

*Beneath countless stars that shine, upon countless worlds where civilizations strive and slay,
there is but one question to reign above all others:*

Who holds the sword?

-The Drifting King

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The Betrayal

The world was burning, and all Wei An Wei could do was watch.

The skies over his sect were coming asunder, tearing as if paper. The sun and clouds were banished from sight, and in their place spread vast rifts for more demons to spill through. Fire flooded down upon the earth, hammering against cracking defensive arrays projected over the sect in haste.

None had been prepared for this moment—it should have been an impossibility. The protections woven over their world should have exorcized all demons that dared enter their atmosphere, but here and now the hells spilled forth, spawning their hordes directly upon the mountain fortress of the Drowned Sky Sect.

Cultivators fought alone and in formation, directing animated weapons to spear through swarms of screaming insects, obliterating demonic leviathans trying to squeeze through the tightness of the rifts. Even unprepared, a cultivator remained a cultivator; they were already set upon defying the laws of heaven, what dread did they hold for the legions of hell?

But where valor and virtue shone bright, the honest fact of the matter was that they were but a sinking island trying to fight off an encroaching sea. Cultivators fought, holding their pockets of resistance until the swarms swept over them, and then deliberately invoked tribulation by reaching beyond the expanse of this world—nakedly tried to steal might from the heavens one final time.

Primordial lightning lashed through existence, carving swaths of reality away into nothingness.

The demons kept coming.

Leaving his broken spear lodged in the skull of something between a bull and centipede, Wei cleaved the beast in half with a sweeping kick—stepped through its parted body as he sprinted through the inner hold of his sect. The walls behind him were crumbling; most of the other disciples his age were fleeing in the opposite direction; families with children fleeing while they could, with even crafters forced to bear their tools as arms against the nightmares spilling into their homes.

Bodies littered the fine wood floors. Men, women, children, and awakened beasts all joined in death. The cries of a weeping infant assailed Wei; a father screamed out, looking for his young. Wei kept silent, but in action, he was no different; he sought his parents—the Sect's Matriarch and Patriarch—to seek final guidance.

He sought them because he was unsure what to do, and that if it was his fate to die, he would rather face his end beside his kin than alone.

Passing deeper, he reached the sect's inner confines and peered down across vast rungs of interconnected homes surrounding a central mansion at the heart of the mountain. Radiant symbols went out one after another as the final layer of protections crumbled away. The linked houses here belonged to the *hundred-names*—the Pathless mortals that have served their sect faithfully for centuries.

Already, Wei could see stalking shadows hunting them, laughing shapes made from the fabric of shadows pulling people off into the darkness. Between the streets, the spiritual awakened Everblossom trees were burning—*screaming*—their radiant petals of violet and red vanishing consumed by fire and made ash. The sprawling canals passing between each home ran still, but flowed as blood rather than water.

Each witnessed defilement bade a sickness to rise within Wei. But he faced the world that was, he accepted the horror as a cultivator should.

He pressed on.

Sprinting through the homes, he was a blur of violence and urgency. Gray skinned imps feasting on the carcass of a dog, splattered apart into tendrils of unnatural ichor, burrowing out of existence as if guided by an unseen needle. He smashed through walls and leaped over collapsed bridges. He steeled his heart and focused only on his goal: to reach the mansion.

With each passing second, his heart ached with *thirst*. His cultivation was running dry. He would need to mediate and center himself when he reached the mansion. As he past the final layer of houses, leaving fleeing mortals and shattered demons in his wake, his heart swelled with relief as he laid eyes upon his home.

Springrise Mansion was named so because of its composition. Created Wei Jing Quan, Matriarch of the Drowned Sky Sect, some seven centuries ago, it resembled the joining of several Everblossom trees molded together, forming walls and rooms with their trunks while branches continued to climb, spearing through even the stone of their mountain stronghold itself. Upon the wood burned scripts infused with the essence of cultivation, and they invoked command's directly upon one's spirit using via a pressure few could resist.

In times of peace, such was where elders and inner disciples were invited to converge and cooperate, or see their disputes resolved properly by the Matriarch and Patriarch's wisdom.

Through the Everblossoms, Wei watched his mother and father reshape the world, unleash edicts and alter arrays to aid peasants in their harvest, forcing clouds to weep and soil to ripe. In times of war, they likewise channeled their techniques through the trees, focusing their protections through arrays and symbols.

A creeping question gnawed at Wei, then. Why hadn't his parents reacted if their home was still intact? He could still sense the essence rippling from the Everblossoms, flowing across their sect. Why hadn't they shrunken the perimeter's defenses before expanding it once more to banish the scourge?

He would get no answers ruminating alone. Sprinting up the steps, he charged for the coiling vines growing over the front gates to his home. They retracted upon sensing his approach and he slammed through the bronze lacquered doors, offering not even a faint apology to the painted *door guardians* in his haste.

The moment he plunged into the inner courtyard, he knew something was wrong. The mansion was *silent* and *empty*. Wei never remembered it being so. He thought about calling out, but thought better of it. He didn't know what threats might be lurking, despite how intact it seemed. Taking a moment to center himself, he planted a hand against a passing branch of wood and exhaled.

All cultivators knew how to meditate. Such was how one centered themselves in the turbulent sea that was the world, drew in the currents of discord before refining it, nourished their spirits by purifying chaos into order. Though but a youth of fifteen years, Wei's highest blessing by birthright and training had been focus. *Unshakable* focus.

His mind emptied with a thought, and he found himself hovering in a miasma of chaos. Streams of flowing essence washed through the Everblossoms around him, and their voluminous puissance made the gray haze that colored his spirit seem little more than contaminated swill.

His masters often told him that he was a gifted—a generational talent. Though such was what they said, he didn't know how that could be true when his mother and father were capable of producing such *purity* through their cultivation. Though his spirit thirsted, he controlled himself, internalized the essence into himself at a trickle. That was as much as he could process at a time without shattering his own **Nascent Spirit**, but even as he did so, he had to resist the siren call to drink deeper, to draw in more power from deeper waters.

Moments of calm presented instances of greatest danger to a cultivator, for they were the refiners of existence, and many a disciple had reached beyond the expanse of this realm before they were ready, sought to steal spiritual essence from the world beyond—a world where the ascended, gods, and titans lurked.

Almost none managed to claim the pure, raw power that lay just beyond the confines of their atmosphere. For those that strayed into the deep, what they reaped was cleaving lightning from the heavens itself—the mighty unmaking the weak for daring to trespass before their time.

Time and time again, Wei heard the call. Time and time again, he resisted it.

Where most disciples his age were two stages behind, struggling to set their foundations, Wei had awakened his **Nascent Spirit** just two days prior to the invasion—and taken his first true step on the climb to ascension.

It was supposed to be a cause worth celebrating. His mother even granted him one of her rare smiles. Now, he would settle for getting out of this mess alive.

Drawing essence from the Everbloom, he ignored the feeling of guilt as the complexities of his parents' spirits dissolved upon greeting his, colors vanishing into dull grayness, but he needed power for what was to come.

As he felt himself filled, he released a final exhale and returned to the world.

The mansion was still silent, still empty. A string was pulling up at his guts, and a drum of dread hammered in his chest.

He strode forth through the courtyard, taking care to follow the stone path and avoid treading upon his father's garden. The wings to his left and right had their door closed. Wei frowned as he wondered where the animated constructs were, but pressed forward, seeking the central quarters where he and his parents spent their nights.

Immediately, something was different. The door was halfway ajar, its bass, ring-shaped handle twisted slightly as if released mid-pull. Gathering his courage, Wei pushed the door open and stepped forth.

And was stopped dead with a single step.

Before him on the ground lay a severed head, its eyes still open, the irises bright green, the mouth slightly ajar. Its hair remained tied in neat tassels, with a crystalline hair pin holding it in place—something his father had gifted his mother during their courtship.

Seconds passed, and Wei stared on, mind unable to process the scene before him. Somewhere deep inside, he knew he was staring at his mother's decapitated head, and a trail of blood led but a few strides beyond where her body lay unmoving. Over it stood his father, one of the man's palm pressed against the trunk of a sprawling tree, channeling the will of his spirit through its branches.

In his other hand shimmered a [**Shapeless Blade**], only made visible because of the blood coating its length.

Blood.

His mother's blood.

Reality slammed down upon Wei like a hammer greeting an anvil, breaking him from his fugue. He broke into motion, taking his mother's face into his shaking hands. Absurd as it was, he reached into her using his spirit, yearned to find something there.

A shade of color.

A semblance of life.

Nothing.

Just emptiness.

Just *death*.

A noise escaped, Wei before he could stop it. There was no coherence to the note, no meaning beside pain. His mother would never watch him train again, instruct him, smile at him, chide him for bullying the outer court disciples, slap his hand for forgetting decorum when they ate together.

His mother was gone.

His mother was gone.

And his father killed her.

Something inside Wei shattered. What was a cry of grief broke into a note of incomprehensible rage. "Why?" he said, barely whispering the word. "*Why?*"

He watched his father's reel back from the tree, spinning to bring his blade to bear. The man froze as he faced Wei, his face an ashen mask of misery, eyes red from weeping.

For a passing heartbeat, they stood there, the father with a technique pointed at his son, the son holding the remains of his mother for the last time.

People often said he resembled his father more than his mother. Aside from inheriting the hue of her eyes, father and son jawed most other features—strong jaw, pronounced bones, wild, flowing hair. Somehow, that made this all hurt infinitely worse.

“Why?” Wei managed again, a growl seeping into his voice this time.

The man before him sagged with exhaustion as he looked upward and away from Wei. “I did all that you asked... not him too. You said you would—I did as you asked!” The shout that erupted from Yu Wu Wen was uncharacteristic of him. He was a figure defined by calmness and focus. But the creature before Wei was nothing but weariness and fury. With words spoken, his father crumbled in on himself, and sighed. “There was choice.”

It took Wei a second to realize his father was speaking to him. “What? What are you talking about? Why did you—”

“There was no choice,” Yu Wu Wen repeated, all expression vanishing from his face, focus reasserting itself. “This was a moment demanded by a will beyond our own. I am sorry, Wei. I did not want this. But it matters so little what we want.”

Wei’s confusion only grew with each passing word. He didn’t even realize that he had placed his mother’s head down on the ground as he staggered close to his father. His head was spinning, red was creeping in the corner of his vision, his fists clenched and unclenched, tightening in pace to the thundering in his heart.

“I will not make you suffer,” Yu Wu Wen said, stifling a quiver. “I will not. That is all I can give you. I didn’t—”

But Wei was on him first, a son seeking the life of his father to avenge his mother; a **Nascent Spirited** boy facing a master on the verge of true ascendancy—the eighth and final step before one became an immortal proper.

In the end, it was as if a worm trying to claim the life of a hawk.

Wei blurred, technique submerged beneath unbearable fury. Strode and pivoted right, sought to provoke his father into missing a strike. But Yu Wu Wen was no outer disciple fool, and skill was the smallest gulf between father and son. Wei might as well have been standing still when his father drove his **[Shapeless Blade]** through his heart.

The boy lurched. His mouth filled with copper, and the muscle at his core shrieked it struggled to beat. His father’s face contorted in repressed horror as he banished his blade, stumbling back as he took in his dead. Blood welled out from Wei’s chest, painting the whites of his broad and gush down his body. He coughed a spray of crimson phlegm, mortally wounded, mind dangling at the precipice of madness, spirit punctured and leaking essence.

“I’m sorry,” Yu Wu Wen muttered, offering worthless apology after worthless apology.

In that moment, Wei learned what it truly meant to hate someone. He didn't know if it was emotion or the last bits of his ruptured spirit that gave him the force to keep standing, to take another step toward the man. All he knew was that he needed to *kill* the man.

If it was the last thing he did.

And on the verge of insanity, a plan formed in his mind. A desperate plan that would see their family reunited in death.

Wei cast a glance at his mother's head one final time. *Forgive me, mother, for what I am about to do to your Everblossoms.*

It was a ridiculous thing to do, but with mind drifting, one final acknowledgement of his filial piety seemed right to him.

Clenching a fist, he strode forward, ostensibly seeking to land a blow on his father. The man just sighed as he dodged, reaching out as Wei crumbled with a choked gasp, embracing his son one final time. "It will be over soon. It will be calm soon. Go. Go be with your mother. She should not depart alone."

Wei spat blood over his father's shoulder, and gripped the back of the man's neck with his left hand. Pulling feebly, he forced his father to meet his gaze, hatred matching sorrow as he spoke: "I will kill you for this... no matter how many lives it takes... no matter how far you flee... no matter how high you ascend... I will find you... I will kill you... I will turn all you love to ash..."

And with each word of loathe he spat, his father broke, his expression wilting further and further until he was on the brink of tears once more. And as the man was distracted by his own torment, Wei reached with his other hand, and pressed his palm against the trunk of the Everblossom just behind his father.

For one last time, Wei mastered himself—against all odds, he quieted his mind.

No more did his mother's death matter.

No more did his on impending end concern him.

All there was in existence was his wounded spirit spilling free into the Everblossom, and the siren call of tribulation beyond.

This time, unlike all the times before, Wei didn't resist. Instead, he reached, groped deeper as he ignored all there was to refine himself in this realm, and sank his will into the heavens beyond.

Faintly, he heard a rising cry of alarm someplace distant. But that mattered no more. Deeper still he rose, deeper still he drank, deeper, until he felt another *presence* reach back and seize him. And then they struck.

Wei felt the blow coming before it arrived—a strike that made all existence shudder, that traveled countless leagues to grant him desired ruin. He opened his eyes, and grinned wide as he beheld his father’s disbelieving gaze. He clenched the back of the man’s neck tighter. “A Patriarch,” Wei began, “should not leave his family. *Come with us.*”

And just before a bolt of falling tribulation split through the demonic rift and cleaved the mountain fortress of the Drowned Sky Sect in twain, the *space* around the twosome tore open as a force pulled them both through, and before ripping Wei from his father’s embrace.

His father vanished as an ocean of roiling chaos consumed them both. An incomprehensible presence burrowed into Wei’s wounded spirit, contaminated his cultivation, and tore at his sanity from the sheer *weight* it bore. He struggled against it—tried to muster his focus and refine it using his cultivation.

It was like drinking in an ocean distilled from the totality of all that existed. There was no hope. No possibility of triumph.

Death was inevitable.

Yet, Wei struggled against it; fought. For though he was but just a dying boy who knew it to be hubris to internalize the sea, he was born a cultivator, and as such he would die as one as well. There, in wrestling against the havoc of chaos, Wei remembered laying in his mother’s embrace, watching her paint the world outside using a brush as she told him what it meant to strive for immortality.

“It is our nature to ascend, to yearn for the heavens, to rise in defiance of titans and gods. If the price for failure was destruction, then what was lost? When death is fated, then the act of seeking immortality can only be a reward. So. Seek the stars, my son. Know the limitations of the heavens, and rise in spite of them. And above all, let your virtues shine, though tribulations fall.”

And as the chaos pushed inward, Wei reached back out in a final act of defiance, reaching as far and vast as his waning spirit could stretch, reaching to seek a proper end befitting a cultivator. He was on the verge of being winnowed down to nothingness when he felt another *new presence*.

But this one did not seize it. This one did not lash at him. No, instead, this one *spoke* to him, and slowly began to pour its essence over into his.

POTENTIAL HOST DETECTED...

ORGANISM IDENTIFIED: HUMAN - SUBSPECIES [CULTIVATOR/TRESPASSER]

SCANNING FOUNDATIONAL ATTRIBUTES

BODY: CONDITION CRITICAL

MIND: CONDITION CRITICAL

SPIRIT: CONDITION CRITICAL

SOURCE CORRUPTION: 99.8%

RISK OF HOST REJECTION: 0%

BEGINNING [SYSTEM] INTEGRATION

ADAPTING HOST'S SPIRIT FOR SOURCE TRANSFUSION

REPAIRING FOUNDATIONS

A new color slithered into Wei's **Nascent Spirit**, changing the once gray haze with into a reflective pool of shifting hues, changing between blackness and white.

Suddenly, the drowning chaos stopped trying to consume him. Suddenly, he felt his spirit lighten and expand, slowly blending with the surrounding waters as his consciousness slipped away.

**THOUGH
TRIBULATION
FALLS**