that, though Ianthe had been quartered somewhere else, Harrow might like to visit with her, to *gain some clarification*. His roundabout comments that her ascension is so close, and perhaps the challenge they would meet on this mission could give her the necessary inspiration.

Harrow saw enough inspiration before the evacuation from Caanan house. Ascension means Ianthe's ashen victory smile in that final chamber, standing blood-splattered over Naberius Tern's body splayed on the floor.

Gideon must never know any of this.

And of course, now, their first mission has gone completely sideways, and all Harrow can do now is wait for that perplexing adept to come back and say more unforgivably kind things while needling her to towards throwing down her duty.

Harrow has borne fateful knowledge her entire life. Harrow has prayed for the keeping of the Emperor's doom since before she could put on her own socks. Harrow has led the Ninth house since prepubescence, and faced each of her duties with bony fortitude.

Harrow has decided that she's not getting out of bed today, and these people - these threats to the Empire and God - they can suck it.

She pulls the blankets over her head upon hearing Gideon rise (in effect, this rising is accomplished with a bunch of moaning and a thud). Push-ups commence. A bit later there's a knock, and she hears Gideon answer it, exchange a few words with whoever's outside, and cross the room to the low carved table.

"You're still alive under there, right? There's breakfast."

Harrow presses her face into her elbow, and wills for a wall of bone to cut herself off from the noise. Unsurprisingly, nothing happens. Creamy golden sunlight soaks into the blankets and pools alongside her, offensively.

"Osseous lady, please don't make me check for vitals, neither of us wants me feeling you up by accident."

"I have no interest in breakfast."

"Okay, great. More for me." And then, much more tentatively: "Harrow, are you mad at me?"

"Quit flattering yourself," Harrow snaps, out of habit. Then she makes herself breathe, and tries to find a response that isn't sharp as a smashed window. Her chest feels like the aftermath of a puncture wound, sucking and raw.

"Right. Good. Super. It is hubris only that makes me worry that this mood of yours can be traced back to me. That's great, because otherwise I wouldn't have kept.... this!"

There's an expectant and self-satisfied pause until Harrow rolls onto her other side and twitches the blanket away from the upper half of her face to look. Gideon, still sitting at the low table, is dangling a smooth bone bracelet, cut and carved from a larger-than-average human femur, from one finger. This makes Harrow actually sit up. The bracelet must be hers - but she'd thought that their wardens had taken every skeletal piece of her accoutrement while she was unconscious. She can't feel it - on top of the thalergic character of this planet, she's still perceiving the world through a smothering layer of the arcane nonsense the other adept cast on her. But it's deeply, deeply welcome to have just one piece returned.

Gideon uses some sort of martial trick to collapse the distance between them into a few steps' worth of unexpected grace, and kneels at her feet, forcing Harrow into a deeply mortifying blush as Gideon takes Harrow's right hand and slides the bracelet onto her wrist. It disappears neatly and entirely into Harrow's oversized sleeve.

"I'm looking out for you, Nonagesimus. One flesh, one end, etc. That still applies. Besides," Gideon clears her throat, "I thought that without any of your stuff, you might be kind of... *bonely*."

Harrow couldn't be more grateful for an excuse to shove Gideon, who is cackling, away.

Chapter 6

It is only just past noon and Lan Wangji is already finding his day to be a trying one.

First, at the hour that Wei Wuxian was barely awake, they met with Xichen to hear a summary of Gideon's account to him. Perplexing, to say the least. Even with Xichen's best efforts to make sense of her garbled tale, there were parts that defied belief - their emperor, someone able to cultivate immortality, and yet so deeply entwined with necromancy. Ships orbiting above clan outposts, among the stars. And Harrowhark's parents, who were willing to forge a deal with so many resentful ghosts on their daughter's behalf - Wei Wuxian had frozen at that revelation, memories of some dark and lonely time written on his face, and dropped out of the conversation until he could summon back a more cheerful affect.

Xichen's offer to stay while they delivered a summary to Lan Qiren was welcome. Lan Wangji counts it lucky that only one teacup was broken in that second meeting, and that Wei Wuxian and Lan Qiren had managed to restrain themselves from an out-and-out shouting match.

Now that his brother and Lan Qiren have both left, there are the invitations that Lan Wangji needs to write to the other sect leaders. Sometime during that process, Wei Wuxian migrates his upper body into Lan Wangji's lap, which is an improvement to the day, but slows the process of writing.

They have jointly finished and dispatched the correspondence and also nearly concluded eating a midday meal when Jin Ling barges his way into the reception hall. On entering, he makes a cursory inclination of his head to Lan Wangji, and starts tossing out questions; as though with enough speed, he can startle his elders into revealing more than they intend.

"Who are those girls I saved you from the other day? Why do they dress like that? Why are they so important that you need to call together all the sect leaders to talk about them?"

Wei Wuxian levers himself upright, still sitting at an unruly angle to the table but no longer nestled between Lan Wangji's arms, and says edgily, "*Don't you have any manners? Hello, Da-jiu, Hanguang-Jun. Nice to see you both; how are you doing today? Have you recovered from your injuries?*"

"Sect Leader Jin. Please sit." Lan Wangji amends, without moving, already considering the loss of Wei Wuxian's weight as another trial.

Petulantly, Jin Ling clunks into the third seat at the table. He crosses his sword on his lap. "I want to know what's going on."

Lan Wangji is certain that Jin Ling has not received his invitation yet. It was sent not an hour ago to Lanling, where he ought to be doing his duty as the Jin sect leader rather than roaming the countryside looking for fights. He has clearly lingered somewhere local since yesterday. Even accounting for the additional enclosure in Jiang Wanyin's invitation, which had been addressed to Jin Ling, in the event that he had run off bearing news to his uncle - there's been

no time for him to read that either. And on top of this, Jin Ling's admittance back into Cloud Recesses ahead of schedule is a matter to be investigated.

"If you want to hear," Wei Wuxian stabs a finger toward Jin Ling, "You have to listen all the way through before making objections. Or asking more questions!"

Jin Ling very pointedly glares at him, raises his eyebrows, but keeps his mouth shut. Wei Wuxian pours himself a drink. "The girls have traveled from very far away - we've never heard of their sects, or their emperor, but they sound powerful and have a long reach. Where they come from, everyone who cultivates uses the demonic path. Everyone. Harrowhark is one of their sect heirs. Gideon is a disciple of her sect."

"They send their cultivators to generate more resentful energy wherever they can, adding territory as they go. Their emperor claims dominion over everyone who cultivates the demonic path. And he is, ah, possessive of it. He was not pleased to have heard reports that others have discovered this method of cultivation." Wei Wuxian sounds a little guilty. He is recalling the reaming out that Lan Qiren gave him about his presumed culpability on this point.

He continues, "So Gideon and Harrowhark were sent by their emperor to destroy me."

Jin Ling, having lost his patience, sputters, "What? An emperor? Wants to destroy you, personally? Bullshit."

"As much as I dislike it, I keep needing to remind people. *I'm the Yiling Patriarch*. People know of me and my works everywhere."

Wei Wuxian is somewhat stretching the truth here, Lan Wangji notes, but doesn't object. The talkative one had made it clear, both in her words to them and to Lan Xichen, that no one had ever mentioned that name to her, simply a rogue necromancer who had drawn the ire of their emperor.

Jin Ling rolls his eyes in an astoundingly accurate reflection of Jiang Wanyin. "So what are you going to do about it?"

Wei Wuxian heaves a theatric sigh. "I thought that we could have a nice calm conversation with them about how they don't need to destroy anyone, and they should tell their emperor to mind his own business. Perhaps they could teach me how to replicate bones before they go home. It seems like it could be very useful and I've got an idea for--"

Jin Ling narrows his eyes. "Senior Wei, that's really stupid."

"Hey--"

"Please tell me we have time to come up with something less stupid to say before Uncle gets here." Lan Wangji notes Jin Ling's certainly that Jiang Wanyin will be arriving soon. Again, he knows more than he ought to.

Wei Wuxian's tart tone is the beginning of another argument. "Well now that we have your brilliant tongue on the case--"

"Also, I want to meet them. Meet them for real this time, I mean."

Wei Wuxian is about to mount another wall of objection and stalling when someone knocks briskly at the door, and Sizhui enters. He, at least, has been raised with manners, and bows to all three of them before speaking. "Hanguang-Jun. Senior Wei. And Jin- Sect Leader Jin. Can you come?" Sizhui looks abashed, and is a little out of breath. "There's, ah, a disturbance. An argument. With the guests."

Jin Ling and Wei Wuxian snatch sword and flute and rush off, and Lan Wangji follows. There's a huddle of juniors at the entrance to the dorm where the guests have been housed, and Jingyi is standing in the center of it, the boldest of them.

Gideon Nav is leaning just on the far side of the doorway wearing a smirk and her dark glasses. She stands out starkly in her black robes among the white of the Lan juniors, and someone has supplied cosmetics for her to re-apply the skull paint to her face.

Lan Wangji can't hear the comment that spurs Jingyi's frustration, but the emotion is obvious in his retort. "Of course I could take you on. Your cultivation level is on the floor and I can tell that from here."

"Either way. I'm sure I could kick your little swooshy ass," she leers. "Do you want to try?"

Sizhui makes a little gesture of explanation at Wei Wuxian. "You see?"

A cheerful shout from Wei Wuxian. "Jingyi! Who told you to get into a pissing contest with the guests?"

"She started it!"

"Can't you see you're making Hanguang-Jun upset?" Wei Wuxian's invocation of Lan Wangji's disapproval makes Jingyi startle, his eyes flickering to Lan Wangji's face. Lan Wangji doubles down on the intensity of his glower to back up his husband's assertion.

Sizhui, placating, says "I'm sure we can clear this up."

Jin Ling, abruptly, interjects, "We should all go on a night-hunt together." All the attention in the circle sucks in toward him.

Gideon breaks the momentary silence. "What in hell is a night hunt?"

Harrowhark is inching into view by now as well. As much as there are shadows anywhere in the bright clean rooms of Cloud Recesses, she seems to have summoned them around herself.

"It's a challenge, to hunt down and destroy spirits that are giving the locals trouble." Jin Ling angles himself to address Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian next. "It's appropriate to our guests' station as sect heirs to try our skills together," he continues, with a suspicious amount of

reason in his voice. “I have the reports of the local watchtowers, and we can find something close that requires our skills to eliminate it. It will be a valuable exercise.”

Wei Wuxian shakes his flute at his nephew. “And if it's like the last time? If I recall, I had to drag you by the heels out of a pit of snake spirits just last week.”

“If you’re concerned about the danger, you can come along, Senior Wei.” Sizhui says with another little nod. “And Hanguang-Jun, if he cares to, of course.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes check Lan Wangji for a reaction. Such an excursion is not explicitly forbidden. Of the four thousand and more Gusu Lan rules, there are thirty-six that relate to the treatment of wrong-doers awaiting judgement, four specifically about spies. And seventy-three about diplomatic envoys, both going and coming. This is, somehow - appropriate. And there is time, before they’ll need to address the other sect leaders, during which the guests might otherwise be stirring up trouble.

It’s almost... tactical. Too tactical for a momentary impulse on Jin Ling’s part.

Lan Wangji gives a fractional nod of approval. Wei Wuxian accepts with a bob of his own head, and spins back to the circle of juniors, which has almost but not quite come to include Harrowhark and Gideon.

“You can give us your word that you’ll work with us?” he asks them.

“Will you be returning our weapons to us for this hunt?” asks Harrowhark.

Wei Wuxian winces. “Yes.” The implication that they might do otherwise is an unflattering comparison, in memory of Wen Chao and his assorted crimes, a lifetime ago.

The silent, sidelong look that Gideon gives Harrowhark makes it clear that the decision lies with her; she responds with a gesture not unlike a bow, a stiff inclination of only her head and shoulders, arms at her sides. “The Ninth house will join you.”

Behind her dark glasses, Gideon’s smirk deepens into an almost-grin.

Once the juniors have run off to prepare, someone has been sent to fetch the guests’ weapons, and Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian are winding their way back to the reception hall, Wei Wuxian snorts a laugh and wraps himself around Lan Wangji’s arm. “What do you think of that, Lan Zhan? I feel like we just stepped out of a maze.”

“It was an ambush.”

“And who was the general this time? Jin Ling? Or Sizhui?”

“Both of them. They planned it together.” The effect they wanted had required both the hammer of Jin Ling’s questioning and the brush of Sizhui’s weaponized politeness. As much as Jin Ling’s living uncles are not subtle, he has inherited a surprising amount of finesse from Jin Guangyao.

“Not bad, not bad,” Wei Wuxian says, thoughtful. “They’re improving at politics.” This is still a trying day, but at least Lan Wangji can squeeze Wei Wuxian’s hand and steal a kiss before they need to deal with the rest of it.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hi, folks, we're back! It's been a while, but I swear this will get finished. I've got a couple of more chapters in the pipe, which will hopefully be coming out more regularly now - though I can't make promises of specific dates, alas. Thanks as always for your patience and lovely encouraging comments ^ _ ^

Chapter Notes

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

The day is improbably bright and green and gold, particularly for something called a *night hunt*, and Gideon is surrounded by a bewildering amount of trees. Their orderly little group is making its way at a pace one could call sedate, down a forest road that one could also call idyllic, but calling the atmosphere companionable - that would be too much of a stretch. Jin Ling is leading the way, Harrow at his side, having donned her best attitude of venerable nobility and clinking with her restored bone adornments. Neither of them are speaking to the other, but their silence is in the very least well-bred. Gideon strides a practiced half-pace behind and closely following are Lan Jingyi and Lan Sizhui, leading four other white-robed Lan in two-by-two formation.

The other necromancer ambles along at the tail of the group, hands clasped behind himself, flute stuck through his belt, trailing black gauze and red ribbons and looking totally unconcerned. During the complex dance of bowing and demurring that had been their departure, he had been most adamantly deferential to Jin Ling's leadership and equally insistent about coming along. Remaining at the back distances him both from Harrow's necromantic aura, and from Jin Ling's cloud of tangible huffiness.

But most importantly, Gideon has her sword again. She is excited for this night hunt; she is prepared; she is raring to go, even. Still, there are nagging questions. Including the one she voices: "So what was it we were going out to hunt, again?"

Lan Jingyi, to whom she has not yet had occasion to deliver an ass-kicking despite their earlier posturing, sniffs from behind her right shoulder. "Haven't you been listening at all? How are you supposed to hunt anything if you're not paying attention?"

Lan Sizhui, by contrast, has the trick of making smiles audible. "We have three reports of local hunters facing injury from aggressive animals over the past few days; the details suggest the involvement of unchecked resentful energy. If that is the case, we will find the source, and repress it if possible."

This gives Gideon a moment's pause. "And repress means stab, yeah?"

"No!" Lan Jingyi groans. "Repress means *repress*. You would know that if you had any sort of education."

"While you were busy making up extra names for thanergy, *I studied the blade.*"

Jin Ling's haughtiness fractures with a snort.

"What was that?" Gideon crosses her arms.

"You can study the blade all you want, it matters what you can do with it," Lan Jingyi jumps back in.

While Gideon's mouth is still working on her next retort, the other necromancer, who has now drifted forward, interjects, "What kind of injuries did they have?"

"Does it matter?" says Lan Jingyi.

Wei Wuxian nods. "It matters so we know what we're facing."

Lan Sizhui's smile has hardened into a flat line. "Broken bones, mostly. And - stab wounds."

"I wonder what kind of animal leaves stab wounds rather than bite marks," Wei Wuxian continues. He is painstakingly not addressing his remarks at anyone in particular, and projecting an affect of *earnest concern* that is far too pointed.

"They said they were attacked by animals," Jin Ling says, with an air of finality. "So that's what we're looking for, Wei Wuxian, because this is my night hunt."

Harrow, silent as a shadow covered in clinking bone jewelry, turns her body enough to give Gideon her a hard look through her veil, while Wei Wuxian protests his non-interference in the night hunt. Gideon nods emphatically back at Harrow to indicate receipt, making her glasses bump up and down on her nose. As though she could forget two hours ago, when Harrow, grimacingly, fragmented the one smuggled bone bracelet into dust, to line the walls of their room in a ward.

"That should block unwanted listeners. I have a task for you. When we leave this compound, I need to make my way back to the ship. I need to report back to the King Undying on our - situation."

"What part of the situation, exactly? We're prisoners but we're going on a field trip, it's fine?"

"Shut up and listen." Harrow had already progressed to pinching the bridge of her nose, though whether to prevent a nosebleed from her still fragile control of the ward or to relieve a headache was unclear. "You will provide me cover, and I will sneak away from this excursion and find my way to the ship via its thanergic signal. I will make every attempt to rejoin you, but you may be on your own for a little while."

When Gideon didn't have an immediate rejoinder, Harrow had removed her fingers from her face and scowled. "What."

"I dunno, Harrow, I've just - got a feeling. About the way they're treating us here. It's. Not bad?" She had been thinking of Lan Xichen's sorrowful sympathy. And a little bit about food that didn't come out of a tube, and a little bit about pretty Lan girls with elegant swords practicing in formation, but mostly the look that Lan Xichen had given her. She had unfortunately, however, not been thinking of Harrow herself, who looked sour and affronted and not unlike she was considering murder.

"You're fooling yourself if you think being a prisoner of these people is better than completing our mission-"

"Am I, though?"

"Griddle, this is the last I'm going to hear of this. I am your liege. Wait for my signal. Give me cover. Do your duty."

Harrow had then allowed the bone ward to crumble with the kind of finality that meant nothing was final at all, but she would sure pretend like hell until it was. That had been about the point when Gideon had realized she needed to drop the subject if she didn't want her teeth fused together or her guts pulled out her mouth or something equally unpleasant.

As Jin Ling continues to glare at Wei Wuxian and his unconvincing protestations, the entire group approaches to a curve in the road, where it is bounded on one side by a stony ridge. Something bursts into flight from the bushes on the top of the ridge, and it is with admirable swordswomanly reflexes that Gideon draws on it.

"What's that?" she snaps, on her guard.

"Probably a pigeon," Lan Jingyi says. When Gideon gestures her sword in the direction it took off and makes an aggressive, questioning head tilt, he continues. "The hunters weren't stabbed by a *pigeon*."

Gideon does not sheathe her sword, because despite the apparently harmlessness of the flying thing, that ridge is giving her tingles. Thus, she is first to notice the four-legged creature when it shoulders its way through the disturbed brush at the top of the ridge. The creature has branching antlers on a wedge-shaped head; wide, bunching shoulders; and pale spots on its dun flank faintly visible, framed as it is in a halo of midday light. "And what's that?"

"That would be a deer." Lan Jingyi sounds less certain this time. The antlers are a fractal, hungry-looking thicket, and the deer is lowering its head, angling its whole body in their direction, tensing to spring. There are the sounds of scraping swords as the group of Lans draw in unison. Gideon moves a half-step in front of her necromancer. It's an open question as to whether Harrow will be able to make her sneaky little detour now, but as far as Gideon's concerned, "protection from stabbity deers" is fairly high up there on the cavalier duties list.

Behind her, Harrow says very softly, "Beloved, why now?" and hearing that is *a trip and a half*. Gideon's senses briefly white out in shock upon hearing Harrow utter the word "beloved". She will be obligated to demand an explanation immediately after this fight or absolutely never. With effort, she keeps her attention trained forward as the deer charges, clattering down the ridge, a crown of blood-thirsty points powered by bounding muscle.

The bulk of Gideon's training has assumed that her opponent would be bipedal and wielding a sword, so she experiences a moment of floaty panic watching this amalgam of antler and leg and hoof whirling closer. But her legs and arms don't know the difference, and engage themselves by long habit to keep her sword between the danger and her core. The cultivators to her left and right scatter, but Gideon bears down on the strength of her two-hander, and catches the rack of antlers on the blade. The clash is thunderous, the sound of a monstrous gear snagging on an unforgiving housing, almost throwing her with the torque.

Her feet dig into the pebbly surface of the road and she manages to halt their shared momentum before skidding too far into the underbrush, bringing herself and the deer to a stop. The beast must be twice her full height, but it has lowered its head to meet her, the highest spikes of the antlers now level with the top of her head, the whole rack as wide as the span of her sword. This thing is huge. Wisps of oily black smoke are escaping its mouth and ears.

The phalanx of Lans and Jin Ling have become a spiked arc of darting swords, and as she maps the battlefield - arms still straining against the power of the deer's antlers - it seems like they might be able to contain it.

"Can anyone try and calm it?" Jin Ling cries. Lan Sizhui, in response, retreats a step and pulls a whole-ass zither out of his sleeve. The deer wrenches its antlers away from Gideon's sword, rearing, and lands an arm's length out of her reach. It treads backward, dark eyes darting sideways at the arc of swords, as Lan Sizhui begins playing, joined by the grating tones of Wei Wuxian's flute.

"Ok, I admit, you can do pretty well with a blade," gasps Lan Jingyi. He is at Gideon's left hand, and the closest; they're close enough that they angle themselves to take advantage of their shared guard, leveling themselves at the heaving deer in preparation for another charge. His expression, layered with the flush of the fight, looks a little guilty. This is vindicating. Perhaps she will kick his ass slightly less, later.

This is her last thought before a second deer rams its antlers through Lan Jingyi's back.

Chapter End Notes

A quick reassurance, for anyone who needs it; this fic will have no major character death. Lan Jingyi does not die at this time! Cultivators are tough!

Chapter 8

Jingyi getting hurt was not the plan. The plan didn't involve *anyone* getting hurt. The plan *barely ever* involves anyone getting hurt, as Wei Wuxian must constantly remind people. And when it is necessary for someone to be hurt, Wei Wuxian knows that he, personally, is a much better candidate than nearly anyone else who might be present. The consequences will fall to him, regardless, so using himself for these things is simply that much more practical.

While the juniors' horrified, collective gaze is still drawn to the scene of the injury, Wei Wuxian is working out a way to get this situation handled. He is one of three beings who continue moving while the tide of battle briefly churns to a halt; the first deer, himself, and Harrow.

The first deer is indifferent to the shock the second deer has caused, and is held in check, barely, by its indecision of where to charge next. Soaked in resentful energy, it stomps restlessly in place, moving as though each of its limbs has come unhinged. It's quite possibly growing even bigger than its already monstrous size; much too large to be natural, in case the darkness shimmering off it in waves isn't enough of a tell.

Harrow slips in from the sidelines and stations herself at her cultivation partner's vulnerable back. She's needed there; Gideon is gaping at Jingyi, sword forgotten and slipping from her fingers, the gap in her guard wide enough to offer herself up as the next target. Harrow, for her part, fills the opening neatly and flings a double handful of white in the first deer's direction. Wei Wuxian, as he sprints for Jingyi, feels more than sees the beginning of her skeleton-summoning trick, a blossom and a shudder of resentful energy. *Dozens of deaths. Dozens of children's deaths*, is his sour reminder to himself about the origins of that power.

But his new and forming plan means that Wei Wuxian needs to focus on the second deer. Shoving his flute back into his belt - there will be bruises on his hip later, but nothing to be done about that - he sketches a talisman one-handed in the air as he moves. As fast as he can throw, it lands on the second deer, to bind it in place before it can regain its senses, toss its massive head, and throw Jingyi off its antlers. He draws another, and a third, calculating how many more will be needed, whether the reservoir of his power will be enough to hold the thing still.

The suspended moment into which he ran is collapsing back into the rhythm of battle, and the juniors are again drawing breath by now. There is a panting, scattered, collective shout. The syllables of Jingyi's name, confused "what"s and wordless gasps layer together into a cloud of noise. Jin Ling and Gideon Nav in particular seem to have found their voices in a harmonizing "Fuck!" that spills over into other assorted cursing. A very small part of Wei Wuxian's mind speculates on the possible origins of some particularly Yunmeng expressions in Jin Ling's vocabulary.

Over the ruckus, a grinding, inelegant chord sounds from Sizhui's qin, another immobilization that strikes at the second deer. It's ugly to listen to, but stokes a sharp flash of pride and confidence in Wei Wuxian, for the spell itself and for Sizhui's quick action.

Between his talismans and Sizhui's note, the deer is frozen irresistibly in place, which should give them a few moments.

Wei Wuxian refocuses on Jingyi to assess the damage. Jingyi still stands, but only because of the antler points through his torso. His eyes are rolling back, mouth rimmed with blood. It looks serious, but if Wei Wuxian knows his stab wounds (he does, by now), it's likely not deadly. No Lan elders will need to send Wei Wuxian back to the grave for getting one of his juniors killed, not today, not so long as they can get Jingyi home.

No time to rest, yet. Wei Wuxian whips his head around, counting juniors and swords, judging distance. Gideon is closest, so Wei Wuxian plants a sharp shove in the small of her back, propelling her closer to Jingyi, and directing, "Keep him on his feet, would you?"

In the same breath, he shouts, "Jin Ling!" Once he catches Jin Ling's eye and gives him a once-over - uninjured, thank everything - Wei Wuxian aims a grin at him. "Have them circle and defend us. Like you practiced, yeah?"

Jin Ling opens his mouth, as though for an argument, then registers the encouragement, swallows his words, nods. He dashes off, calling the rest of the juniors into formation.

A piece snaps together in Wei Wuxian's mind, problem meeting solution like key meets lock, one more step clear in the sequence of getting everyone safely home. He spins again, shouts again. "Harrowhark!"

"Yes?" Her voice is close, casual, pitched low. Her gaze, under the black gauze veil, is directed at the other half of the fight, watching skeletons grapple the first deer, thrashing and braying, to the forest floor.

"That antler is *made of bone* ." He pauses for breath, and to let his thoughts catch up with his mouth. "Just pulling it out would make things worse, but can you alter it? Detach them? Make it easier to move him?"

The pause can't be more than a few seconds, but in the pulsing rush of battle, it seems like Harrow is silent, thinking, for a long time. Now past the sudden burst of inspiration, Wei Wuxian is struck by a sobering thought. *What if this is farther than her cooperation extends? We are her enemy. She may refuse.*

"I can do it," she answers.

Wei Wuxian nods once. "We'll hold him steady."

The juniors are disciplined enough that there aren't shouts of exuberance as the first deer is dispatched, but Wei Wuxian can hear the relief in their voices when it's done. Their smaller formation - Gideon, Harrow, Wei Wuxian - draws close to Jingyi and the bound deer. Wei Wuxian circles behind Jingyi's shoulder, flanking the beast, near enough to be reflected in the pool of its eye as they align themselves. A few paces away, Sizhui is tensed to strike his qin again for another application of the binding if it's needed.

Gideon, sword discarded and faintly shaking, grips Jingyi's shoulders from the front. Harrow worms between her arms and grasps the antlers. Her dark-gloved hands slip a little, in Jingyi's blood.

A flick of Harrow's wrists, and the antlers sheer away from the deer's skull at their roots. Wei Wuxian pushes the deer's unblinking head out of the way with his shoulder, filling the space with his own body, providing counterweight to Gideon's steadying of Jingyi from the front.

Slowly and then faster, like a dune being sculpted away by a stiff wind, the antlers burn into a smoky haze at their tips and roots. Harrow flattens her palms against the dwindling points, pressing closer and closer against Jingyi's chest as the seconds pass. The reduction makes the angle less awkward, lets Wei Wuxian support Jingyi by elbow and waist, and then to take the whole of his weight as Jingyi falls backward into him.

Jingyi's body is lax and heavy in Wei Wuxian's arms, and the flow of his qi is faint but stabilizing. The antlers are completely dissolved. The white of Jingyi's uniform is soaked through, but the bleeding remains minor for a stab of this kind, much less than if the antlers were ripped directly out. There are a wealth of hands to hold him, now; with the first deer defeated, only two of the other students guard facing outward with their swords, and the rest - Sizhui and Jin Ling included - are crowding close, anxious to help.

Wei Wuxian lets them, helping to shift Jingyi's deadweight into two pairs of waiting arms.

Once unburdened, he raises his flute again, reorients himself at the remaining deer. Now-shorn, it is blowing faintly through wide nostrils, struggling against the bonds they've placed it under. With a melody, Wei Wuxian begins to call away the corruption from it, sinking some into himself, sending a greater quantity to disperse harmlessly.

As he takes the resentful energy from the deer, its form dwindles, though whether the change in size is from a physical loss or a trick of the eye is hard to tell. The inky blackness runs from its coat like old filth cleansed in a storm. In the end, he lets it bound away, bright-eyed, nimble, harmless.

Harrow is standing, flexing her fingers, staring at them. Staring at him.

One last thing. Wei Wuxian retrieves the alarm talisman from his shirt, sets it aflame with a snap. Back home, its pair has also burst alight. Back home, someone knows that they need assistance, and that someone will come, quickly. He spins on one heel to face his juniors, in their protective huddle around Jingyi. Bracingly, he says, "Someone is going to get a fire started while we wait. And it's not going to be me!"

Jin Ling asks, "Is he going to be alright?"

"Everyone should get stabbed once when you're young and healthy; it's good practice." Wei Wuxian pairs this with a smile, and manages to make it sound carefree. "He'll be fine."

Jin Ling looks, at best, 50 percent convinced. Wei Wuxian continues, "But we've still got a problem on our hands. We have to find whatever corrupted those two deer before anything else can get that bad."

“We can help find it,” says Gideon.

Her necromancer gives her a look, cold and silent and suppressive, an entire argument balled up into a glance.

“We’re going to help,” Gideon repeats.

“I do *not*-”

“Harrow,” Gideon says, darkly. “If you meant *anything* you’ve said to me, you’ll stop being an *utter ass* about this and make the right call. No more casualties. We’re going to help.” She folds her arms. Absurdly, it looks as though she might cry.

Harrow blinks first. She blows out a breath, and explains, “The source... is likely to be our ship. It’s close, and somewhat charged, necromantically. If this is a recent phenomenon, we can assume it’s connected.”

“Can you take me there?” Wei Wuxian asks.

Harrow looks back to Gideon, who sets her jaw and responds, “You know what I think, boss. With your permission, I’ll be staying here to make sure no one else gets stabbed by evil deer.”

When Harrow turns away from Gideon, she gives off the distinct impression of someone tightly suppressing some reaction. For a moment, Wei Wuxian can see his brother’s fury and exasperation in the set of her shoulders, but only until he blinks that impression, too, away.

It takes Harrow and Wei Wuxian less than an hour’s walk to find the ship. It is impossible to miss, once they’ve gotten close. It isn’t just the height of the thing, tall enough to tower over any of the more extravagant buildings in Caiyi, or the exterior’s intricate bone plating, though both of those are plenty distinctive. The aura of pure, resentful malice leaking out of the thing is something the magnitude of which Wei Wuxian hasn’t felt for years.

Before they begin the seal, Harrow waves Wei Wuxian back, pulls open a hatch, and climbs up into the edifice. She spends a few moments inside while he lingers, and returns before he can start accumulating either suspicion or worry. Whatever she found inside, she remains as unreadable as ever.

It takes several long minutes for them to pace a circle around it, tromping through the crushed bushes and over several half-felled trees. Thankfully, the array that Wei Wuxian improvises doesn’t need much blood, and Harrow offers one pale ungloved hand for pricking to contribute her own.

When they’ve finished, and are resting (even Harrow having dropped her play at dignity to sit in a huff on the ground) Wei Wuxian says, “Remind me to take you to Yiling sometime, you’ll fit right in.”

“I don’t think there will be a ‘sometime’.”

"There is if you want it." He lets her absorb that, twirling the flute in his fingers for something to do. "Your mission was to kill me; fine. You're not the only one who's tried. And it's failed. You're not trying again, you're smarter than that. You could stay for a while."

"And you won't drive us off."

"Not if you want to learn. Or to teach! I would be very, very interested to hear about the bones."

"Necromancy doesn't seem to be in general approval around here. I doubt the welcome would be extensive," she says dryly.

He sighs, and pulls a face. "Give it a few days, at least. Hang around until the rest of the sect leaders get here to talk this over. Let me introduce you; you're of a rank with them, and you should meet them before you go back to your emperor's court."

He leaves unsaid, that this is an emperor who seemed to be very little bothered by the deaths of his subordinates. An emperor who still wants Wei Wuxian's life, and who might loom as a conquering threat all too soon.

Finally, Harrow says, "A transmission came, since we departed here two nights ago. I have a letter from the King Undying." And while he is still processing that, she continues. "I would like your advice on its contents."

That night, in the jingshi, it is just the two of them, himself and Lan Zhan. Late, because by the time he and Harrow had walked back, the day was almost gone. Jingyi had been up and talking by their return, almost spry by that point, given the speed at which he had been flown back and cared for.

"You don't think this is a terrible idea? That we'll regret it if they stay? A political disaster?"

"No," Lan Zhan answers. "Not if you're certain. Are you certain?"

"Maybe? I wasn't then, when she asked me, but later, when we finally made it back, and came to visit Jingyi in the infirmary-"

"With the bunnies."

"Yeah, someone had brought two or three of the bunnies in for the company." It was commonplace, when juniors or the even younger students were sick or injured; he hadn't thought much of it at the time. "The two of them have put on such a show since they got here - so serious and so cold. I'd almost believed it. But when we walked in, Gideon had one of the bunnies and was cradling it to her chest - as though she'd never once held another living thing."

Wei Wuxian has been pacing back and forth through their rooms, thinking aloud, unable to sit still. Lan Zhan has followed him from room to room, listening, as the sun set and the lamps

were lit. Now, he comes beside where Wei Wuxian stands at the railing outside, offering a hand, palm-up, for Wei Wuxian to take.

"Harrow walked over and just - you should have seen her face when she felt its fur." Wei Wuxian takes the offered hand. He laces his fingers in Lan Zhan's, gaze still abstracted. "I look at her, at both of them, and all I can see is - us, younger. Myself, you, Jiang Cheng." He pauses, finding the words. "Facing something bigger than ourselves. No one to guide us. No rest unless we fought for it. No softness."

"Needing justice."

"Ha! Yes. In a way." Wei Wuxian can't help but smile at that. "You're always cutting right to the heart of it." He lets himself lean into Lan Zhan's warmth, drawing in a long breath of the familiar scent. Better to be here, at the end of a long day, than anywhere else. "If we can give them what we needed then, that would be worth a lot of terrible ideas, wouldn't it?"

"It will; we can."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Edit 1/5: In talking to my lovely and helpful housemate about this chapter, they suggested a one-liner that was far too good to pass up, so it is now retroactively part of this dialog. :)

Holding a bowl of rice porridge between her two palms, Harrow revolves in a slow circle in the dimness just past the threshold of the necromantic workroom. In contrast to the stark illumination of the morning sunlight that she has just left behind, this room is a rich, welcome reprieve to her Ninth eyes, even sheltered as they are behind her veil. As a domain of chaos, clutter, and half-spent candles, however, it offers no resting place for her remaining breakfast, so she continues to bear the bowl, as though in offering. All the while Wei Wuxian bustles about in the darkness, attempting to clear space, but only succeeding in generating a cheery and undignified ruckus.

The Body is watching him with curiosity, glowing faintly in floor-length white skirts and monumentally long sleeves. She has not left Harrow since last afternoon, and remains a dispassionate escort, visible only to Harrow's eyes. At the time of her appearance, astride the dire corrupted creature they fought, she ripped one startled acknowledgement from Harrow's unsuspecting lips - *beloved, why now?* - but has been content with Harrow's silence since then. She joined Harrow in the narrow bed where she slept, last night, and helped to lull her to her exhausted sleep with a gentle stroke of one exquisite death-pale hand down Harrow's cheek.

The Body has not come to Harrow for years. Until this reappearance, Harrow could have almost considered herself cured of this particular visitation. She is not ungrateful, but must admit herself somewhat inconvenienced, and perplexed. Although the Body's presence was a numbing balm on her mind throughout last night, when she might otherwise have been kept awake with pondering, this companionship is the last thing Harrow could have expected.

Wei Wuxian, for his part, seems none the wiser about their visitor. He pauses, looking at the heaps of mess with some embarrassment, chin supported on one hand and the other tucked between his elbow and body. Momentarily still, he vibrates with potential, vitality personified in contrast to the Body's glacial stillness, a smile tingeing his expression where hers is the purest solemnity.

Harrow's eyes have finished recovering from the assault of the bright morning light, allowing her to take a full impression of this space. Wards, painted in blood and red pigment, decorate every surface in an astounding profusion; some complete, many merely sketched at. They are of types whose purpose she could barely hope to guess; she doubts that this is entirely due to her lack of specialty in spirit magic. Tools and figures, of all types, plants dried and fresh,

boxes and pots and sheaves of paper, crowd the low tables and the shelves pushed against the back wall. This back wall is barely an arm's-breadth away, measured on Wei Wuxian's lanky frame. Books, too, with titles as unfamiliar as their style of construction, sewn edges that show the exposed paper at their binding. The whole is a bursting complication that confounds categorization, setting her head spinning.

Harrow would rifle through the books, or inspect a ward closer, but for the occupation of her hands in cradling the still-lukewarm bowl of porridge. She has surprised herself, even, at the impulse to take it with her upon Wei Wuxian's yawning interruption of her breakfast. But of all the changes she is forced to accustom herself to now, the food is not entirely disagreeable. She was reluctant to abandon her half-finished meal, even if Gideon would smirk at her, having seen through her disguised enjoyment.

Instead of reaching for the objects of her curiosity, Harrow focuses her senses on the pockets and currents of thanergic potential that fill the workroom. It is disconcerting that her awareness of such things has returned to her with some subtle alteration, energies of death somehow standing starker and deeper. But she will allow that this may be the effect of observing in a primarily thalergic environment.

To her recovering senses, Wei Wuxian, too, is a shimmer and a tremor of necromantic potential. She had thought before that this was purely due to his craft, but now, so close (bumping elbows in this messy and crowded space, clearly meant for one), distractions removed and her senses heightened, she cannot quite make sense of it.

As Harrow ponders this, the Body sits, settling in a narrow seat on the edge of a shelf. Wei Wuxian finally manages to sweep sufficient crumpled papers and wood shavings off the low table, to make room for Harrow and her porridge.

The letter Harrow finally unfolds for him, after settling herself, is printed in blood, of course. Harrow's own, which she had fed to the receiver in the ship yesterday eve, in order to redeem the waiting message. Bright when it had first wicked into the thin flimsy, the blood has dulled to a flaking rust color.

Kneeling at the table, Wei Wuxian squints at it. "That's nonsense. I can't read it."

"It's ciphered. I'll transcribe." Harrow can read the message at a glance; it is meant to be accessible to her. These words had made her sure she would need assistance, when she first received them yesterday. They had also made her certain that her cavalier could not be that assistance, and that she must leave Gideon behind to address this message, much as Harrow had attempted to shelter her from the mysteries of Canaan house.

"I have ink somewhere," Wei Wuxian says, twisting backward and digging through a cubbyhole just at the far range of his reach.

Harrow pulls a pen from her pocket. While Wei Wuxian is still fiddling with an inkstone, craning his neck to see the letter while his hands do their work, Harrow digs the pen nib deep into the meat of her cheek - blood quicker to produce than ink - and begins to transcribe.

Harrowhark

Given the delay in your report, I can only assume the worst. If our enemies are powerful enough to hinder you in your current state, there is only one path forward. Please understand that it is with no joy that I give you this advice. But Lyctorhood is easily within the reach of your skills, and you have the materials available to you. If I may be blunt, your attachment to your cavalier is admirable, but can no longer be the basis for your inaction. Do your duty, and join me and my Gestures, your brothers and sisters.

To the necromancer: You know what you did. I advise you to perish.

The second half of the finished transcription is in Wei Wuxian's passable but untidy hand, as he pulled the sheet away from Harrow when her pen ran dry. Clearly he is quick enough with ciphers to learn the translation for this one on the fly, merely from watching her work.

Harrow would have pulled the sheet back from him and finished in her own time, but for the moment of contact, and the disturbance of thanegy, when Wei Wuxian's hand brushed hers.

"I don't like the sound of him," Wei Wuxian begins, which is a stunning judgement to make of God Himself. "*Your attachment to your cavalier*- what does that mean?"

Directly behind Wei Wuxian, drawing Harrow's gaze, the Body has stepped forward for her own dry inspection. She is not reading the note, but rather focusing her unfathomable eyes on Wei Wuxian himself.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks. A chill runs electric from Harrow's skull to her coccyx, that he might mean the Body. But Wei Wuxian is staring at Harrow, having sensed her perplexed stare even through the shelter of her veil.

"*You know what he feels like?*" asks the Body. "*You should recognize it.*"

Harrow grasps at the sum of her thoughts as though in a dream, quite unable to piece them together into a coherent whole. "Are you a revenant?" she finds herself asking Wei Wuxian, although this cannot be possible. Revenants cannot be necromancers, and she has seen him use theorems, unmistakable.

"Hm. No. Possibly? Revenant," he turns over the word, thoughtful, as though it holds a puzzle. "In the sense that I am *raised*, maybe. I am alive, by clear comparison with the fierce corpses I know. I will allow that the way I came back *was* pretty unique..."

"The way you *came back*?" Harrow presses.

"Back from death," he confirms.

"You were deceased." Somehow this, while what she was probing for, refuses to bring her cloud of observations into anything resembling sense. *Revenant*, or *corpse* (fierce, beguiling, or any other kind) does not match the particular slick of thanergy that is Wei Wuxian.

"Explain the circumstances."

"I got better!" he says. "Look, storytime later maybe? About the letter...?"

“This first. It matters.” Dimly, Harrow is aware that she’s managed to stick her elbow in the mostly-forgotten bowl of porridge. This does not diminish her focus.

“Mm. Okay. Short version, for professional courtesy.” He taps fingers on the table. “I was dead for a decade and a half. Extremely dead. No-one-could-find-my-body-or-spirit dead, though from what I’m told there were enough people looking. I don’t remember any of it, so not much to tell there.

“I would have stayed dead. But I left some notes behind, about resurrection, and sacrifices, purely theoretical.” He waves a casual hand. “That’s just the sort of thing you write, when you’ve got the time.”

Harrow gives a fractional nod. She is aware of this tendency; it is a grand tradition of necromantic houses to theorize, including her own. This makes Wei Wuxian smile, in a brilliant flash of recognition, but it’s quick, sizzling away like water on the surface of a star.

“A young cultivator, someone treated very badly by everyone he came across - his family, his peers - found my notes and decided to trade his death for vengeance by proxy, the proxy being me. Even a good long time after my death I had something of a reputation, you see. Yiling patriarch, grandmaster of demonic cultivation - long story, like I said.”

Wei Wuxian is no longer meeting Harrow’s eyes, but leaning back on his palms to stretch, looking up at the ceiling. His words come quick as ever, a constant fluid flow.

“By the time I woke up, the exchange was done. I had his body and he was - gone. Unorthodox. But most of what I did was unorthodox. I completed his last requests, that cleared the remains of the curse, and here we are.” Sat back up, he’s rubbing his forearm, absently.

The Body’s incomparable face is graced with a smile the color of frost.

Harrow, once she has managed to master her jaw enough to close her mouth, says, “This shouldn’t be possible.”

“What?”

Harrowhark, Reverend Daughter, would never be so flustered as to flail while in search of words. She comes close, at this moment. “The kind of sacrifice that you’re describing -- in his letter, My Lord mentions Lyctorhood.”

“Yes, and that is...?”

“In brief, a necromancer, at the height of their skill, can consume the death of their cavalier. They circumvent mortality, gain a source of perpetual thanergic power. They become one of the Saints of the Lord Undying. A life, perfectly utilized in the moment of destruction, transformed into a thanergic engine. That’s the sort of theorem this is.”

“Sure. It sounds similar. Why is that a problem? That I invented the same thing, I mean.” Wei Wuxian is radiating pure inquisitiveness, which is a strange affect for someone admitting to

an *impossible heresy*.

“It’s nonsensical. If it’s as you report, I should be discussing this with the necromancer who guided the process. Not you. The Lyctoral process can’t be misused for a - a body swap.” Harrow cannot sit still. She rises, takes one single step in the direction of the shelving, and is forced to turn back in the cramped space. “If he was even able to reel in your soul for the process, which should also *not be possible*. Not *an entire decade and more* following your death. And that’s not to mention that the path to Lyctorhood is a sacred secret, guided by Resurrecting Lord himself. And you theorized it *alone*.”

“Ah.”

Harrow continues dully. “If this is correct, you are an unprecedented genius. Beyond imagination. No wonder my Lord wants you dead.”

Wei Wuxian waves this off as though it is unsurprising to him. “Okay, wait a minute. Speaking of what “your lord” wants.” Wei Wuxian stabs at the transcription with his forefinger. He gains a smudge for his trouble; the ink is still damp. “He’s asking you to kill your companion, and turn into a super necromancer?”

“To complete my mission and remove you, yes.”

“Nope, we’re not talking about the assassination plot right now, I see you trying to change the subject. Excuse you, there’s no way you’re pulling that one. I’ve been avoiding difficult topics with worse ones since before you were born. We’re talking about your lord asking you to *kill your cultivation partner* so that you can gain more power.”

“Yes.”

“And you weren’t surprised by the order.” For a beat, Wei Wuxian stares into Harrow’s face, through the veil and the paint. She stares back. “Does Gideon Nav know?”

“Of course she does not,” Harrow snaps.

“And will you do it?”

“I would die first.”

“Okay. We will try to avoid that.” While Harrow is still struggling valiantly to understand the sudden shift to “we”, he continues, “I’m not one for long-term strategy, though, and unless you want to try throwing resentful energy at your Emperor and seeing what sticks, we’ll need someone else doing the planning here. Luckily, I know someone.”

“Your husband.”

“No.” Wei Wuxian’s eyes go fond and dreamy for a moment. “Lan Zhan is a petty monster, and I love him for it, but we need someone with more tact.” The glittering smile is back. “Would you like to meet the greatest mastermind of my generation?”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I place the blame for the interminable delay on this chapter squarely at the feet of one Nie Huaisang, who both:

- a) refused to narrate this chapter
- b) refused to tell me what his plans were for five entire months

That being said, we're here now! Hope you enjoy!

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

When Gideon Nav stalks over to Lan Jingyi, where he's seated on a veranda, her massive sword hanging off her shoulder and sweat dripping down her neck, Jingyi crosses his arms, lifts his chin, and turns his body away.

She had gotten the attention of the entire refectory this morning when she had entered that way (minus the sweat); sword bold over her shoulder, impossible to miss. The remainder of breakfast after that had been a somewhat rushed affair, with the undercurrent of boasting about relative sword prowess steadily rising in volume while at least four authority figures tried to glare the meal back into silence. Now every junior who bears a sword regularly and doesn't have specific duties this morning has been gravitating to the sparring circle outside.

If Jingyi had permission to stand up and lift his arms without throwing everyone into an overprotective tizzy, he would be right down there with them. But due to some subtle but very firm maneuvering on Sizhui's part, he's been planted on a cushion, with a pot of tea, and summarily ignored, up until now.

Gideon Nav sighs at him. "Oh, don't be like that, I have a question. I am here to plumb your wisdom, Jingyi-xiong."

"Who gave you leave to call me that?" he answers, archily.

Gideon tips her glasses down her face and tries again, confiding. "Senior? Teacher. Please. I'm still getting the hang of groveling for information and favor, new vocabulary and shit. And I need your wisdom. I need a wingman."

"Fine. What's your question?"

"Who is the babe wearing the hood, and will she step on me if I ask politely?"

Once he's managed to parse that – and Gideon's expectant look – Jingyi cranes his neck to see if it's a shijie or qianbei he recognizes. There has been a slow but certain growth of spectators all morning, visitors for the conference adding their colors to the crowd, and

contributing to the general atmosphere of levity. Almost no one has their head covered, so he manages to pinpoint the woman wearing the deep grey hood almost immediately. Her clothing is pointedly lacking sect insignia, but she would look much shabbier if she were truly unconnected.

He shrugs. “No idea, though you could ask Wen-shishu, isn’t she talking to him?” Both Wen-shishu and Sizhui, actually, and in quite a close conversation as she lays a hand on Wen-shishu’s shoulder. The smile lighting up Wen-shishu’s face is infectious, so the strange woman must be someone he knows. Ah, well, information to pull from Sizhui later.

Absorbing that, Gideon mutters something to herself, offers a half-hearted slap to Jingyi’s arm, and strides back into the sparring circle.

“Hey!” With a snort, Jingyi resigns himself to more watching. He has to be content to shout more-or-less unhelpful suggestions as Gideon re-enters a match to hulk around with her huge blade, and his shixions dance, bright and light, exemplary in Lan forms. Before the next round has finished, Zizhun, bashfully, sweeps by and drops off a plate of snacks, but sees Jingyi’s glower and neglects to stay for more than a moment. Jin Ling, gripped by unfortunate responsibilities, isn’t here to watch, meaning that they’re missing out on him doing that little twitchy dance he does when he’s trying to learn a new sword-form. (It looks like nothing more than Fairy trying to sit still after being promised a treat.)

Jingyi is mid-cheer when Clan Leader Nie, of all people, fumbles himself down into a seat next to him, and helps himself to the plate of snacks, and moans, “Ah, for my passed youth! Imagine having the energy to fight after such a grueling journey.”

Now, don’t get him wrong; Lan Jingyi’s objections to Clan Leader Nie aren’t personal. But the coldness with which Nie Huaisang has been denied invitation to the Cloud Recesses lately has indicated to anyone paying attention the mark of Hanguang-Jun’s hand, and it’s important to be partial to the right people.

He fishes the plate of snacks away from Clan Leader Nie’s searching fingers. “What are *you* doing here?”

Nie Huaisang wafts a puff of air at him with his fan. “Taking a well-earned rest!”

Jingyi narrows his eyes in response, and accuses, “You’re clan leader, shouldn’t you be providing a little bit of an example?”

“I just finished the longest, most boring and tense meeting of the past year, among so many people able to decide nothing! How can I go on without a break?”

Indeed, leaders of numerous clans, large and small, are filtering their way from the reception hall into the crowd, guided by their personal friendships and animosities. Clan Leader Jiang and Senior Wei are visibly doing their usual awkward nonspeaking avoidance of one another and compensating by projecting attention onto their closest juniors at hand – this being Jin Ling and Harrowhark respectively. Jin Ling is getting a lecture for his trouble, while both of Senior Wei’s hands have landed jovially on Harrowhark’s shoulders, making her startle and freeze like a small ash-black bunny.

Glancing across the courtyard, Jingyi notes that Wen-shishu and his companion have melted farther back into the crowd.

Clan Leader Nie has busied himself in pouring a cup of tea, from the pot which is still within his reach. Jingyi can't prevent him while continuing to defend the snack plate.

With a smile, Clan Leader Nie asks him, "Why are you sitting at the sidelines and telling me about the value of discipline?"

"I'm providing advice. If hadn't played a daring and critical role in our night hunt yesterday," says Jingyi, sourly, "I would be right over there."

"Testing your mettle against the foreign cultivator, of course," Clan Leader Nie says, gaze fixed, wide eyes on the fight before them. Gideon is matched against a particularly savage young cultivator in Nie colors at this moment. "What do you think of her?"

"She's weird." Jingyi says immediately, then, for the sake of partiality, amends; "Powerful, but weird. Not graceful - it's like no one ever told her she could guide the blade, it's just muscle, but I've seen what it can do." He feels a sudden surge of possessiveness for this battle-partner. "Don't you go underestimating her!"

"Oh, no no no, of course not, I would never," Clan Leader Nie demures.

Gideon has triumphed over her Nie opponent, to assorted calls from the audience. She sheathes her sword, pumps a fist in the air, spins, and ends in a pose of apparent triumph, with one elbow bent, her other arm extended up and back in parallel, and her face dropped into her bent arm. The posture looks stiff and rehearsed, like a dance.

"Ghost General next!" someone calls.

Wen-shishu has failed to hide. Other of the spectators join in, adding jovial encouragement, though Wen-shishu looks more bashful for it. His head inclines in question at the hooded woman, then at Sizhui. Sizhui smiles, and the hooded woman squeezes Wen-shishu's hand and says something.

Gideon Nav, pulling her head out of her elbow, beckons him.

Clan Leader Nie says, "She's certainly something. And what about the other one?"

"The other one? Oh. She's -" Mid-answer, Jingyi has the very sudden and strong recollection of Harrowhark, her face inches from his, furrowed in focus under the bone-white paint. The vibration of resentful energy warping the antlers through his chest, and the way she bit her lip and squinted while that energy had wiggled its way between his bones.

How she had looked ageless. A bit terrifying.

"I like her," he says stoutly. The least endorsement, really, for a life-debt, which he apparently has now.

“Some people have been calling her dangerous,” says Clan Leader Nie, as though he’s talking about the weather.

“And who are you supposed to believe? ‘Some people’, or me? You asked me!” Jingyi says, tart. “Just because they don’t like new cultivation techniques, people think they can go around and judge.”

"Oh, like or don't like, I'm sure I don't know what to think!" Clan Leader Nie is saying, smiling. "So I'm here to see for myself, in any case."

The encouragement from the audience has gotten more strident, and while this would usually mean that Wen-shishu is about to disappear - he's shy like that - Sizhui has managed to coax him into the circle, bare-handed, across from Gideon and her massive blade.

Clan Leader Nie, trailing off, quiet, makes a subtle toss of his head and his fan. Has he made eye contact with someone in the crowd? Taking stock, Jingyi sees the Nie arranged somehow symmetrically around the courtyard. Not aggressively, no naked blades, but with an air of preparation.

Gideon and Wen-shishu square up, clash twice, and Gideon nearly takes victory – Wen-shishu knocking her strike out the way in the very last moment, his shyness transmuting into concentration. After their third serious clash and disengage, even typically proper Sizhui shouting his excitement on the side, Wen-shishu tips his head back and *roars*, cutting through the babble of the crowd.

Sometimes it’s easy to forget that Wen-shishu – Sizhui’s bashful and kind Wen-shu - is the Ghost General, etchings of puppetry hiding under his collars, the sweetness of his usual personality providing cover for a power that can rend his enemies to pieces.

The crowd is transfixed. Gideon herself holds her ground.

It is only because Jingyi is sitting right next to Nie Huaisang that he notices the gesture that changes the fight.

That subtle flick, flick, *unravel* that originates in his fingers – that’s a trick some folks have the knack of, something that Jingyi can’t manage himself, but he has the skill to see it, as it sets off, shimmers through the air, faint color of qi lost to the bright sunshine and then something distant *snaps*-

Gideon’s sword explodes in a geyser of death.

There’s nothing to call it really, other than death – maybe resentful energy would be the textbook word for it, the one shifu would expect to hear in a classroom, but it’s a nauseating eruption of energy in some sort of non-color emerging from the sword, blasting the weapon out of Gideon’s hands and straight up into the air, making everyone in the courtyard duck for cover, gagging from the half-metaphysical stench and teeth-grinding horror of it.

The sword *howls*. Jingyi feels it in his eye sockets.

Through lidded eyes, Jingyi sees Gideon, directly beneath it, covering her head on the ground, and Wen-shishu struggling to stay vertical, a clawed hand reaching up through the miasma, veins standing out pitch-black on his neck.

With a flash of white fire, Hanguang-Jun is arrowing his way between the Nie disciples (still somehow at attention, as though they were expecting this before the slight parting of the air that set chaos loose).

Wei Wuxian, too, wades through the crowd, glowing red and dark with summoning, and there's a lash of Zidian, and the crackle of sword energy from all directions, including a glowering Clan Leader Jiang's Sandu.

A streak of black and bone darts in closer than any of them, for the heart of the blast, for the flash of Gideon's red hair inside it.

"You see," says Clan Leader Nie, who has not moved, even when Jingyi flinched low himself. "Dangerous."

The fount of energy is calmed, sealed with the combined attentions of two generations' heroes; the sword clatters to the ground under a shower of talismans and surrounded by cultivators at attention.

And then, with deceptive swiftness and a graceless stumble, Clan Leader Nie is cowering behind Hanguang-Jun, clutching the robes at his back; and Lan Jingyi can not for the life of him tell what trick he used to get there.

"Chief Cultivator!" he wails. "What was that, I don't understand! Did that sword have some sort of spirit sealed in it? And even the wielder didn't know?"

Hanguang-Jun closes his eyes briefly. He hasn't yet sheathed his sword. "Yes."

Many of the audience are still picking themselves up from the ground, casting suspicious glances at the now-quiescent sword in the center of the courtyard, in a shallow crater marring the flagstones. Harrowhark and Gideon, closest to that epicenter, are a huddle on the ground, singed and blinking. Harrow shows particular disarray, bloody tear tracks down her unveiled face and hands still raised toward the sword's resting place, shards and sheets of bone scattered from her in every direction. Gideon supports her by the shoulders from behind, half-shielded, glasses gone, silent for once.

Wen-shishu, also raising himself from the ground, looks undamaged as ever. The hooded woman has come to kneel at his side.

Clan Leader Nie continues, still addressing Hanguang-Jun, in a voice that cuts over the rising speculation. "How fortunate you're here to protect us all! What must we do about this?"

Lan Jingyi could swear that he hears Wei-qianbei say "Laying it on a little thick there, Nie-xiong," but with the disorder, confirmation is impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks also to Writing Salon discord friends for helping to workshop an appropriate victory gesture for Gideon - and especially to Westie for pointing out a dab, it was perfect!

Chapter 11

[--th of —]

This is bollocks, Harrow, and I don't mean just the traveling by large animal part, though that is pretty bad. Three days on a horse so far, and we haven't even gotten to the dirty hole or wherever. I would have liked to go by sword, but no one wanted to twosies with me, and the leadership here was pretty serious about carting me off posthaste. But seriously. Who in their right mind wants to steer a big hairy thing that wants to bite your fingers off? I tell you, horses look cooler in fiction, where at least they can be the bearers of hot ancient swordswomen with suitably revealing armor. The real thing is majorly unappealing.

But, yeah, bollocks. You know it, I know it. They didn't even give me a chance to say goodbye to you before packing up my sword in a big ominous box and sending us both away, so, here I am.

Let me know where you end up? It seemed like they were going to take you to see some grave dirt or somesuch. Don't forget me while you're having your little necromancer enclave or whatever, okay? Make sure you remember my buff, hot body when there's no one around to defend you.

You want me back there with you? Just say it, night boss. So long as I don't have to take another horse to get there.

[--th of —]

Okay, I've changed my mind, they have mega swords here. Even if the most mega swords are all in catacombs and ossuaries and all that familiar shit. (That's where they're keeping my two-hander while they study it. With luck someone here can tell whatever sword ghost that was to GTFO so I can have my blade back.)

Don't worry, you don't need to come over here and strangle me, as I'm sure you want to. I'm keeping your night lady faith, only talking to other people in whispers about the dead and such.

Sike, I talk to people all the time and it's mostly about swords. The guys came along and Lan Jingyi makes a good practice buddy now that he's recovered. We also found some
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Never mind, I decided I don't want you turning up to murder me over my reading material either.

[--th of —]

Finally found someone who's willing to head to your place with the grave dirt in order to carry a letter. Write me back to ensure that you haven't withered to nothing without my illustrious presence.

-One flesh one end

Gideon

Harrow folds the two sheets covered with Gideon's sprawling curved handwriting, and layers them into her notebook carefully. She is satisfied that the letter is no forgery. Both by the tone, and the fact that every letter 't' is made out like a small dagger, complete with delicate point and rounded guard.

No time to write back yet. She takes up the bone flute instead - molded from the last souvenir of her old regalia - finding the tone holes with the pads of her fingers. Then steps from her corner of the cave and out to today's studies.

Wei Wuxian, absorbed in his own correspondence, is sealing an answer back to a note already - faster than she could imagine returning one. He grins up at her approach. "Ready to continue?"

"Yes, Teacher."

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